

UNVEILING WOMEN'S RELIGION AND EXPERIENCES IN
ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA AND ROME

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Abstract: This work intends to uncover and examine women's religious roles in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome. By looking at women's religious practices, a more inclusive religious, women's history is revealed. Ancient Rome and Mesopotamia were both male-dominated societies that have scholarly traditions of women not being studied equally to men, especially in religious history. However, by making women an integral part of the religious history of each society, a greater understanding of the overall history is uncovered. Overall, women actively participated in the religious life, both privately and publicly, in both ancient cultures.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this work is to unveil ancient women's religious experiences and roles in Rome and Mesopotamia. While ancient Rome and Mesopotamia were both patriarchal societies shaped by agriculture, military exploits, and imperialism, the experience of women must not go unstudied. Further, the religious experience of women should be studied as an integral part to the religious histories of both civilizations. Religion dominated social, private, and sometimes political life. Temples and shrines were a part of the everyday scenery that ancients saw; women were certainly not excluded from this, so why has their perspective gone less studied than the man's? This is because the study of ancient history, to a degree, has been based upon written records produced for the ruling classes, which often excluded women. I have chosen to center my study on Roman and Mesopotamian women to demonstrate that, although separated by centuries and in vastly different cultures and geographic regions, women's religious experiences and expectations often had many commonalities, despite the differences in culture, time, and location. The point

where gender and religion intersect offers historians a new interpretation of ancient cultures and questions the tendency of much previous scholarship that secluded and separated women's roles in history for centuries.

By looking at ancient Mesopotamia and Rome together, I believe a broader understanding of ancient cultures can be uncovered. Mesopotamia and Rome are positioned at the ends of the timeline for ancient, pagan cultures. The Old Babylonian period (roughly 2000-1595 B.C.E), which this work mostly deals with, offers a wider range of sources than most other periodizations of Mesopotamian history. The middle of the Roman Republic up through the first centuries of the Roman Empire (roughly 300 B.C.E.- 300 A.D.) provides more sources of evidence for uncovering women's religious history. Both of these eras are characterized by the revival of empires, therefore, often attracting masculine studies. Also, mentioned above, both civilizations are militaristic, agriculturally focused, and patriarchal. However, these two time periods also offer historians an interesting study on how women functioned in society, particularly in the religious realm, during a very male-dominated time in history. Here, we see women in unexpected places.

The historiography of women's history is one of two extremes—total exclusion from the historical narrative or a tale of women's liberation. Ancient women's historiography is more complicated. Women's studies, as its own field, is fairly new to the concerns of ancient historians, and often, these historians have a much more difficult time trying to incorporate the women's studies discipline into the ancient historical narrative. Before the beginning of the

women's movement in the late 1960s, the majority of male scholars rarely even considered the study of women, especially women's religious experiences.¹ Their disinterest was due to the unarticulated assumption that human religion and human history was identical to men's religion and men's history. Even with the women's movement and the call for female inclusion in history as active agents, many male scholars continued to assume that women's experiences were either the same as men's or irrelevant and not worthy of scholarly attention.² Other

¹ For Mesopotamian works before 1960 see, Sir Earnest Alfred Wallis Budge, *Babylonian Life and History* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1891); Thorkild Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2, no. 3 (July 1943): 159-172; T. Fish, "War and Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 23, no. 2 (1939): 387-402; Robert Dentan, *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955); Morris Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* (Boston, MA: Ginn & Company, Publishers, 1898); Cornelis Petrus Thiele, *Comparative History of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian Religion* (London: Trubner Publishing, 1882). For Roman works before 1960 see, Theodor Mommsen, *History of Rome*, 3 volumes (Leipzig, Germany: Reimer & Hirshel, 1854); Herbert Jennings Rose, *Religion in Greece and Rome* (New York: Harper, 1946); William Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Periods of the Republic: An Introduction to the Study of the Religion of the Romans* (New York: MacMillian Company, 1899); Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Cheshire, CT: Biblo and Tannen Publishers, 1926).

² For Mesopotamian works that continued to leave women out of the historical narrative or continued to only be concerned with women's biological functions see, Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); Jean Bottero, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); For Roman works see, James Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Jason Davies, *Rome's Religious History: Livy, Tacitus, and Ammianus on their Gods* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

scholars asserted that there was no evidence, or not enough, about women's religious experiences, or religion at all, to conduct worthwhile studies.³

Another reason why women often go unstudied in ancient history is because the bulk of religious scholarly attention is concerned with the mythology and the pantheons of both ancient Mesopotamia and Rome. While understanding mythology of each culture is important to uncovering the religious experiences of women and their understandings of religion, these concepts need not be the central focus of studying ancient women's religious lives. Furthermore, when studying female deities, scholars tend to stress the importance of fertility goddesses, therefore, also distorting the concerns of ancient women and often making it seem as if all goddesses were related to fertility or feminine matters, making all individuals who worshipped them also strictly concerned with those matters. In 1989, Jo Ann Hackett asked, "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us?," in an article where she argues that studying female deities as "fertility goddesses" and their cults' rituals as sacred prostitution was a way for modern, Yahwistic scholars to degrade ancient religions.⁴ In fact, Hackett says, "That is not to say there was never any fertility religion. Fertility religion is everywhere. It is all over the Bible, it was part of Canaanite and Mesopotamian religion, and it is part of modern Western religion, too."⁵ While Hackett's study focuses on the ancient

³ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1964)

⁴ Jo Ann Hackett, "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern 'Fertility' Goddesses," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 65-76.

⁵ Hackett, "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern 'Fertility' Goddesses," 68.

Near East, specifically Ishtar, I believe her argument applies to Roman goddesses, such as Venus, as well.

In the two ancient societies that this work will examine, Rome and Mesopotamia, scholars first excluded women in the religious history, then struggled to incorporate female participation before partitioning men and women's religious history. However, historians since the late 1970s have continued to make strides towards inclusivity with the aid of a rise in feminist scholarship.⁶ The last four decades have witnessed scholars grappling with how to incorporate the female religious experience without completely changing previous understandings of ancient cultures, most notably is the link between the rise of gender hierarchy and class hierarchy, in which scholars speculate the restrictions on women's autonomy were a necessity of class society.⁷ However, when one considers women as an active participant in history, and those women

⁶ For Mesopotamian works that incorporate gendered analysis see, Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2000); Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Bernard Frank Batto, *Studies on Women at Mari* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996); For Roman works that incorporate gendered analysis see, Sarolta Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2008); Celia Shultz, *Women Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 2006); *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. by Sarah Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 1991); Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Source Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Fredrick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972); Rayna Rapp, "Gender and Class: An Archaeology of Knowledge Concerning the Origin of the State," *Dialectical Anthropology* 2 (December, 1977): 309-316.

routinely showed agency and resisted patriarchal tradition, the historical and cultural understandings of those ancient societies tends to be troubled. By far, of all the changes that characterized women's history, women's liberation in the twentieth century is the most drastic. Though this liberation did not directly impact ancient women, it most certainly led to new ways to study women, and new language.⁸ Theories of universal oppression of women, exclusion from historical narrative, and the notion that women's experiences are ahistorical are not productive and do not fully uncover women's history.

The historiographical trends that I deal with the most are the beliefs that women remained separate or secluded from men in religious activities, that women did not participate in official religious ceremonies, and that being a religious woman meant being a prostitute. As chapters three and four will look at in more depth, events such as the Bona Dea Scandal and institutions such as the *gagum*, lead to the belief that women were partitioned from men in religious activities. However, this belief is built on misconceptions that did not consider wider historical discoveries. Particularly in the Roman context, scholars insisted for centuries that women were forbidden to participate in certain cults which were more masculine and male-dominated, such as the cults of Hercules and

⁸ This is especially true for classical women. See, Marilyn Arthur, "Liberated Women: The Classical Era," in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, MA: Houghton & Mifflin, 1976). Here, it is clear that the language of "liberation" from the women's movement was influencing scholars in their studies. Other works that use liberating language include Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

Silvanus.⁹ More instrumental to uncovering women's religious roles is uncovering women's agency. Not only does female agency often go unnoticed, but the study of ancient history has a long tradition of trying to label women something that they are not, most commonly scholars attempt to categorize religious women as prostitutes/whores or virgins.¹⁰ This virgin/whore dichotomy has shaped historical scholarship about women and lead to falsehoods about ancient women's religious lives.

I have chosen to break my research into three chapters that I believe best allow the reader to understand the many layers of uncovering women's religious roles in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome. Chapter two will examine the religious experiences of the average woman in both ancient cultures by looking at the domestic cults and rites of passage in a woman's life. This chapter's focus is the average woman, meaning non-elite, lower class women. These women's

⁹ For works that argued women were prohibited from male-dominated cults see, .P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1962); Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975); Ross Shephard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddesses to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁰ For Mesopotamian works that categorize religious women with these terms see, Michael Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1996): 185-196; Julia Assante, "The Kar-kid/Harimtu, Prostitute or Single Woman," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 30 (1998): 5-96; Susandra J van Wyk, "Prostitute, Nun or 'Men-Woman': Revisiting the Position of the Old Babylonian Nadiatu Priestess," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 4 (2015): 95-122; Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 64-123.

religious experiences revolved around lived religion. Chapter three will examine the more widely studied area of women in official religious roles (sometimes referred to as priestesses). Specifically looking at Old Babylonian *naditus*, Vestal Virgins, and the Cult of Bona Dea, I will reveal the limited public religious roles that were offered to women and their representations to each culture. Chapter four will take a closer look at these roles and reveal how women in these positions often broke tradition, often within their own society's social norms. Furthermore, the evidence they provide continues to complicate modern scholarly narratives and conceptions of women in ancient history.

Of course, the issue of sources must be taken into account when attempting to uncover any aspect of ancient history, especially ancient women. Most historical accounts of women in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome originate from ancient literary sources that do not provide enough information or enough valuable information on how to construct a history of women. When accounting for religion, these sources often detail large, public festivals that were not the common experiences or activities among women. Ancient men did not concern themselves with accurately providing a description of women's religious activities. Instead, scholars often have to turn to archaeological and epigraphic evidence, which is usually fragmented and translations lead to contextual misunderstandings. It is these sources that are the only evidence materials left to us by ancient women themselves.

The sources that I have utilized to uncover this women's religious history are mainly, literary, epigraphic, and archaeological. Literary sources from

contemporary ancient authors, such as Cato, Ovid, and Plutarch, do hold some biases, given that these are men writing about women, however, their writings do offer some understanding to women's roles, particularly their household duties. Epigraphic and archaeological sources are sometimes the only sources of evidence left by the women themselves. Although, their validity is often disputed. Instead of focusing on all the discrepancies in the source materials for women's religious history in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome, I have considered all of the possibilities for understanding women's religious roles, therefore, broadening the understanding of the women and their cultures and revealing that women were more involved in the religious life of their time than often believed.

This work aims to expand on the understanding of ancient women in Rome and Mesopotamia — and not just their religious life, but also their overall history. By enhancing the picture of female religious activity, I hope to reveal that women's religious roles were not confined to the private sphere, but often did flourish there, and that women could participate in the public sphere, often religiously. Indeed, religion offered ancient women more opportunities for participation than is often considered. However, these opportunities may have been placed on women without their consent. In the end, women were more engaged in the religious life of their families and communities than often believed.

CHAPTER II

The Lived Religion of the 'Woman': Domestic Religion and Rites of Passage in the Common Woman's Life

The religious life of the average woman centered around domestic cults, like the hearth and ancestral cults, and rites of passage such as marriage and birth. The study of women's official religious history is difficult to fully understand, characterized with sometimes conflicting and non-existent evidence and many undiscovered components; the study of the *ordinary* woman's religious history is even more complex and complicated, at best. It is the average – ordinary, common, less privileged—women that this chapter will focus on, and sometimes slaves, especially in the Roman context. The average woman often gets overlooked when studying women's religious roles, however, every woman had a specific role that she was to fill in religion. The average woman's role was just in the realm of *lived* religion. Of the thousands of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological religious texts that survive from ancient cultures, only a small fraction concern women. Of that small fraction, most concern elite women in the sphere of official religion (i.e. priestesses, members of the royal family or patrician elites, diviners), even less survive concerning the average woman. It is

these *women* that the *woman* is best understood. By this, I mean that often in history the 'woman' is rarely studied, instead it is 'women' that receive the most of scholarly attention. This is due to a number of causes: lack of evidence, conflicting sources of evidence, historically lower literacy rates among women, a history of disinterest in the common woman, and the misconception that women's history, until fairly recently, is ahistorical, timeless, and interchangeable, therefore, undeserving of a historical study. In fact, it is true that for much of the ancient Near East, 'woman' does not exist. Roman history provides slightly more information on the average woman, as hundreds of inscriptions and literary evidence survives concerning 'woman,' though mostly elite, non-ordinary, women.

The historiography of ancient women, in general, has focused on elite women, often members of ruling families. This chapter seeks to fill in the gap and uncover the common woman's religious life. The focus on elite women in the past is the outcome for the lack of evidence of non-elite women in ancient cultures. However, it actually seems that the evidence for uncovering this history was always visible, it was just uncertain if the sources could reveal anything about the religious life of women. This misconception becomes clearer when integrating lived religion into the historical narrative of religion. One must consider lived religion to uncover a non-elite woman's religious history.

To understand the ordinary woman's religious experience in ancient societies, historians often turn to the study of piety, or what I will be referring to as "lived religion." Scholars have studied "folk religion" and "popular religion" as a

phenomenon throughout history, often when studying lower class populations and women.¹¹ However, it was these studies and terms that mislead, confused, and caused conflict among scholars. What is “popular religion”? Does “popular religion” only concern the “common folk”? Did “popular religion” represent a corruption or wrongdoing of authorized, official religious teaching and ritual? Was “popular religion” even historically significant to the main developments in religious history? The term created unnecessary and confusing boundaries for centuries. It was not until recently that scholars have begun to use “lived religion” to study, what Robert Orsi calls, “the religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places.”¹² Lived religion studies how religion shaped family life and familial structures, for example: how the dead are buried, moral boundaries, daily prayers, how homes are constructed and maintained, cultural norms for daily interactions and mealtime manners.¹³ While Orsi defines lived religion for his study of Italian Catholicism in Harlem during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his interpretation can easily be applied to ancient women in Rome and Mesopotamia, broadening the religious life of women. By studying religion as cultural, therefore lived, scholars are able to direct equal attention to institutions and individuals, texts and rituals, practice and theology –this way

¹¹ For a more recent work on this see, Jorge Rupke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

¹² Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 1985), xiii.

¹³ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xiii.

religion is always *in* history and is concerned with how people *do* religion.¹⁴ This chapter therefore will focus on lived religion, or personal piety of women in Mesopotamia and Rome, insofar as the evidence allows.

In many ancient cultures, there was no division between sacred and secular, so religion and governing went hand in hand. It is important to understand that the women being studied did not exactly choose a certain religion, but instead, grew up in a world that could not be conceived without that religion. In this understanding, it is quite complicated to study piety, as religion in these ancient cultures was far from our modern understanding of religious conviction being something personal or private. In fact, in both ancient Rome and Mesopotamia, religion was hard to escape. Often times what we study as religion was just another custom, norm, or way of life. As Karen van der Toorn describes, “religion dominated social life; with its temples and shrines it was ever present to the eyes, and accompanied a person from the cradle to the grave.”¹⁵ The religion that dominated the social life was often lived religion, meaning this form of religion was often an unthinking decision that was a part of everyday life—it just *was*.

To study the common woman in ancient Rome and Mesopotamia, one must keep in mind that the sources are often very few in numbers and lack inclusivity. By this I mean that most sources concerning the woman’s religious

¹⁴ Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, xix.

¹⁵ Karen van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (England: JSOT Press, 1994), 16.

experience actually center around upper class women. As later chapters will delve into further, it was often elite women who were granted the permission to conduct ceremonies and host feasts to deities, who made offerings the most, who occupied the few official religious offices offered to women, and who we have the most evidence on how to construct the religious life of women.

However, these sources about aristocratic women should not be ignored when studying the common woman. It seems more appropriate to consider the elite as a model, which often the lower social stratum tried to imitate. Lived religion especially falls under this emulation. For example, it was both the Roman and Mesopotamian custom for lower class families to pray at the beginning and end of meals and to offer a portion of the food to the domestic deities, especially the divine hearth. Though lower stratum families may not have had the finances to supply the deities with high-end meals, they still did so, just as the elites did. In this way, “a study of religion in the life of the aristocratic lady indirectly sheds light on what happened in other social classes.”¹⁶

Domestic Religion

The common woman’s religious identity centered around the private sphere, concerning the domestic deities in both Mesopotamia and Rome. A domestic deity is defined as a god or goddess who was worshipped primarily inside the home in private rituals conducted among the family. These domestic deities protected the family and some were particular families’ own ancestors

¹⁶ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 17.

who were worshipped and thanked daily. The domestic cults strengthen the family, created familial identity, and gave women, particularly, special roles within the home. Domesticity, though sometimes carrying negative connotations, was certainly the place of the common woman in ancient Rome and Mesopotamia. Women were not particularly confined to the domestic realm, but on average, most women could expect that it was in the private, domestic sphere that one could show their devotion and express their piety to the divine. It is true that female piety flourished outside of the official cults, but resided in the lived religious sphere of the domestic cults. Every household in Mesopotamia and Rome had its own household gods and ancestors that the family patriarch placed the women in charge of tending to. These household deities were not so much personal gods, but family gods, and venerating them correctly was of the utmost importance to the entire family's well-being.

We know that the most important domestic deity in Roman religion was Vesta, goddess of the hearth.¹⁷ Alongside her cult's role in official religion, each household had a shrine (hearth) where family members worshipped and prayed to the goddess daily. Vesta, the spirit of the fireplace, gave warmth and cooked family meals, so one could see why her rituals were important. Most rituals

¹⁷ For primary source authors on the importance of Vesta in the private sphere see, Ovid, *Fasti* 6; Propertius 4.6; for secondary author discussion on the importance of Vesta see, Celia Shultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 123, 136, 192; David Orr, "Roman Domestic Religion: A Study of the Roman Household Deities and their Shrines at Pompeii and Herculaneum" (Ph.D Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1972), 34-44.

observed in the home took place before the Vesta at the familial hearth.¹⁸ On the name days of each month, such as Ides, Nones, and Kalends, and on special family occasions such as weddings and births, the hearth was decorated with garlands by the women, and wine and other sacred delectables were offered on the fire. Ovid accounts for this in *Fasti* 6,

In praying we address Vesta first, who holds first place.
It was once the custom to sit on long benches by the fire,
And believe the gods were present at the meal:
Even now in sacrificing to ancient Vacuna,
They sit and stand in front of her alter hearths.
Something of ancient custom has passed to us:
A clean dish contains the food offered to Vesta.
See, loaves are hung from garlanded mules,
And flowery wreaths veil the rough millstones.
Once farmers only used to parch wheat in their ovens,
And the goddess of ovens has her sacred rites:
The hearth baked the bread, set under the embers,
On a broken tile placed there on the heated floor.
So the baker honours the hearth, and the lady of the hearths.¹⁹

It was most certainly the women of the house that were dutied with Vesta's up keep and tended to her flames. A dutiful *materfamilias* took extra care when tending to the hearth and most certainly taught her daughters the same responsibilities. Ovid described these tasks,

And now she swept the house raised up by a post,
Now she sets the eggs to be warmed by the plumes of their mothers,
Or she collected green mallows or white mushrooms.
Or she warms the humble hearth with a pleasing fire and, in the same way,

¹⁸ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 123.

¹⁹ Ovid, *Fasti* 6. 305-319.

She tires her arms with constant loom work and masks ready defenses against the treat of winter.²⁰

These tasks would also be the responsibility of female servants. If families had a female servant, *vilica*, she was in charge of preparing food, maintaining food supplies, but she must also tend to the hearth as a member of the family, keep it clean, and adorn it properly on holidays and name days.²¹ In Cato's *De Agricultura*, he accounts for female servants' responsibilities to Vesta,

She must not engage in religious worship herself or get others engaged in it for her without the orders of the master or the mistress; let her remember that the master attends to the devotions for the whole household. She must be neat herself, and keep the farmstead neat and clean. She must clean and tidy the hearth every night before she goes to bed. On Kalends, Ides, and Nones, and whenever a holy day comes, she must hang garland over the hearth, and on those days pray to the household gods as the opportunity offers.²²

As for privately owned slaves, especially female slaves, their religious realm also lied with the domestic cults. The assumption among scholars is that slaves were often compelled to choose the same deities as their masters, as studies have revealed no clear distinction between the religious practices of free or enslaved peoples.²³ There are believed to be no cults directly connected with

²⁰ Ovid, *Fasti* 4. 695-700.

²¹ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 127.

²² Cato the Elder, *De Agricultura* (published in the Loeb Classical Library, 1934), 143.

²³ Peter Dorsey, *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1992); K.R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sandra Joshel and Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

the servile state, however, domestic cults were much more widely venerated among slaves. This trend is logical since most slaves would not relate to the grandiose deities in the state pantheon, and would not have had the means to afford to commission statues or reliefs, or make dedications, which were usually done in costly marble. It is hard to deny that class in Roman society was in consideration, especially when concerning state religions. The ruling body monopolized on conducting official religious rites, and since slaves were always in the lower stratification, no matter whose property they were, slaves generally found their religious identity in domestic cults.

Slaves, of course, had their own cults and festivals that they enjoyed more than others. Feronia was one of the goddesses that received specially attention among slaves and freed people (former slaves that were granted freedom). Livy accounted for freedwomen collecting money as a gift for Feronia, while matrons collected money for Juno Regina, “whilst the matrons were to contribute according to their means and bear their gift to Queen Juno on the Aventine. A lectisternium²⁴ was to be held, and even the freedwomen were to contribute what they could for a gift to the temple of Feronia.”²⁵ Silvanus seems to be another deity that was widely venerated by slaves and freed people. One inscription recalls the holy Silvanus securing the freedom of six slaves.²⁶ Slaves certainly

²⁴ Roman religious ceremony consisting of a meal offering to the gods and goddesses.

²⁵ Livy, *The History of Rome* (22.1.18).

²⁶ Theodor Mommsen, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, (Berolini, Germany: Apud G. Reimerum, 1862), Inscription 3456; 14: 355.

had a role in other domestic cults and worship of family gods, which will be discussed later.

Vesta was central in all women's milestones in Roman culture. It was to her that a new bride or newborn baby was presented, and it was also before her that family meals took place at the sacred table. Vesta received a portion of the family meal, most notably, the sacred salted grain cake that the daughters or *materfamilias* were dutied to bake for the goddess. Vesta was not the only domestic deity that had a role in the lives of women. Janus, the spirit of the doorway, protected the family, literally facing both in and out to great welcomed visitors and to keep out enemies.²⁷ At weddings, brides smeared wolf's fat on Janus's doorposts and threshold at the groom's home. When a baby was born, the threshold was struck with an ax, a pestle, and a broom to ward off wild and evil spirits.²⁸

In Mesopotamia, it is less obvious if the hearth functioned as a religious symbol. Only one Akkadian text survives hinting that the hearth was sacred.

Karel van der Toorn analyzes the text stating that,

On a tablet with an excerpt of omina that all relate to family piety, we read that 'when a man rekindles the fire his hearth over and over' the 'blessing' (?) of the god will be perpetual in his house. Although the interpretation of the text is doubtful on one point, the religious meaning of the hearth fire certainly seems warranted. The repair of the *kinunu*, the 'hearth', was a delicate matter that could only be done at certain times. This may be connected to its cultic

²⁷ Allen Ward, Fritz Heichelheim, and Cedric Yeo, *A History of the Roman People* (New York: Pearson, 2014), 49.

²⁸ Ward, *A History of the Roman People*, 49.

role. In Akkadian the 'extinguished hearth' is a metaphor for a family that has died out.²⁹

What seems to hold more religious connotation is the actual flame, making the hearth function only as an indirect religious symbol. Other tablets detail instructions for kings to restore the gods, goddesses, and the divine lamp if they wish to prosper. The divine flame certainly affected women and the domestic cults, as well. Carelessness in the kindling of the lamp was thought to cause women to lose her life in childbirth.³⁰ The Babylonians had a sacred room where familial rituals were carried out, similar to those before Vesta. This room, called the *asirtu*, was either an annex of the house, a separate room inside the house, or an adorned corner of a room depending on the family's financial stance. Here is where family oaths were promised and slaves were brought to confirm their new status in the family. The roof of the house also acted as a sacred space and must be cleaned, certainly by the women of the house, before prayers were said.³¹ Most texts documenting domestic cults' rituals presume that it was especially women who were concerned with their daily care.

In both Rome and Mesopotamia, the domestic cults also included divine family ancestors and individualized minor deities that held special meaning to each family. The combination of household gods and ancestors' divine images was central to family piety and their rituals were a part of everyday life. Much is known of the *Lares* and *Penates* that were venerated by the ancient Romans.

²⁹ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 40.

³⁰ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 41.

³¹ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 43.

However, less is known about the Mesopotamian ancestor cults. The *Penates* were the household deities who guarded the food that Vesta cooked and also received ceremonial portions of family meals. *Lares* were the family ancestor heroines. Their figurines were placed at the table during family meals and were present at major family occasions, including marriages and births, and their shrine was a place for family socializing.

The household deities and divine ancestors of Mesopotamia, often referred to as *ili*, *istar biti*, and *etemmu*, were equally important to lived religion.³² The *ili* and *istar biti* functioned as the household god and goddess, while the *etemmu*, spirits of the dead literally meaning ‘ghosts’, are most relatable to the *Lares* of ancient Rome. In both cultures, the *Lares* and *Penates* of Rome and the *ili*, *istar biti*, and *etemmu* of Mesopotamia, the women of the house were in charge of their shrines’ upkeep and veneration.

In Rome, the *Lares* of the family were responsible for protecting the *pater familias* and his home. *Lares* were always male ancestors.³³ The *Lares* of the family are broken into two distinct groups: the *Lares familiaris* and the *Lares compitales*. *Lares familiaris* were honored on holidays and on Kalends, Nones, and Ides of each month. It was to the *Lares familiaris* that the owner of an estate

³² van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 38-39.

³³ There is, however, some evidence for a female counterpart to the *Lares* called the *iuno*. The *iuno* are only attested for in a poem by Sulpicia in the corpus Tibullianum (3.12.1-2) and by Seneca (Epistle 110.1) and dedications to *iuno* are only known from North Africa. There is no clear evidence to support the assertion that *iuno* can be traced back to the earliest period of Roman history. For more see, Schultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 124-125 .

offered reverence to before attending to business.³⁴ Also, *Lares familiares* were in charge of long-term family preservation through the *pater familias*' procreativity, so they were worshipped on his birthday and at his marriage. *Lares compitales* were associated with crossroad shrines (*compitalia*) around the edge of the family's estate and they watched over the fields and family property.³⁵

The *Lares* of the fields and crossroads had one major festival celebrated every winter. At this festival families would walk among the shrines where they displayed woolen dolls for each free person in the household and a woolen ball for each slave.³⁶ Since women were traditionally tasked with woolworking and weaving, Schultz argues that "the women of the household were probably responsible for supplying the woolen figures,"³⁷ proving that women were extensively involved in this festival. Also, these figurines that women were dutied with making also reveal a great deal about slave participation. While this evidence furthers the belief that slaves had a place in domestic cults, along with Cato which was already cited above as revealing that slaves were allowed to pray to the family *Lares* and participate in the worship of Vesta.³⁸ However, just because slaves had roles and greater participation in domestic cults does not call for the conclusion that this inclusivity during religious festivals meant that the slaves were treated as equals. This is especially true for the *Compitalia* festival.

³⁴ See Cato the Elder, *De Agricultura*, 2.1

³⁵ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 124.

³⁶ See Cicero's letter to Atticus in, D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero's Letters to Atticus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 23.

³⁷ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 129.

³⁸ See page 14.

The *Lares*, protectors and representations of estate boundaries, also acted as boundaries for slaves that were not to leave without permission. As Louise Adams Holland argued, “The slaves’ annual sacrifice to the *Lares Compitales* may be a constant renewed pledge of loyalty to the limits within which all their duty lies, an obligation potentially bitter, but in proactive sweetened by a holiday from heavy labor, by games and laughter, and by extra doles of food and wine.”³⁹ And the woolen balls hung around the estate to represent slaves may not have been an act of inclusion, instead a way for masters to circumvent humiliating contact with their servants. As Peter Dorcey points out, the less elaborate ornaments, which lack a head, reminded slaves of their inferiority.⁴⁰ It seems that religious festivals that included slaves, were actually acted as ways to further control. Some official cults allowed slaves participation on certain festival days, such as Juno’s March 1 festival. Here matrons would wait on their servants, and slave women were privileged with wearing matron dresses. And at the December Saturnalia, masters and slaves exchanged roles.⁴¹ However, these festivals were not to honor slaves, but instead ways to release tension and prevent slave rebellions.⁴²

The *Penates* are more closely related to Vesta. They shared the responsibility for the family storerooms with Vesta where food, oil, wine, grain,

³⁹ Louise Adams Holland, “The Shrine of the *Lares Compitales*,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 68 (1937): 438

⁴⁰ Dorcey, *The Cult of Silvanus*, 112.

⁴¹ See, Macrobius, *Saturnalia* (1.10-12).

⁴² Dorcey, *The Cult of Silvanus*, 110.

vegetables, and other family necessities were kept.⁴³ Since the ladies of the house were in charge of providing food for the family, it is logical that venerating the *Penates* correctly was extremely important. Behind the hearth of early Roman houses, at the back of the atrium, was the *penus* (storeroom), which was the home shrine of the *Penates*. By protecting the storeroom and its contents, the *Penates* personified the continuity of the household's subsistence.⁴⁴ Some scholars argue that the *Penates* are so closely related to *Vesta*, that *Vesta* was, in fact, one of the *Penates* in early Roman history.⁴⁵

In Mesopotamia, the *ili* and *istar biti* were the household gods that dominated domestic religion. Just like in Rome, the domestic gods were attached to the men of the family and traced through the paternal line. When a family member left the paternal home, they were not allowed to take the family gods with them—these gods always stayed in the paternal home.⁴⁶ van der Toorn even recognized the distinct similarities between the two cultures' household gods tradition, "the combination of household gods and ancestor images reminds us inevitably of the *lares* and *penates* that were venerated by the ancient Romans."⁴⁷ These household gods and ancestors embodied the family's identity by protecting the family members from outside dangers and watched over loyalty

⁴³ Dorcey, *The Cult of Silvanus*, 123.

⁴⁴ Orr, "Roman Domestic Religion: A Study of the Roman Household Deities and their Shrines at Pompeii and Herculaneum," 40.

⁴⁵ David Orr, "Roman Domestic Religion: The Evidence of the Household Shrines," *Augstiege und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2, no. 16.1 (1978): 1557-1591.

⁴⁶ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 38.

⁴⁷ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 40.

between family members. While the invocation of the household gods was placed on the head of the household, women were especially concerned with them. As van der Toorn explains, “the family cult was tremendously important for the maturing girl. Although she was by no means wholly excluded from official worship, her principle domain was still life at home.”⁴⁸

Some lived religious experiences in Mesopotamia were expected to be performed by both men and women, equally. When looking at rituals such as handwashing, especially in ancient cultures like Mesopotamia, it is important to understand that dirty hands at the dinner table was not so much a hygiene issue – it was a religious issue. Of surviving texts, it is alluded to that the gods only hear prayers if the hands of the person praying are purified (washed). Letter correspondences from *naditus* to family constantly mention that she prayed for her family ‘with washed hands.’⁴⁹ Prayers account for the stressed importance of cleanliness when addressing the gods. For example, consider the excerpt from Diviners’ Prayers, which was a prayer that diviners would say to attract the god’s attention, to enlist his help for proper procedure, and possibly for favorable verdict,

O Shamash, I place in my mouth sacred cedar,
For you I knot in a lock of my hair,
For you I place in my lap bushy cedar.
I have washed my mouth and hands,
I have wiped my mouth with bushy cedar,
I have tied sacred cedar in a lock of my hair,
For you I have heaped up bushy cedar.

⁴⁸ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 45.

⁴⁹ This will be discussed more in the next chapter, see page 48.

Cleansed now, to the assembly of the gods
draw I near for judgement.
O Shamash, lord of judgement, O Adad, lord of prayers,
and acts of divination.
O Shamash, I place incense in my mouth,
... sacred cedar, let the incense linger!
Let it summon to me the great gods.
In the ritual I perform, in the extispicy I perform,
place the truth!
O Shamash, I hold up to you water of Tigris and Euphrates,
Which has carried to you cedar and juniper
from the highlands.
Wash yourself, O valiant Shamash,
Let the great gods wash with you.
And you too, Bunene, faithful messenger,
Wash yourself in the presence of Shamash the judge.⁵⁰

The practice of washing hands was not just common among Mesopotamian women in official religion, but also average women, especially at meal times.

Women were taught from an early age the practice of handwashing as a lived religious experience. A known Mesopotamian adage says, 'to have to bring to the mouth unwashed hands is an abomination.'⁵¹ Babylonian omen texts reveal that those who pray with washed hands can be assured that their prayers will be heard.⁵² As previously detailed, we know that meals were religious on many levels. When families enjoyed the fruits of their labors, the gods were entitled to their share as well. Since meals were religious in many connotations and always opened and closed with prayer, it makes sense that handwashing was

⁵⁰ Benjamin Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1995), 288-289.

⁵¹ see van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 31.

⁵² van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 31.

the custom. One text documenting a sacrificial offering, most certainly done by a male, reads: “wash your hands, purify your hands, let the gods your brothers wash and purify their hands! Eat the pure food at the pure table, drink the pure water from the pure cup!”⁵³ The purity of not only an individual’s hands, but also the table, chairs, and dining utensils at meals and prayers was essential for any pious Mesopotamian.

The divine, especially in Mesopotamia, attached special importance to the physical appearance and purity of their worshippers. Something as simple as smelling of garlic was enough to deem a person impure and was ritually unforgiving.⁵⁴ One tablet accounts the purification of a priest after he had come in contact with impure women: “When he walked through the street and alley way he stepped into discarded bathwater, he set his foot in unclean water, he saw water of unwashed hands, he met a woman with bad hands, he looked at a girl with unwashed hands.”⁵⁵

In Rome, it is certain that young girls learned how to tend to the domestic deities, and this would most certainly revolve around ordinary tasks, such as cooking, weaving, and preparing the family shrines for prayer. It is unclear if handwashing held as much religious meaning to the ancient Romans as it did for Mesopotamians. However, cleanliness was also of importance for religious purposes. A common practice such as bathing was surrounded by religion,

⁵³ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 31.

⁵⁴ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 30.

⁵⁵ Cuneiform texts from Babylonian Tablets 17. See van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 51.

another indicator that religion was unescapable. Roman baths have been studied extensively for the unusual social interactions that were offered to both genders and all classes. Bathing houses have been studied as engineering marvels and democratic institutions. However, scholars rarely study the religious aspects of paying a visit to the public bath.⁵⁶ From literary sources, we can conclude that baths were often used as medical remedies, therefore associated with one's health. Later chapters will look more at the relationship of health to the divine, but deities most certainly had influence and control over the well-being of the ancient Romans.

From archaeological evidence, we know that the decorations in many bath houses often depicted healing and health associated deities, particularly Asclepius and Hygieia.⁵⁷ Asclepius was the god of medicine and his daughter, Hygieia, was the goddess of health, cleanliness, and sanitation. From the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, archaeologists unearthed a large statue of the head of Asclepius, believed to be a part of a bigger full body statue accompanied by an equally larger statue of Hygieia, which are now entirely lost.⁵⁸ Inscriptions also indicate bath houses being dedicated to and adorned with images of these two deities throughout the Roman world; for instance, an inscription found in Northern

⁵⁶ In Fikret Yegul's study on bathing in the Roman world, he makes no connection to bathing and religion. In Garret Fagan's study on Roman baths, he discusses the religious art that adorned bath houses, but failed to analyze the possibility of baths having a religious connotation. Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999); Fikret Yegul, *Bathing in the Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵⁷ Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, 88.

⁵⁸ Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, 88.

Africa dedicated a bath facility to Asclepius.⁵⁹ Other inscriptions record the raising of Asclepius and Hygieia statues in baths. One inscription even tells of the restoration of a bath to fulfill an oath.⁶⁰ It seems that for all Romans, women included, the depictions of these two deities reiterated the religious nature of bathing.

Rites of Passage

Daily aspects of the average woman's life held special religious meaning, but rites of passage such as marriage and motherhood held even more religious connotation. Arguably the most important events in a woman's life were her wedding and the day she became a mother. Many scholars have argued that in both ancient cultures, marriage was strictly civic, because official religious personnel did not preside over the ceremonies. However, this is a misconception, and we must not draw comparisons to modern, Eurocentric wedding ceremonies that are usually lead by religious figures such as priests and preachers, in fact, we should keep in mind that civic marriages were also common in medieval Europe. The lack of prayer or sacrifice, and possibly the presence of women in large numbers, in wedding ceremonies made it difficult for scholars to reveal the religious significance, leading to the belief that the wedding and marriage was only of civic meaning. If a marriage was not arranged among in-laws but was a natural mutual attraction, which was more common among the non-elite,

⁵⁹ Theodor Mommsen, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, (Berolini, Germany: Apud G. Reimerum, 1862), Inscription 997; 8: 312.

⁶⁰ Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, 88-89.

communal feasts and religious festivals were often good times for women to mingle, flirt, and meet potential spouses.

Roman and Mesopotamian marriage rituals actually had a lot in common, but the civic functions of marriage varied between the two cultures. In Rome, husbands gained control of their wife's dowries through the transfer of *manus* (hand). A marriage with *manus* meant that the wife was never legally free and always under the control of the husband.⁶¹ Marriages in Mesopotamia also had financial implications, involving payments from the bride-groom or his family and from the bride's family dowry. When studying marriage this way, it does seem reasonable to assume that it was strictly civic and just another way to subvert women to men, however, wedding ceremonies also had tremendous religious connotation, even for the average woman.

What was the religious implication of a Mesopotamian wedding? On one hand, the ceremony appears non-religious, as it did not occur in a sacred space and was not conducted by any religious authority. However, there were religious implications, especially with regard to the bride's new household gods. In Mesopotamia, on the day of her wedding, the bride was expected to cut all ties with her family and her previous domestic gods. After the bride was bathed and perfumed, to ensure cleanliness and purity, the bride-groom entered the house through the adorned threshold. The bride's father explained that he was giving his daughter as a wife followed by a lavish banquet. The groom would stay at his

⁶¹ Ward, et. al, *A History of the Roman People*, 43.

new in-laws' home for seven to fourteen additional days while the festivities continued, after he would return to his own home to prepare for his new bride to move in and routinely visit her at her parents. The wedding was finally confirmed only after the bride left her family's home for her husband's. For the wife, the departure meant mentally and religiously severing all ties with her paternal house.⁶²

There is, however, one case of evidence that survives that accounts for the bride bringing her own family gods with her to the husbands' home. After marrying his daughter off, Zimri-Lim, a king of Mari in the eighteenth century B.C.E., received a letter from his daughter's new home stating that, "You have given the princess bride to this House. I/She has now set up your gods and acquired strength. Be happy."⁶³ This may have been a special circumstance, though, as the bride was a princess. She then became under the authority of new household deities and had to participate in different domestic cults, including worshipping her husband's family's ancestral gods. Once the wife set foot in her new home, she was introduced to the new gods that she was to praise.⁶⁴ One undated Sumerian text details the god Dumuzi telling his beloved Ishtar before their marriage that he wants to make her a part of his family, and suggests that a meal was to be shared in the house before his gods; "I want to bring you to the house of my god. I want to lie down with you before my god, you must sit with me

⁶² van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 66.

⁶³ Jack Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 324.

⁶⁴ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 66.

in my god's shrine."⁶⁵ Karen van der Toorn suggests that 'to lie down with' signifies sexual intercourse, but the 'to sit with' refers to a communal meal. If this speculation is correct, there is a direct correlation between Mesopotamian and Roman wedding rituals.

The traditional Roman wedding ceremonial rites consisted of three steps: the *traditio*, the *deductio domum*, and the meeting of the bride's new domestic and family deities. The wedding day began similarly to those customs of Mesopotamia. The bride was heavily adorned, bathed, perfumed, and dressed in her traditional bridal clothing. For Roman wedding ceremonies historians have many more sources available than for Mesopotamian wedding rituals. Ancient authors spanning in time from the third century B.C.E. through the first century A.D., such as Plautus, Lucan, Statius, and Catullus, among many others carefully described how the wedding day looked and played out. Every detail down to what the bride wore and the tools designated for fixing her hair reveal that the bride was mostly commonly dressed to represent her presumed chastity and fidelity in the garb of a Vestal Virgin and the *Flammica*.⁶⁶ The rites began with the *traditio* inside the bride's home where her father or male guardian relinquished her to the groom. The most recognizable element of the Roman wedding was the *deductio domum*, which was the procession of the bride to the groom's house. The procession ended at the groom's home where the bride would smear

⁶⁵ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 66.

⁶⁶ Karen Elaine Klaiber, "Nuptiae Romanae: The Wedding Ceremony in Roman Literature and Culture" (PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2002), 69-133.

Janus's doorposts and threshold with wolf fat. How the bride entered her new home was instrumental to pleasing her new domestic gods. She must not step on or kick the threshold, as it was to bring bad omens.⁶⁷ Next, the bride would join her new family for a communal meal and dedicate coins to her new *Lares*, and say a family prayer in the atrium of her new home in the presence of her new *Lares* and *Penates*.⁶⁸ Schultz describes the bride's new dedication to her husband's *Lares*,

A matron's worship of the household gods of her husband's family began on her wedding day when she set a coin for the *Lares* upon the hearth of her new home and offered prayers to the household genius; the *Lares compitales* received another coin from her soon after her wedding night. She also offered prayers to the *Lar familiaris* on certain days each month.⁶⁹

In both cultures the virginity of the bride was of special importance. Roman weddings were often attended by diviners, particularly auspices, to ensure the chastity of the bride. The fact that the Roman bride was dressed as a Vestal signifies that virginity was the ideal condition of marriage for first time brides, however, no evidence suggests that virginity was a prerequisite for marriage. Her attire was symbolic because she was a virgin bride about to become a matron, right in between the two statuses of the Vestals. As the Vestals attended to the sacred flame in the temple of Vesta to keep Rome safe, the new bride was expected to tend to her new divine hearth to keep her new

⁶⁷ Klaiber, "Nuptiae Romanae," 191-193.

⁶⁸ Klaiber, "Nuptiae Romanae," 190.

⁶⁹ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 127.

family safe.⁷⁰ As van der Toorn explains, “[Mesopotamian] parents undoubtedly preferred that she [their daughter] entered the marriage as a virgin and surely would have taken appropriate measures.”⁷¹ If a bride was not a virgin, she was considered impure and could not marry until her impurity wore off.

Moreover, the divine was most certainly present on the wedding night to ensure the loss of virginity went well, and hopefully was fruitful. The consummation was tense and full of danger. In Mesopotamia, a number of rituals were carried out to ensure protection. In Mesopotamia, Ishtar was often called upon during first marriage intercourse. The Old Babylonian Atrahasis myth details the festivities of the wedding consummation,

When the bed is laid in the hou[se of the father-in-law],
Let the [wo]man and her husband chose each other as partners;
When, to institute marriage, Ishtar rejoices in the house [of then
father-in-law].
Let there be merriment for nine days,
let them continually call upon Ishtar.⁷²

van der Toorn believes that the nine-day merriment is a direct association with the nine months’ duration of pregnancy and meant to represent an increase in the chances of impregnation on the consummation night. The fact that Ishtar is

⁷⁰ Schultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 4; for more on the symbolic meaning of the virginity and chastity of women to the Roman state and family see, Holt Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State,” *The American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 4 (Winter, 2004): 563-601.

⁷¹ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 65.

⁷² translation from van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 72-73.

called upon, signifies that the intercourse was meant to be enjoyed, also. Ishtar took pride in the eroticism of the lovemaking of newlyweds.⁷³

Similarly, on the wedding night of Roman brides, Venus was called upon to help the Roman bride enjoy the sexual relations. For the Romans, virginity and desire were antithetical, therefore the virgin bride needed persuading to engage in sexual intercourse.⁷⁴ In Augustine's, *City of God*, wrote in the early fifth century, he mocked the Romans for needing a deity in every moment as being excessive, especially at the loss of virginity. Augustine says that Pertunda, the goddess who enabled sexual penetration, was there to make the loss of virginity easier, but he finds her presence offensive to men and believes that this is the husband's duty.⁷⁵ However, Augustine was writing in a different context from the pagan world, when these traditions were practiced the most.

The wedding ceremony, in Roman and Mesopotamian cultures, was one of the most religiously significant events in a woman's life. Her marriage brought change to her religious identity, even if the transition only concerned the domestic cults. However, we must not underestimate the emotional consequences of this; the woman's family and domestic deities had been a part of her life since infancy. This is why the wedding and marriage was a large part of the common woman's religious experience. Reasons why these elements

⁷³ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 72.

⁷⁴ Klaiber, "Nuptiae Romanae," 226.

⁷⁵ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 7:24.

often go unnoticed when studying women's religion is the inadequate attention paid to lived religion.

As soon as a woman embarked on her married life, motherhood was the assumed next step. By the large amounts and significance of the many fertility goddesses of ancient cultures, it is clear that fear of infertility always loomed over women. But once the woman became pregnant, even more danger was ahead that called upon the divine for assistance. Birth goddesses existed in both pantheons and were called upon for divine assistance during birth. In Mesopotamia, these goddesses were called *sassuratu*; in Rome, Juno Lucina was invoked to help bring the baby to light (*lux*), but many other deities assisted in the birthing room. In Mesopotamia, it is even suggested that the midwife and wet-nurses had special religious status.⁷⁶

Many aspects of the average woman's religious life centered around lived religion, meaning that the most routine and ordinary functions of her life were actually religious. Whether the woman liked it or not, her life was influenced and molded by religion. Women were not secluded from religion, but actually took an active part in religious life. The woman's religious life, however, may not have been centered around official religion, it was no less important to the greater religious atmosphere of ancient Rome and Mesopotamia. Her private devotion to her domestic cults and family ancestral deities ensured her family's protection and represented her commitment to that protection. In cultures where religion is

⁷⁶ van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 86.

interwoven in everyday life, it is hard to imagine that culture without religion. This is how the average woman must of felt; she could not conceive of a world other than her own. Day to day she unthinkingly was a part of religion. Pleasing her father, bathing, having good table manners, celebrating a wedding, and ensuring her family's safety was all religious— lived religion. The average woman often gets overlooked when studying women's religious roles in ancient Rome and Mesopotamia, however, the woman's tasks and rituals of lived religion was as much her duty and role in religion as was being a priestess in official religion.

CHAPTER III

Serving the Family and the State: Women in Religion as Extensions and Representations of the Family and the State

The greatest religious role a woman held in her life was serving her family and her state. In both ancient Rome and Mesopotamia, for a woman to hold a religious position in the public sphere was a great honor, but also, was often the only opportunity a woman had to actively participate or be seen as a leader in the public realm. As we have already seen, every woman was expected to serve her family in the private sphere with strenuous dedication to the domestic cults and family ancestor deities. But rarely, a woman was chosen to hold a religious office, conduct sacred rites, or be a religious representation for her family or her state. It is actually from these women – the minority experience – that scholars have the most information about on how to construct the religious life of ancient women. This chapter will look at the Vestal Virgins, the Bona Dea cult, and the Old Babylonian *naditu* priestesses to reveal how often when women were granted highly public religious positions they often served as extensions of their families, particularly husbands and fathers, or were representations in servitude to the state. While some women who held priestly roles were celibate and lived separately, married women also participated perhaps to a greater extent in the

Roman context.

The official religious roles of women discussed in this chapter should not lead one to believe that all women experienced the same benefits or status in society. Often times, these women were chosen for their position because of their family's elite status in society, their husband's or father's financial standing and/or political affiliation, or their reputation as being good wives or daughters. Their higher status in society, privileges in public, and legal rights were usually granted to them because of the men in their lives. While it is easy to study these women as powerful and greater than all other contemporary women, it is important to realize that they were still under the influence and control of the patriarchy, no different than the common women discussed in the previous chapter.

Mesopotamian Women in Religion and Old Babylonian *Naditus*

In traditional third millennium religious practice in Mesopotamia, city gods could be either male or female; all were thought to have spouses and families in the divine realm. They also had human high priests or high priestesses, and there was an inverse relationship between the gender of the deity and the gender of the high priest(ess): a male god had a female high priestess, a goddess had a male high priest. Since Sumerian is a gender-neutral language, both could be represented by the same word, en. Ens were most often royal children, and they appear to have lived in the temples themselves, celibate. Ens were extremely important people, politically, economically and religiously. But there were other

traditional types of priestess in the third millennium as well. These were lower ranking. One of these types involved women called *lukur*, and they appear to be the precursors of what later on will be the focus of this chapter, the *naditu*.

The *lukurs* were groups of women, perhaps twenty to thirty, who were dedicated to a certain god and who lived together in what appears to be a sort of cloister. *Lukurs* of the god Shara of a place called Umma are the best attested around 2040 B.C., but there were other local groups scattered about Mesopotamia. Temples in the third millennium had two elements, inextricably linked: worship of the deity and the administration of the temple's economic interests, which were often very considerable. Temple administrators were almost always men. It can be very difficult to tell when an official was acting in the economic sphere and when in the religious, if such distinctions are even valid for this date. As the Old Babylonian period went on, the long-established en priesthood/ priestess hoods were fading away. Another role for women was becoming more prevalent though, and this was the office of *naditu*. Probably the *naditu* is just the Akkadian word for the same group of *lukur* women discussed above. But as the princesses stopped becoming en priestesses, some now would be dedicated as *naditus*. Soon, other women from wealthy family started to become *naditus*.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Tonia Sharlach, "Social Change and the Transition from the Third Dynasty of Ur to the Old Babylonian Kingdoms c. 2112-1595 BCE," *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford, 2007): 61-72.

When women held high religious offices in Mesopotamia, they were often partitioned from men in certain aspects of life or were a part of female-only communities. This chapter will first examine the *naditus* of ancient Babylon to uncover their religious duties to reveal that often *naditus* did not particularly request to be in their positions and were often placed in the cloister to represent the family. These cloistered communities of women served one god for life, often acting as a representation of their family to continually offer prayer. It is unclear if the *naditus* were completely secluded from men, but it is certain that they lived inside of a cloister among other *naditus* and their protection was of importance.

The institution called *gagum* in Akkadian, best translated as “cloister,” flourished in ancient Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian Period (2004- 1595 B.C.) The cloister housed a group of women known as *naditus*, meaning “fallow women.” These women lived their entire lives with one another conducting business. Most of what is known of the *naditus* comes from the extensive amount of documents concerning their business transactions, which will be discussed in chapters four and five, so it is easy to overlook that these women entered the cloister for presumed religious purposes. The religious role was central to the *naditus*, however less is known of this aspect of their lives. From surviving texts, historians⁷⁸ can piece together an idea of the organization and administration of

⁷⁸ Rivkah Harris, “Biographical Notes on the naditu Women of Sippar,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 16, no.1 (1962): 1-12; Rivkah Harris, “The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6, no. 2 (Jul., 1963): 121-157; Rivkah Harris, “Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?” (paper presented at the Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East, Providence, RI, November 6, 1987), 145-156; Elizabeth Stone, “The Social Role of the *Naditu*

the cloister and a slight glimpse into the life of a *naditu*, including her relationships with family, other *naditus*, and the god she was dedicated to.

Naditus entered the cloister dedicated to one god and sometimes his consort. For example, *naditus* in Sippar were dedicated to Šamaš and the goddess Aya, while *naditus* in Babylon were dedicated to Marduk, and *naditus* in Nippur were dedicated to Ninurta. This lifelong dedication to the god played a large role in these women's lives, as some were able to marry but all were forbidden to have children of their own, so celibacy is assumed.⁷⁹ What is known about the *naditus* and the cloister comes from the abundance of legal documents. Unless otherwise stated, all *naditus* referenced will be *naditus* of Šamaš in Sippar, because it is from this cloister that the most evidence survives to reconstruct the life and role of a *naditu*.

From archeological evidence and cloister documents, historians have constructed a basic understanding of the cloister compound and the offices of the cloister.⁸⁰ Some scholars suggest that the *naditus* were secluded from men,⁸¹ though the evidence for cloister office positions suggests otherwise. Cloisters are known to have existed throughout ancient Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian

Women in Old Babylonian Nippur" *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 25, 1 (1982): 50-70; Caroline Janssen, "Samsu-Iluna and the Hungry Naditums," *Northern Akkad Project Reports* 5 (1991): 3-23.

⁷⁹ For instance, *Naditus* in Babylon could marry. Stone, "The Social Role of the *Naditu* Women in Old Babylonian Nippur," 55-56.

⁸⁰ Harris's work, especially in "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia" is foundational to historians' understandings of how the cloister functioned and the roles of the *naditus*.

⁸¹ Stone, "The Social Role of the *Naditu* Women in Old Babylonian Nippur," 62.

Period (2112-1595 B.C.), notably in Kish, Nippur, Elam, Babylon, and the most famous cloister in Sippar.⁸² Many questions remain unanswered about the institution of the cloister and the lives of the *naditus*. Jean- Vincent Scheil excavated Sippar in 1894, and unfortunately, the excavation was not conducted systematically or scientifically, so much of our understanding of the cloister comes from texts concerning the cloister or the *naditus*.⁸³ The layout of the cloister seems to be so for optimal convenience for the one hundred to two hundred women living inside. The safety and seclusion of the *naditu* women seemed to be of importance, as kings often concerned themselves with repairing the wall. For example, Hammurabi, ruling in the eighteenth century B.C.E., rebuilt the cloister wall in his fourth year of reign.⁸⁴

Inside the cloister walls, one would find a tiny self-sustaining community. The cloister layout closely resembles a modern compound, rather than a nunnery, as most scholars compare the structure to. Cloister officials' homes were embedded in the walls and they most certainly lived among the *naditus*, which is surprising since most officials were men.⁸⁵ Inside the walls were the private homes of *naditus* ranging in size. Through *naditu* inheritance texts the homes of the *naditus* are known to be privately owned, and in some cases a

⁸² The cloister in Sippar is much more widely studied due to the detailed information of this institution and its *naditus* that survives. see Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 122.

⁸³ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 124.

⁸⁴ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 124.

⁸⁵ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 126.

naditu owned multiple homes inside the complex. Often *naditus* would rent homes from other *naditus*. For example, texts reveal a *naditu* named Eli-erissa paid two shekels of silver to another *naditu*, Iltani, as rent for a house.⁸⁶

Other important administrative buildings were located within the cloister walls such as the cloister granary.⁸⁷ The grain stored here served as payment to many of the menial cloister staff and was probably guarded by a cloister official. The granary may have also served as storage for the *naditus'* own crops. An arable plot of land (*meres gagim*) is mentioned in one economic text, but the text is too badly damaged to gain any other knowledge. Rivkah Harris, leading historian on *naditus*, suggested that this land was actually a sesame field inside the cloister walls, due to a cloister official, Sutean, who is mentioned as guard of the sesame fields.⁸⁸ Sutean was paid in barley, and in the same text another name, Nabium-malik, followed who received payment for being the overseer of the sailor. Harris argued that this position was in place to supervise sailors who transported the produce of the sesame field. The granary also probably fed the animals, such as ducks, inside the cloister walls.⁸⁹

When examining the organization of the cloister, men played an important role in many administration aspects, which raises questions to the amount of

⁸⁶ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 125.

⁸⁷ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 129.

⁸⁸ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 130.

⁸⁹ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 145.

seclusion from men the *naditus* of Sippar experienced. Discussed already have been the argued male cloister position of Sutean and overseer of the sailors, but men held many other administrative positions within the walls. Along the wall was four gates guarded by gatekeepers at all times. Gatekeepers mentioned in seal inscriptions reveal that the office was hereditary, like many other positions in the cloister. The gatekeepers' job was probably to collect dues imposed on people entering the cloister to conduct various transactions with the *naditus*.⁹⁰ Harris stated later in her career that the *naditu* of Šamaš "might have the freedom to leave for short family visits," in which the gatekeeper probably played a role in making sure the women remained inside the cloister until permitted to leave.⁹¹

The steward of the *naditu* was another office occupied by men. Women may have held earlier positions of steward, but men always held later stewardships for unknown reasons. The position was one of significance, as the steward was always second on the list of witnesses in *naditu* transactions. Little is known of the duties of the steward, but there could have been as many as three at any given time. From seal inscriptions, it is also clear that the daughter of stewards became *naditus*.⁹² The office of steward was also a lifelong position and they commonly held property outside the cloister, as seen in a tablet that describes a *naditu* exchanging a field for another "next to the field of the steward

⁹⁰ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 137.

⁹¹ Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?" (paper presented at the Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East, Providence, RI, Nov. 5-7, 1987), 151.

⁹² Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia", 134.

of the *naditus* of Šamaš.⁹³ It also seems that all other cloister positions were subordinate to the steward.

In times of disagreement, there was a designated cloister judge to preside over arguments and lawsuits. The fact that the cloister needed its own judge proves the importance of the business transactions that were conducted within the walls, also the possibilities for disagreements between *naditus* and buyers or renters. In the period before Hammurabi, *naditus* went before the judges of the temple of Ebabbar to handle disputes. Though, sometime around the reign of Hammurabi, a cloister judge was appointed to handle such dealings.⁹⁴ A letter concerning the cloister reveals that a person might be appointed for a specific time to serve as judge in the disputes of the *naditus*.⁹⁵ This is shown in texts that mention a man, Awel-Adad, who was appointed to the cloister as a judge, it is unknown who appointed him or for how long his position was maintained, but the appointment proves the existence of a cloister judge.

Not all cloister offices were held by men. It was mentioned above that early cloister steward positions may have been held by *naditus*, but other offices were solely occupied by women. Harris states, “it is not surprising to find that the complex organization of the cloister had its own scribes. Nor is it astonishing to

⁹³ Harris, “The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia”, 134.

⁹⁴ Harris, “On the Process of Secularization under Hammurabi,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 15, no. 4 (1961): 119.

⁹⁵ Harris, “The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia,” 140.

find that many of the scribes were *naditus* themselves.”⁹⁶ Female scribes often appeared as witnesses in documents concerning real estate transactions. Evidence suggests that not all scribes were *naditus*. One document lists an Inanna-amamu, who was the sister of a *naditu*, but it seems that she herself was not a *naditu*. The office of scribe was also a life-long position, and possibly may have been a familial position. Other female cloister positions included cooks, weavers, and servants.

Often speculated is the office of abbess, who acted as a superior mother figure to the other *naditus*. Harris argues that there was, in fact, an abbess of the *naditus* because one document mentions an *Ama Lukur.ra* (Abbess of the *Naditus*).⁹⁷ The position may have been in place for only a short period as the title is mentioned only once. The possibility of an *entu* priestess occupying this position would not be surprising. The Code of Hammurabi (110:37) mentioned a *naditu* or an *entu* who does not reside in the cloister, suggesting that there was an *entu* who did reside in the cloister. Harris believed that an *entu* did live in the cloister and served as the abbess of the *naditus*.⁹⁸

The nature of the sources that scholars have to work with are minimal, fragmented, and often confusing. An abundance of sources account for the *naditus* business transactions, but less survives that reveals that extent of the

⁹⁶ Harris, “The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia,” 138.

⁹⁷ Harris, “The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia,” 141-142.

⁹⁸ Harris, “The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia,” 142.

religious duties the women were responsible for and how religious the office of the *naditu* really was. Due to the amount of economic texts concerning *naditus*, it is easy to forget that the *naditus'* position was one of religion. Raymond Westbrook commented on the absence of religious discussion concerning the *naditu*; "Should we forget that these women were women of religion? Our view is skewed by the texts we have, which happen to be economic texts. Religion was central, and women of religion presumably played some important role, but we just don't happen to know what was going on."⁹⁹ Though called "religious women" less is known about their religious duties.

The only documentation of their religious practices comes from records of *piqittu* oblations.¹⁰⁰ These oblations were obligatory upon every *naditu* and cloister official. The texts list the amounts of flour and the various parts of meat that are to be given to the Šamaš temple. Also listed is the names of those who offered. In some cases, a name is not listed, instead the document stated that the oblation came from the house of a certain person. The reasoning for this is that *naditus* would often have a renter fill her place. Some *naditu* lease contracts even contained a *piqittu* clause, which stated that the leaser would fulfill the *naditu's* obligation to bring an oblation.

Other administrative accounts concerning the *naditu's* religious relationship deal with the ceremonies involved during the installation of a *naditu*,

⁹⁹ Raymond Westbrook, "Response to Harris's Paper," *Women's Earliest Records From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia* (Brown University, 1989), 164.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 149.

which consisted of a three-day festival. Upon entering the cloister as a *naditu*, the girls' male guardians received a betrothal gift, suggesting that the *naditus* were married to the god of the cloister. This marriage is marked more by the attire of a soon to be *naditus*. Harris suggests that the girls were dressed in bridal clothing, which may have been the distinctive dress of the *naditus* for the rest of their lives. On the second day, called "the day of the dead", the *naditu* to be would witness other *naditus* remembering dead *naditus* by performing the rituals usually performed at the time of their death. The girl may have been brought into the cemetery to witness her guarantee of eternal care. Finally, the girl was brought in to see all the images of Šamaš and Aya, a privilege few were granted. During this time the "thread of Šamaš" was placed on her arm, which symbolized her new and intimate relationship with the god.¹⁰¹

The most abundant information on the religious activities of *naditus* comes from the Mari Letters of Erišti-Aya, daughter of Zimri-Lum, who served as a *naditu*. Erišti-Aya wrote to her parents, often distraught that they forced her to live in the cloister far from home, and demanded for her parent's attention and affection. She made reference to praying for her family often, which scholars use as evidence for *naditus'* religious roles and representation of the family. Two letters follow that show the haunting demands from Erišti-Aya:

May my Lord (Šamaš) and my Lady (Aya) keep you well for my sake. May they lead you to wherever you signal. Am I not your own emblem, an advocate who enhances your prestige at the Ebabbar

¹⁰¹ Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?" (paper presented at the Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East, Providence, RI, Nov. 5-7, 1987), 154.

temple? Why have you cut off the two maidservants trained to me? You have sent my rings, but are cutting off one maidservant. Now then, send me the two maidservants trained by me as well as my clothing. In the presence of the custodian of foreigners, I have donated to my Lady (Aya), who keeps you in health, the garment and container you have sent me.¹⁰²

May Lord and Lady keep you well for my sake. When, O when- I have wailed- when will the affluence of my father's house rise up to me, so that death for me becomes life? I have written to you: two maidservants were sent to me a year ago two maidservants, but one died. I am an emblem for your dynasty; so why am I not cared for, not given money or ointment? I was pleased over the kings [2 damaged lines] and have given (him) a garment such as yours, yet I got no gift (back).¹⁰³

Scholars like Bernard Batto argued that from Erišti-Aya's letters it is clear that the main function of the *naditu* was a religious one. Only in one letter does Erišti-Aya address her father as *abija* (father), instead she called him *kakkabija* ("my star"), a term of respect. She wrote of the services she performed on behalf of her father, consisting of praying for him and his dynasty before Šamaš and Aya. Eristi-Aya frequently reminded her father of these duties and asked why she was not receiving her rations from the royal stores: "Now the daughters of your house... are receiving their rations of grain, clothing, and good beer. But even though I alone am the woman who prays for you, I am not provisioned! Every night and at dawn I pray for your life."¹⁰⁴ In other letters, she revealed her constant prayer while referring to herself as the *surinnum* ("sacred emblem") of

¹⁰² Jack M. Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letter* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 264.

¹⁰³ Jack M. Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letter* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 264.

¹⁰⁴ Bernard Frank Batto, "Studies on Women at Mari: Politics and Religion," (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins Univeristy, 1972), 142.

her father. “Am I not your praying emblem who constantly prays for your life? Why am I not provisioned with oil and honey from my father?”¹⁰⁵ In this sense, Erišti –Aya was acting as a votive on her father’s behalf. Batto argues,

Erišti-Aya’s metaphor of herself as the *surinnu* of the king, who prays continually for his life, should be compared to the common practice of installing votive statues before the god(s) in the temple. These votive statues were thought to effectively offer continuous prayer on behalf of the donor. These statues may be of two types. The first was a representation of the donor himself in some gesture of prayer. The second type depicted the protective genii (*lamassatum*), or the one who prays on the donors behalf. This second type is comparable to the role of Eristi-Aja. In both cases the king installs them as intercessors to pray continuously for him in this absence.¹⁰⁶

The practice of *naditus* praying for their fathers was not uncommon. Other letters from *naditus* survive revealing the same practices. One *naditu* wrote, “I continually pray for you with washed hands before my lord and lady.”¹⁰⁷ Note the importance of having washed hands while praying, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Another *naditu* wrote her father concerned for his health, “During my morning and evening offerings before my lord and my lady, I pray continually for your life.”¹⁰⁸ It appears that *naditus* regularly prayed for their fathers, which was not rare for any other woman. The practice of praying for their fathers should not go without further analysis. Most of the *naditus* own words that

¹⁰⁵ Sasson, *From the Mari Archives: An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letter*, 264.

¹⁰⁶ Batto, “Studies on Women at Mari: Politics and Religion,” 144.

¹⁰⁷ Batto, “Studies on Women at Mari: Politics and Religion,” 144.

¹⁰⁸ Batto, “Studies on Women at Mari: Politics and Religion,” 145.

survived are in the form of letters, mostly mentioning prayers. When prayers are mentioned in letters it is most commonly prayers for their fathers or for the family. It might be suggested that *naditu* prayers were monitored or they were instructed on *what* and *who* to pray for. It is unknown if the *naditus* would say prayers on their own behalf, maybe for an illness or a personal request, but one would assume that they did. However, it should be questioned if *naditus* prayed for their fathers and male family members out of honest concern for their well-being, or if possibly, they were told what their prayers should consist of. The constant stressed mentions of prayers for fathers may have also been a way to reassure the family that the *naditu* was doing her job and representing the family well before the divine.

The role of the parents is also revealed in Erišti-Aya's letters. In one letter Erišti-Aya wrote to her mother stating, "your husband and you made me enter the cloister."¹⁰⁹ It is unclear why Erišti-Aya was placed in the cloister, but it is clear that she held some resentment towards her parents for placing her there. A sense of estrangement is detected in her letters when she pleads for her rations and asked that her family treat her well. She wrote to her mother again, "I am the king's daughter! You are a king's wife! Even disregarding the tablet with which your husband and you made me enter the cloister—they treat well soldiers taken as booty! You, then, treat me well!"¹¹⁰ Apart from the obvious religious reasoning

¹⁰⁹ Batto, "Studies on Women at Mari: Politics and Religion," 146.

¹¹⁰ Batto, "Studies on Women at Mari: Politics and Religion," 147-148. The "tablet" here probably refers to the terms of her dowry. The Code of Hammurabi stated that the father of a *naditu* must write a tablet for her stating the terms of her dowry.

of having a daughter act as a personal representative before Šamaš at his temple, Zimri-Lim may have been influenced by the prestige of having a daughter among the other daughters of his contemporaries on the throne in Babylon.

How well does Erišti-Aya represent *naditu* daily practices? Her pleas for the need rations to survive may be exaggerations. Stephanie Dalley suggested that these requests may have been a part of a competition for status among other cloistered princesses.¹¹¹ Harris disregarded these texts saying that stereotyped female rhetoric plays a large role in how scholars read the texts, when in fact this style of writing was customary to the Old Babylonian period. Harris believed that scholars should not read into the “whining and crying to their brothers about what they weren’t getting, they were also involved in making transactions.”¹¹² While they seem to be independent women taking on the role of male, “they don’t give up their femininity: they’re always whining and moaning, but really more so, and I really think it’s part of an act, of how women are supposed to sound.”¹¹³ The daily life of the *naditus* will never be revealed in its truest form, only speculations can suggest what their day consisted of and their feelings towards the position that they were placed in at an early age.

The *naditu* role was one of the highest religious roles that a woman could have in ancient Mesopotamia. However, as we have seen, it is unclear if the

¹¹¹ Stephanie Dalley, *Mari and Karana: Two Old Babylonian Cities* (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1984), 105.

¹¹² Rivkah Harris, “Response to Prof Harris’s Paper,” *Women’s Earliest Records From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia* (Brown University, 1989), 160.

¹¹³ Harris, “Response to Prof. Harris’s Paper,” 159.

naditu exactly wanted her position. While it did offer her special privileges, such as buying and selling property, she was always forbidden to have children and mostly forbidden to marry. She was clearly placed in her position, possibly against her will, by her father or male family members to represent the family before the divine, and as later chapters will reveal, to keep the family wealth safe, however, the *naditu* often found ways to retaliate against her family if she held resentment for her reality.

Roman Women and Official Religious Positions

Directing attention to Rome¹¹⁴, the woman in charge of the December rites of Bona Dea, the wife or mother of the consul or Pontifex Maximus, will be examined to reveal that while the rites were to be conducted only by women, they were crucial to Rome's welfare. I will also examine other Roman religious offices designated for women, such as Vestal Virgins, the *Regina Sacrorum*, and the *Flaminica Dialis*, status in society and how their selection was almost always hinged on their relation to the men in their lives. In ancient Rome, many more religious privileges and roles were offered to women—here, I will examine the Vestal Virgins and matrons who were involved in the cult of Bona Dea, specifically the December rites, suggesting that the goddess' rites were instrumental to the welfare of the Roman state, even though they were

¹¹⁴ When I refer to "Rome" or the "Romans" I mostly am referencing the city of Rome and its inhabitants; however, these terms are not always exclusive to the city or its citizens. Other instances refer to those living outside of the city of Rome, sometimes even in North African or far Northern European provinces of the Roman Empire.

conducted by women. It is also the assumption of many scholars that women were separate or secluded from men in all realms of official religion. The belief that women only worshipped goddesses and had no need to offer thanks to or pray to a male deity was the popular belief among historians for a long time.¹¹⁵ This misconception may have been because of the idea that the cults of goddesses were not as important to Rome. The Romans believed that the veneration and proper worship of the deities was a direct correlation to the welfare of not only the individual, but also Rome as an entity.

Historians often look to the cult of Bona Dea as proof that women were separate from men in religious activities.¹¹⁶ Bona Dea was often considered a goddess of the nobility and solely of women.¹¹⁷ This assumption of exclusively aristocratic feminine character of the cult stems from the rule that only noble women and Vestal Virgins were allowed to attend the goddess's ceremonial rites. Either the wife or mother of the Pontifex Maximus or Consul, along with the Vestal Virgins¹¹⁸, performed the rites of the cult. The cult had two festival days, May 1st and December 1st, though less is known about the May 1st festival, arguably because less controversy surrounds the rites.¹¹⁹ On the night of the

¹¹⁵ See chapter one.

¹¹⁶ J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1962); Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddesses to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹¹⁷ For a more extensive historiography of this see, H.H.J. Brouwer, *Bona Dea: The Sources and a Description of the Cult* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), xxi-xxvii.

¹¹⁸ Plutarch, *Life of Cicero*, trans. Thomas North (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), 81.

¹¹⁹ For detailed descriptions of both rites see, Brouwer, *Bona Dea*, 323-375.

December rites, the magistrate's wife or mother, assisted by her servants, decorated the house, while the Vestal Virgins transported the image of Bona Dea to the residence from her temple. The women sacrificed a sow and the mistress of the house performed a *libatio*¹²⁰ over a fire. The women are said to celebrate all night with dancing and drinking.¹²¹ The most surprising aspect of the December rites was the women taking part in drinking, at the very least even handling, wine. It is known that women were punished if even caught handling wine. The most severe account of this comes from the ancient author, Valerius Maximus in the first century A.D. He told the story of Egnatius Mecennius beating his wife to death for having a drink of wine. Wine was believed to be unvirtuous for women. Mecennius was never punished for his actions, because it was thought that he was setting a good example by punishing his wife.¹²²

On the night of December 1, the men left the house to the women so that the rituals could take place. Plutarch elaborated on the importance of men being absent, "besides, it is not lawful for any man to be present at their sacrifices, no not within the house it self . . . now when the time of this feast came, the husband, and all his men and the boys in the house, do come out of it, and leave it wholly to his wife."¹²³ This male cleansing of the house went as far as removing or covering all images that resembled a male: "they'll command any

¹²⁰ Offering of wine for a deity. Means, "to pour."

¹²¹ see, Plutarch, *Life of Cicero*; *Life of Caesar*.

¹²² Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings: One Thousand Tales from Ancient Rome*, trans. Henry John Walker (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 212.

¹²³ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 6.

picture to be veiled that happens to portray the form of the opposite sex.”¹²⁴ On the night of the 62 B.C. December rites, Publius Clodius, who had become infatuated with Caesar’s wife, Pompeia, disguised himself as a woman and snuck into the house of Julius Caesar where the rituals were taking place. The maids immediately recognized Clodius. Once the women discovered the imposter, Caesar’s mother, Aurelia instructed the women to “leave off the ceremonies of the sacrifice, and hide their secret things.”¹²⁵ The scandal circulated throughout the city. Clodius and Pompeia went to trial; it was thought that his “great villainy” had slandered the “commonwealth and the gods” and Pompeia had ruined the rites by unknowingly allowing him into the house.¹²⁶ Since the Romans thought that if they mishandled the rites the gods would punish them, both Clodius and Pompeia were punished and their reputations ruined.

Scholars, such as J.P.V. D. Balsdon, regularly look to the Bona Dea scandal to prove that women had to be separate from men in religious ceremonies, because of the repercussions that resulted when a male infiltrated the rituals. His assumption that the restriction of men from the cult meant that rites were not important is misinformed.¹²⁷ Because Clodius ruined the rites, the public placed him on trial for slandering the commonwealth and the gods; disobeying them was a serious offense because it damaged the peace of the gods and instilled fear that they would punish the populace. In response to this

¹²⁴ Juvenal, *Satire 6*, trans. Lewis Evans (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1886), 411.

¹²⁵ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 6.

¹²⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 7.

¹²⁷ Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits*, 87.

scandal, Caesar divorced his wife, even though the trial proved her innocent. When asked why, he replied that Caesar's wife must be above suspicion.¹²⁸

Historians, like Balsdon, often overlook the other aspects of the rites. The Vestal Virgins performed the rites correctly the following night in hopes that the gods would pardon the mistake. The presence of the Vestal Virgins verified that the rites were crucial, and the urgency to perform them correctly demonstrates their importance. Although the rites were performed by women, the cult was official and rites were *pro populo Romano*¹²⁹ and to benefit the *pax deorum*.¹³⁰ The Vestals leaving the sacred flame of Vesta unattended to participate and watch over the rites of Bona Dea speaks volumes to the rites' importance to the Roman public. Also, Caesar could not risk suspicion that his wife was guilty, because it would harm his reputation and threaten his status. The repercussions of the scandal confirmed that the rites were essential to the Roman society.

Scholars often also look to literary sources to argue the Cult of Bona Dea was reserved only for patrician women,¹³¹ however, recently some scholars argue that there appeared to have been a connection between Bona Dea and the famed ancient orator and politician, Cicero, proving not only that Bona Dea was revered by men, but also the importance of her cult and the women who conducted her rites. The exclusion of men is not the most important theme in the

¹²⁸ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 7.

¹²⁹ "On behalf of the Roman people."

¹³⁰ "Peace of the Gods."

¹³¹ Since Bona Dea's major rites were conducted by patrician women, and less is known about the May rites and who conducted them. See Brouwer, *Bona Dea*, 370-371.

literary sources about Bona Dea. H.H.J. Brouwer argues that Cicero held high esteem for the goddess and she "appears as Cicero's protectress in his struggle for the preservation of the established order."¹³² Through Cicero's writings, it can be argued that his mission was "to preserve all things traditional in the Roman State, and therefore Roman religion."¹³³ The bond between Cicero and Bona Dea can be traced back to the 63 B.C. December rites. Cicero, consul that year, was in the middle of the controversial Catilinarian conspiracy when his house was the setting for the rites to take place.¹³⁴ Cicero had left the estate to the women and considered taking an action of severity against Catiline, but was afraid because punishing a noble citizen may spark chaos and ensure danger because of the rashness. It was during these moments of thought that Bona Dea delivered a message to the women about to conduct the rituals, that they perceived as destined for Cicero.

Cicero being perplexed thus with these doubts, there appeared a miracle to the ladies, doing sacrifice at home in his house. For the fire that was thought to be clean out upon the altar where they had sacrificed, there sodainly rose out of the imbers of the rind or barks which they had burnt, a great bright flame, which amazed all the other ladies. Howbeit the Vestal Nuns willed Terentia (Cicero's wife) to go straight unto her husband, and to bid him not to be afraid to execute that boldly which he had considered of, for the benefit of the commonwealth, and that the goddess had raised this great flame, to show him that he should have great honor by doing of it. . . she went to make report

¹³² Brouwer, *Bona Dea*, 264.

¹³³ Brouwer, *Bona Dea*, 264.

¹³⁴ The Catilinarian Conspiracy was a plot to overthrow Cicero's consulship. Lead by the Roman senator, Lucius Sergius Catiline, with the help of other Roman aristocrats. Cicero eventually exposed the plot and the conspirators and denounced Catiline forcing him to flee the city and executing other conspirators.

thereof unto him, and prayed him to do execution of those men.¹³⁵

The fact that such a monumental political decision was based off of an omen delivered by the divine is not surprising. But the fact that this omen stemmed from a goddess who delivered her message to a house of women and word travelled by these women's mouth to the Consul and he took the advice without question proves that the rites were of importance, but even more so was the role of the women who performed the rites.

When the scandal happened in 62 B.C., Cicero made Clodius his public enemy, assuring that Clodius received no acknowledgement by the state, only furthering Brouwer's theory that Cicero had a personal connection with Bona Dea. When Clodius was proposed to be sent to Armenia to be the ambassador to King Tigranes, Cicero seized the opportunity to assure that Clodius did not receive this honor, by mentioning his disgrace, "So, as you say, Clodius is going to Tigranem! I should be glad to go by myself on the same terms. But never mind. It will be a more convenient time for me to get a travelling pass when my brother Quintus without problems, as I hope, has settled down to regular routine life and I know what that priest of Bona Dea plans to do."¹³⁶ Their feuds continued until Clodius's death in 52 B.C., ironically in close proximity to a Bona Dea temple. Cicero was known to stand up for and protect the Roman tradition. Believing that Bona Dea was

¹³⁵ Plutarch, *Life of Cicero*, 82.

¹³⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Ad Atticum II*, trans. E.O. Winstedt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 141.

purely Roman (there is no counterpart for Bona Dea in Greek mythology), Cicero revered her as a genuinely Roman deity, and all things Roman must be preserved.

Not all women's cults were private (such as the Cult of Bona Dea); others were constantly publicized, like the Cult of Vesta. Though highly public roles with greater privileges in the public sphere, the Vestals were chosen for their position as children, therefore had no choice, opinion, or agency in this life altering decision. Though Vesta was the goddess of private matters, such as the hearth, home and family, the cult was crucial to all of Rome, especially the priestesses. The public relied on the Vestal Virgins to perform their duties correctly to please the gods, in turn keeping the peace among the people.

The Pontifex Maximus selected the Vestals as children between the ages of six and ten to serve the goddess and the state for thirty years.¹³⁷ Upon becoming a Vestal, the girls' fathers handed over paternal control; having no family connections was a quality that no other Roman citizen, male or female, experienced. Also, Vestals were the only women who were freed from the control of their male family members without falling under the *manus* of another man. Vestals were removed from their agnatic family, but did not pass to the ownership of another family, instead she was under the "*manus*" of the state. In addition to being under the control of the state, the Vestals swore a vow of chastity during their thirty-year term. Their chastity, discussed previous was

¹³⁷ Sarolta A. Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 81.

symbolic of the Roman state. The Vestals were unpenetrated, just as the Rome was. As long as the Vestals remained intact, so did Rome. The Vestals had social status and religious powers equal to men, such as sitting with senators at games and participating in the rituals of Argie.¹³⁸ As attendants of Vesta, the priestesses' duties were to keep the sacred flame alive, prepare cultic objects, and perform bloodless sacrifices throughout the year on behalf of the Roman people. The Vestals were essential in the relationship between the gods and the people. There was no room for error for priestesses; if suspicion arose of unchastity, the Vestals faced the punishment of flogging or death by live burial. The six Vestal Virgins dedicated their lives to the goddess Vesta and, by extension, to the Roman state.¹³⁹

Other female religious officials, such as the *Flaminicae*¹⁴⁰ and *Regina Sacrorum*,¹⁴¹ came to their positions by their marriages. These priestesses' status even granted them the right to conduct blood sacrifices.¹⁴² Only marriage could grant women with positions of high religious honor, and the privilege of receiving a priestess-hood was only possible through chastity. Other women

¹³⁸ Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 83.

¹³⁹ Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ Wives of the *Flamines*, priests of the fifteen official cults in Rome. See Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 113-114.

¹⁴¹ Wife of *Rex Sacrorum*, senatorial priest who made offerings for the king. See Sir William Smith, *A Concise Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. Francis Warre Cornish (London: Spottiswoode and Co., 1898), 537.

¹⁴² The *Flaminica Dialis* sacrificed a ram to Jupiter on market days and the *Regina Sacrorum* offered a sow or female lamb to Juno on the first day of every month. See Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2012), 207.

who held religious distinctions, but not priestesses, like the Roman matron who hosted the December rites of Bona Dea, also came to the position because of their spouse's nobility. Marriage was an important qualification for women in every cult. For instance, in the cults of Pudicitia, Fortuna Muliebris, and Mater Mater, only women who married once were allowed to approach the temple's statues.¹⁴³

Priestesses of Vesta were chosen by the *pontifex maximus*, the *Flaminicae* and the *Regina Sacrorum* came to their positions solely through marriage, and again approved by the *pontifex maximus*. Other women who held prestigious religious roles, such as conducting the rites of Bona Dea, were granted through marriage or relation to the *pontifex maximus*, and later the emperor of Rome. However, in some cases, voters selected elite Roman matrons to perform an extraordinary public religious duty (such as conducting inaugural sacrifices and making dedications) based on their status and character as women. Often, the Pontifex Maximus would select a large group of married, patrician women and let the matrons decide who would receive the honor. For example, sometime at the end of the third century B.C., the Sibylline books¹⁴⁴ advised the Senate to dedicate a statue to Venus Verticordia so that the minds of women and young girls could easily be turned away from lust to chastity. The Pontifex Maximus elected one hundred matrons, and then narrowed that number

¹⁴³ Shultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 147.

¹⁴⁴ Collection of prophesies from oracles written around the sixth century B.C. See Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion*, 62-70.

to ten. The matrons nominated Sulpicia, wife of Q. Fulvius Flaccus, for the honor to dedicate the statue, because “what distinguished Sulpicia from her colleagues was not only her venerable lineage and the status of her husband but also the outstanding propriety of her behavior. Sulpicia was judged by her peers to be the most chaste.”¹⁴⁵

Most certainly, the greatest religious honor a woman had in her life was the opportunity to serve her family or her state publically. However, it is unclear if the women in these positions exactly wanted their roles or if they were being coerced into acting a particular way. Often women came to these positions conditioned by the men in their lives or based on their reputation as good wives and daughters. No matter how many privileges her religious role granted her, she was still subject to the words and actions of men. But still, it is these women who held official religious roles – the minority experience – that allow scholars a better understanding to how the female functioned in the realm of official religion, which was most certainly a male dominated realm. Through their study, we realize that women's religion was often extremely important to the state and the family. The fact that their sacred roles often meant they were secluded or separate from men in religious matters, does not mean that their roles was of any less importance. In the next chapter, we shall see how the belief that women were separated from men in religious practice, largely supported by the study of women's official religious roles, is actually a

¹⁴⁵ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 144.

misapprehension.

CHAPTER IV

Betraying Tradition: Women in Religion Who Broke Cultural Norms and Trouble the Scholarly Tradition

So far, the woman's private religious experience and the rare public religious roles have been examined; in both cases, Roman and Mesopotamian women were still largely subject to men and constantly under their influence. However, through legal documents and epigraphic evidence, we see how women often broke tradition of religious societal norms, scholars' understanding of these women, and their ancient cultures. By societal norms, I mean the religious traditions that women were expected to uphold. For Mesopotamian women, the religious role of the *naditu* was one of the most prestigious roles a woman could have. In the previous chapter their duties and expectations were examined—this chapter will reveal how those women broke tradition, showed agency in their actions, and often betrayed their families. To show how women broke the traditional understanding of women's roles in religion, I will investigate some of the more confusion and misleading conceptions that scholars have subscribed to when studying ancient women, and show how those conceptions are not always accurate.

Naditus and Family Betrayal

The roles, rituals, and ceremonial rites of the *naditus* in Sippar reveal that the women did enter the cloister for some religious purposes. However, as seen in Eristi-Aya's letters to her family, it is unclear if the *naditu's* wanted their positions. A sense of estrangement, frustration and betrayal is detected in her letters pleading to her family for attention and care. Eristi-Aya's letters are exceptional and uncover a possible common feeling held among *naditus*. Princesses *and* common women were placed in cloisters throughout Mesopotamia, but because of Eristi-Aya's status, her personal letters are among the few pieces of evidence that come directly from a *naditu*. Were her feelings normal for all other *naditus* or the exception?

From documents recording adoptions, I suggest that the feelings of estrangement, betrayal, and frustration were widespread among *naditus*. The previous chapter mentioned that the bulk of sources concerning *naditus* are actually about their business transactions. These business transactions centered around real estate. While in the cloister, *naditus* were in charge of buying, selling, and renting out family properties.¹⁴⁶ At the time of a *naditu's* death, the properties, profits, and any wealth accumulated by the *naditu* would ideally go

¹⁴⁶ Rivkah Harris, "Biographical Notes on the *naditu* Women of Sippar," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 16, no.1 (1962): 1-12; Rivkah Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6, no. 2 (Jul., 1963): 121-157; Rivkah Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?" (paper presented at the Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East, Providence, RI, November 6, 1987), 145-156.

back to the male family members. Since the *naditus* in Sippar were unable to have heirs of their own, most forbidden to even marry, it made sense that the properties and money would default back to the father, brothers, or uncles of the *naditu*. In an ideal *naditu* arrangement, it is unclear if the properties and wealth were ever truly hers, or if she was always conducting business on the behalf of her family, but the *naditu* could certainly be in charge over large amounts of wealth.

The *naditus* were independent businesswomen who could heavily increase the family wealth. One example scholars refer to is the multiple texts concerning the princess Iltani. Iltani was probably one of the wealthiest *naditu* ever. She lived well into her seventies and her business activities were manifold. Iltani was an important landowner, leasing properties out to other *naditu* and other citizens outside the cloister. Texts that record her hiring out harvest workers hint to her vast land holdings. Iltani also hired *issakku* farmers to manage her fields and harvest workers. The *issakku* farmers were wealthy in their own right, suggesting Iltani paid them well. Only one other *naditu* is known to have an *issakku* farmer. Iltani also acted as a creditor lending out barley in multiple legal documents. In addition to being a landowner, Iltani also owned cattle, which was rare among *naditus*. One text lists the number of cattle owned by Iltani and the names of the herdsman she employed to look after them. Altogether, she owned 1,065 head of cattle and was in charge of six men, attesting to her wealth.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Harris, "Biographical Notes on the *naditu* Women of Sippar," 6-7.

Princesses were not the only *naditus* highly active in business transactions. Tablets found in the Sippar cloister archives document multiple notable women. Innabatum owned at least eight fields that she regularly leased. She also owned multiple slaves, some of which were adopted and later married off, gaining even more wealth from this.¹⁴⁸ Other women such as Hussutum also leased out fields, owned animals and slaves, and acted as a creditor lending out barley and silver on multiple accounts.¹⁴⁹

Since the *naditu* was in charge of these properties, the family wealth was the only leverage a *naditu* had to retaliate against her family if she felt mistreated. According to cloister archives, *naditus* often adopted other women and commissioned wills making the adoptee the rightful heir to the wealth. Why would a *naditu* make such a bold move and betray her family? I purpose this was one way *naditus* showed agency, expressed unhappiness with this system and took revenge on their families for placing them in the cloister.

Adoption records are also among the abundance of legal documentation found at the cloister in Sippar.¹⁵⁰ Of the 6700 texts that survive from Sippar, sixty-three are adoption records or records that imply adoption.¹⁵¹ From these sixty-

¹⁴⁸ Harris, "Biographical Notes on the *naditu* Women of Sippar," 8.

¹⁴⁹ Harris, "Biographical Notes on the *naditu* Women of Sippar," 5.

¹⁵⁰ Adoption texts were also found at Nippur, but they are so badly damaged that it is unclear whether the *naditu* is the adopter or the adoptee. Elizabeth Stone, "The Social Role of the *Naditu* Women in Old Babylonian Nippur" *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 25, 1 (1982): 62.

¹⁵¹ In some instances, adoption is not always explicitly stated, but other times implied in certain types of contracts like marriage or inheritance documents. Of the records concerning *naditu* adoption, seven are marriage contracts and three are inheritance documents. Guido Suurmeijer, "He Took Him

three records concerning adoption, thirty-seven adopters are single women, and twenty-five are *naditus*.¹⁵² *Naditus* would commonly adopt other matured women to receive their inheritance or to take care of them in old age. In addition to taking care of the *naditu* in old age, it was also common the adopted daughters would be responsible for the care of the *naditu's* spirit after her death. This would include performing the necessary rites after her death, just as a biological child would.¹⁵³ The filial duties that a son would normally be in charge of was filled by the adoptive daughter, creating a parent-child relationship. There are three known types of adoption that survive from Sippar texts: 1.) *Naditu* adoption of another *naditu*, 2.) *naditu* adoption of her niece, 3.) and *naditu* adoption of an unrelated female. Each type of adoption had its own purpose, and *naditus* may have adopted more than one woman, each for a different purpose.¹⁵⁴

The most common type of adoption seems to be the *naditu*-niece adoption. A *naditu* could have adopted her niece to take care of her in old age or to receive her inheritance, still keeping the wealth in the family even though the wealth would not have gone to the male family members, as intended. The adopted niece did not always become a *naditu*. Seven marriage contracts implying adoption reveal that a girl was given away in marriage by her mother who was a *naditu*. Since the *naditus* were forbidden to have children of their own, these mother-daughter relationships must have been adoptive, proving the

as His Son': Adoption in Old Babylonian Sippar," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archeologie orientale* 104 (2010): 9-40.

¹⁵² Suurmeijer, "He Took Him as His Son," 16.

¹⁵³ Suurmeijer, "He Took Him as His Son," 20.

¹⁵⁴ Suurmeijer, "He Took Him as His Son," 20.

adoptive daughter did not have to become a *naditu*. In one instance the mother was the bride's own sister, meaning one sister was a *naditu* and must have adopted her sister, who was not a *naditu*, then becoming her mother.¹⁵⁵

Naditu adoption of another *naditu* could have been done for the same purposes as *naditu*-niece adoption: for care in old age, for care of spirit after death, or for inheritance purposes. In both *naditu-naditu* adoptions and *naditu*-niece adoptions, the mother-daughter relationship was implied. Also, in both scenarios, the *naditu*'s family was displeased with her decision if the adoption involved the adoptee receiving the inheritance. Harris reveals "it was no rare occurrence for the relatives of an adoptive *naditu* to attempt to abrogate the adoption after death."¹⁵⁶ It is unclear why *naditus* would purposely leave their inheritance to a non-family member, other than suggesting that certain *naditus* held resentment towards their male family members for placing them in seclusion or for improper treatment, and this was their only way to retaliate.

Naditu adoption of an unrelated family member had its own purposes. Dominique Charpin argues that these adoptions were mainly a business transaction.¹⁵⁷ Though, the adoption still could have occurred for the same reasons as *naditu-naditu* adoptions, for old age care or inheritance purposes. Texts survive that document *naditus* adopting matured girls from unrelated

¹⁵⁵ Suurmeijer, "He Took Him as His Son," 10.

¹⁵⁶ Rivkah Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6, no. 2 (Jul., 1963): 153.

¹⁵⁷ Dominique Charpin, *Hammurabi of Babylon* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012).

families. In these documents, the *naditu* paid the family five shekels for the adoption of their daughter. The five shekels is believed to be a “bridal gift” (*terhatum*) that all families’ of brides would receive when wedded as a first wife to a free man, though normally the *terhatum* payment was ten shekels.¹⁵⁸ So why would a family adopt out their daughter for five shekels to a third party and not wait for the opportunity to marry her off for ten shekels? Guido Suurmeijer suggests that when a family was in a financial bind and exhausted all sources of income, their daughter’s *terhatum* was the only income to look forward to.¹⁵⁹ Here is where the *naditu* steps in. She would adopt the girl and pay the family five shekels. In this contract, the *naditu* agreed to act as parent-in-law with respect to the biological family. This would involve properly caring for the adoptive daughter, maybe placing her in one of the *naditus*’ properties or possibly living with her in the cloister. The contract also gave the *naditu* rights to marrying off the adoptive daughter to a suitable man when she saw fit, and receive the appropriate ten shekels *terhatum*.¹⁶⁰ The *naditu* doubled her money from the adoption of an unrelated family member. From the *naditu*’s perspective, the adoption was an investment with promising profit, and for the biological family it was a way to insure their daughter’s protection and a promised suitable marriage without waiting in financial despair.

The adoption of other women for inheritance purposes was controversial and male family members commonly tried to repeal this contract after the

¹⁵⁸ Charpin, *Hammurabi of Babylon*, 165.

¹⁵⁹ Suurmeijer, “He Took Him as His Son,” 26.

¹⁶⁰ Suurmeijer, “He Took Him as His Son,” 26.

naditu's death, raising questions of the relationship between the *naditu* and her family after she entered the cloister.¹⁶¹ The possibility of an estranged relationship between the *naditus* and biological family with resentment towards male family members is illuminated in these records. The cloistered *naditu* only received a portion of the income derived from her maintenance of the properties she was in charge of—the male family was always the representative owners of the *naditu's* properties, and at the time of her death, said properties would revert back to the rightful owners. When the father of a *naditu* died, the brothers or uncles of the *naditus* vowed to provide their sister or niece with necessary essentials to survive, mainly allotments of food and clothing, however, as Caroline Janssen reveals, male family members often fell through on their vows to care for the *naditu*.¹⁶²

The secluded state of the *naditu* is instrumental in understanding the relationship with the *naditus* male family members. Stone suggested that the relationship between the *naditu* and her brothers depended on her secluded state, which is arguable because there is no way to prove the extent of her seclusion.¹⁶³ If the *naditus'* seclusion was strictly enforced, her secluded state would have forced her to rely on others to perform public actions, mainly her brothers, hence enforcing a close relationship with male family members after

¹⁶¹ Harris, "The Organization and Administration of the Cloister in Ancient Babylonia," 153.

¹⁶² Caroline Janssen, "Samsu-Iluna and the Hungry Naditums," *Northern Akkad Project Reports* 5 (1991): 3-23.

¹⁶³ Stone, "The Social Role of the *Naditu* Women in Old Babylonian Nippur," 61

entering the cloister.¹⁶⁴ The adoption records could express the resentment the *naditus* held towards their male family for placing them in seclusion or not taking care of them properly. Janssen's "Samsu-Iluna and the Hungry *Naditums*" argued the validity of the starving *naditu* texts, proving that in some cases the *naditus* were abandoned and left to the cloister for care. Janssen examines a letter from Samsu-iluna that mentions *naditus* who depended on the king's stores for maintenance, especially food, because many *naditus* were not receiving allotments from their families and were left to the cloister for care.¹⁶⁵ Harris also mentioned many pleading letters from *naditus* to their brothers beseeching them for food because they were destitute. This would explain why a *naditu* would disinherit her male family members who did not supply her with the necessary allotments of food, oil, and clothing that she was promised when she entered the cloister.¹⁶⁶

The cloister would obviously not let *naditus* starve in their care, but also another instance where the cloister intervened comes from an adoption text. The text explained that a *naditu*, Lamassi, had become ill and during her illness she was cared for by another *naditu*, Huzalatum. Lamassi had not taken the necessary steps to adopt Huzalatum; the cloister therefore intervened and comprised a contract stating the Huzalatum would care for Lamassi until death

¹⁶⁴ Stone, "The Social Role of the *Naditu* Women in Old Babylonian Nippur," 62.

¹⁶⁵ Caroline Janssen, "Samsu-Iluna and the Hungry *Naditums*," *Northern Akkad Project Reports* 5 (1991): 3-39.

¹⁶⁶ Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?" (paper presented at the Conference on Women in the Ancient Near East, Providence, RI, Nov. 5-7, 1987), 155.

and after death, creating the parent-child relationship. Huzalatum would also receive a small payment from Lamassi's inheritance.¹⁶⁷ Here the cloister acted as an authority to perform certain legal actions, but this may have been done only in dire cases.

Through these adoption texts, scholars can study how women in ancient Mesopotamia had agency in their actions, something that often gets overlooked when studying ancient women. Not only does female agency often go unnoticed, but the study of ancient women also has a long tradition of trying to label women something that they are not. The idea of women being outside of history has previously been discussed, but this idea is certainly relevant in how we label women and categorize their roles in history. Often, ancient women are forced to fit the traditional mold of mothers, daughters, wives, prostitutes, or whores. When women fall outside of these categories, there tends to be a trend to force them into one of these labels.

For example, the historiography of *naditus* is occasionally shaped by this a-historical woman ideology. In a 1966 article, Michael Astour categorized *naditus* as "sacred prostitutes."¹⁶⁸ Astour's conclusion of ancient Near Eastern priestesses and *naditus* was standard for much of the twentieth century. Julia Assante argued that *naditus* performed illicit sexual acts and assigned the label

¹⁶⁷ Harris, "Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?," 155.

¹⁶⁸ Michael Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1996): 185-196.

of prostitute to the women in an article in 1998.¹⁶⁹ More recently, Susandra J van Wyk argues that a *naditu* was placed in the cloister by her family for her protection. van Wyk says that rich parents, concerned about their daughters enduring the brutality of childbirth would opt to send their daughter to the cloister to ensure a childless life, and as an added advantage the *naditu* role had religious meaning, which made the scenario of a women living outside of the home and not under the patriarchal control of another man socially acceptable. Going even further, van Wyk suggests that the *naditu* was a “man-woman,” performing acts of sodomy out of the cloister.¹⁷⁰

These classifications of *naditus* and women in general, were based on the obsession of female biological functions that shaped women’s history for centuries. These biological functions, such as fertility, pregnancy, and sex placed women in the a-historical roles discussed previously: wives, mothers, whores, prostitutes, witches, midwives, and nuns.¹⁷¹ All of these female roles involve some layer of studying the sexual expectations of women. However, attempting

¹⁶⁹ Julia Assante, “The Kar-kid/Harimtu, Prostitute or Single Woman,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 30 (1998): 5-96.

¹⁷⁰ Susandra J van Wyk, “Prostitute, Nun or ‘Men-Woman’: Revisiting the Position of the Old Babylonian Nadiatu Priestess,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 4 (2015): 95-122.

¹⁷¹ see Jo Ann Hackett, “Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern ‘Fertility’ Goddesses,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (Spring 1989): 65-76; Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).

to reconstruct, or even understand, ancient women's sex lives is basing a study on many uncertainties, yet many scholars still attempt this.¹⁷²

While the *naditus* were showing agency in their actions by breaking tradition, mainly adopting other women, scholars should show hesitation in studying them as independent women not under patriarchal control. The *naditu* was always an extension of the family – she never functioned in society outside of her family relations. The *naditus'* dependency and presumed independence were inseparable. Her independence was granted to her based on her dependence on male family members. Many of the same scholarly traditions have been used to study ancient women in Rome, and as we saw in the last chapter, women with high religious roles were also always granted their positions based on the status of their fathers and husbands.

Roman Women and Scholarly Betrayal

It was often the betrayal of tradition placed on Roman women by scholars, and sometimes their contemporaries, that reveals the most about women's religious roles and female piety in ancient Rome. The belief that women remained separate from men in all realms of religion has been discussed, however, the reasons why this belief shaped the scholarship for centuries is with

¹⁷² Notably, Zainab Bahrani's book which differentiates between the various sexual acts of ancient women, including the acts of sodomy sacredly performed in devotion to particular deities, and what they represented. Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

merit.¹⁷³ The mythology and traditions surrounding many cults in ancient Rome led scholars to assume that there were designated cults for women to worship, and cults where women were prohibited from worshipping.¹⁷⁴ The cults that scholars believed women were prohibited from worshipping in were deities whom are categorized as masculine. Celia Shultz took notice of this scholarly tradition placed on Roman women in a 2000 article,

Discussion of the religious activities of Roman women is usually limited to two types of cults: those that addressed traditionally feminine matters, for example, the cult of Juno Lucina whose temple was thought to have been founded by the matrons of Rome as a thanks offering for safe childbirth, and those that required virginal chastity of their officials or worshippers—the most famous of these being the cult of Vesta. This rather limited picture of female religious activity in Rome is drawn largely from the evidence of ancient literature. A great deal of material evidence, however, suggests that women enjoyed a much wider range of religious experiences. There is, above all, inscriptional evidence for female worshipers of Juppiter, Apollo, Mars, and Mercury—none of whom was particularly concerned with fertility or chastity.¹⁷⁵

Deities such as Hercules, the famed hyper-masculine, half mortal heroin from Greece who was deified and venerated as a Roman god, and Silvanus, the god and protector of the forests who watched over fields, agriculture, and hunting, fall

¹⁷³ See pages 51-52.

¹⁷⁴ see J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1962); Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975); Ross Shephard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddesses to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁷⁵ Celia Shultz, "Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis: Female Worship of Hercules at Rome," *Zeitschrift fur Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 133 (2000): 291.

into this categorization of deities believed to only have been worshipped by men, even prohibiting female worship. I use these two examples because they encompass both realms of religion—official and the more wide-practiced lived religion.

The previous chapter discussed how scholars use the rites of Bona Dea to argue that women must be separate from men in religious activities; scholars also often turn to the Cult of Hercules as proof for this hypothesis.¹⁷⁶ Many believed the Cult of Hercules secluded women, not only due to the masculine qualities that he represented, but also because of the mythology. Macrobius, the famed ancient Roman author in the first century A.D., paraphrased the Roman scholar who first offered explanation on why women were excluded from worshipping Hercules, Marcus Terentius Varro:

For a similar reason women, too, are forbidden to attend the rites of Hercules in Italy: when he was thirsty from driving Geryon's cattle through the fields of Italy, a woman told him she could not give him water because the holy day of the women's goddess [Bona Dea] was being celebrated and it was against divine law for men to drink from a vessel used in the rites. As a result, Hercules placed women under a curse if they were present when he was going to offer a sacrifice, and he ordered Potitius and Pinarius, the wardens of his rites, to prevent women from participating.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ see Mommsen, commentary on CIL VI 337; R.E. A Palmer, "The Deconstruction of Mommsen on Festus 462/464L., or the Hazards of Restoration," ed. J. Linderski, *Historia Einzelschrift* 105 (1996): 75-101.

¹⁷⁷ Macrobius, *Saturalia*, trans. Robert A. Kaster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 149-151.

However, scholars cannot judge the extent of the prohibition from Varro and Macrobius alone. In a second century book about Roman oaths, Aulus Gellius said, “ ‘In old writings, Roman women do not swear by Hercules nor do men swear by Castor. Yet it is no mystery why those women did not swear by Hercules, for women refrain from sacrificing to Hercules.’ ”¹⁷⁸ Plutarch also hinted about the exclusion of women from the cult in his *Moralia* published around 100 A.D.,

“Why, when there are two alters of Hercules, do women receive no share nor taste of the sacrifices offered on the larger alter? Is it because the friends of Carmenta came late for the rites, as did also the clan of the Pinarii? Wherefore, as they were excluded from the banquet while the rest were feasting, they acquired the name Pinarii (Starvelings). Or is it because of the fable of Deianeira and the shirt?”¹⁷⁹

Historians and linguists argued that the Latin referred to just a single temple, the Ara Maxima, which would explain the large number of dedications to Hercules by women found at other temples throughout the Italian peninsula.¹⁸⁰ The poet Propertius, writing in the first century B.C.E., offered an explanation in poem 4.9

¹⁷⁸ Celia Shultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 66.

¹⁷⁹ Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Franks Cole Babbit, 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 4: 95. Also, the last reason that Plutarch offered as an explanation for the exclusion of women from Hercules’s cult, Deianeira and the shirt, refers to the accounts of Sophocles and Ovid who account for Deianeira sending a shirt anointed with the blood of Nessus to Hercules as a love charm. The shirt brought Hercules death, hence why Hercules is supposed to hate all women.

¹⁸⁰ J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits*, 243; Staples, *From Good Goddesses to Vestal Virgins*, 24-30; Schultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 61-69; Schultz, “Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis,” 293-295.

as to why female restriction from Hercules' cult could be subject to just the Ara Maxima. Just as Varro's and Macrobius's account, the poem tells the same story of Hercules being turned away from the priestess of Bona Dea. The poem, however, adds that Hercules broke down the door of the goddess's sanctuary and commanded, "may the Ara Maxima mightiest of altars, to be built by these hands in thanks for the recovery of my cattle, never be open for girls to worship at, so the thirst of Hercules may be avenged in perpetuity."¹⁸¹ Considering all classical authorship, there is no concrete evidence to support the ban of females from all of Hercules's temples. To even further discredit these assumptions, the exact location of the Ara Maxima is unknown, and no remains have been discovered from the temple.

Female-authored dedications found at Hercules's temples support the theory that the exclusion of women did not apply to the entire cult, and in fact, women worshipped Hercules on a regular basis, sometimes even alongside men. Joint dedications to Hercules from husbands and wives offer a limited understanding of women's involvement. Because wives were generally extensions of their families, specifically their husbands, these joint dedications give no insights into women's agency. For example, consider this dedication left at Hercules' temple in Rome: "Primus, freedman of the emperor, along with his wife, Aelia Felix, gave this gift to Hercules the Undefeated."¹⁸² From this

¹⁸¹ Propertius, *Poem 4.9*, trans. John Warden (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), 223-224.

¹⁸² Theodor Mommsen, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, (Berolini, Germany: Apud G. Reimerum, 1862), Inscription 327; 6: 61.

inscription there is no clear evidence provided from the phrase, “along with his wife,” to prove that Aelia Felix had any say about the amount of money that the gifted dedication cost or the words on the dedication left to Hercules. Scholars, however, cite these joint dedications more often than dedications left by women alone to avoid issues of female restriction and contradictory literary and epigraphic evidence.¹⁸³ Female-authored dedications are usually overlooked and not analyzed as closely as they should be. For example, the editor’s commentary on the dedication, “I, Numisia Aphrodite, gave this gift to Hercules on behalf of the health of and my son and family” only stated, “note that this inscription was dedicated to Hercules by a woman.”¹⁸⁴ The Cult of Hercules was not particularly concerned with feminine matters, though women still paid homage to the deity and sought help from him. Obviously, Numisia, from inscription 286 in volume six of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, sought Hercules on the behalf of her son; after all, gifting a feminine deity for a male child’s sake would not be sensible.

Women even commonly left gifts of money with their dedications, though it is unclear if the money they left was from their own wealth or husband’s money. For example, consider the following dedication: “Pomponia, wife of Buteo, gave to Hercules the Conqueror and Defender, from her will ten weights of silver. To Hercules the Conqueror and Defender, Pomponia Zmyrna gave from her will ten weights of silver.”¹⁸⁵ Bestowing money upon Hercules from a personal will

¹⁸³ Schultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 63.

¹⁸⁴ Mommsen, *Inscription 286*; 6: 54.

¹⁸⁵ Mommsen, *Inscription 333*; 6: 62.

demonstrates the reverence women had for the god, yet scholars often neglect these dedications. However, other inscriptions detail women leaving money or restoring temples, which required tremendous wealth, on their own and sometimes with the aid of the husband's money. For example, "Publicia, daughter of Lucius Publicius, wife of Gnaeus Cornelius, son of Aulus, built this temple of Hercules, and the doors, and she polished them. And she restored the alter sacred to Hercules. All these things she did with her own and with her husband's money. She oversaw that it was done."¹⁸⁶ In 1996, R.E.A. Palmer dismissed Publicia's participation arguing that her refurbishment of Hercules's temple was actually "the result of some unknown sacral incapacity on the part of her husband."¹⁸⁷ However, other scholars disagree with Palmer's assumptions citing that,

As it cannot be proven, however, this hypothesis must remain learned must remain learned speculation. A more probable explanation, especially in light of the existence of many female-authored dedications to the god, is that Publicia was involved in Hercules' cult, independently of her husband. It is also possible that Publicia's attachment to the cult came through her own family.¹⁸⁸

Mommsen, one of the most regarded Roman historians and commentator, dismissed female participation in Hercules's cult and regarded the dedications as forgeries based on meritless reasoning. Mommsen's commentary on the

¹⁸⁶ Mommsen, *Inscription 981*; 1²: 198.

¹⁸⁷ Palmer, "The Deconstruction of Mommsen on Festus 462/464L, or the Hazards of Restoration," 93.

¹⁸⁸ Celia Schultz, "Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis: Female Worship of Hercules at Rome," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 133 (2000): 294.

following dedication, “Marcia Irene gave this gift to Hercules the Boxer,”¹⁸⁹ read, “This inscription appears suspect to me on account of the epithet “boxer,” which makes the god not only the patron of boxers, but a boxer himself, and because women do not worship Hercules.’ ”¹⁹⁰ Mommsen made this argument because classicists of the nineteenth century often regarded Hercules as a wrestler, not a boxer. However, there was no reason to doubt the validity of the inscription based on Marcia Irene’s epithet of Hercules. Hercules “The Boxer” may have received the popular cognomen because of the attention directed to his cult by members of a particular group of worshippers. Worshippers often assigned epithets based on lifestyle or profession. For instance, olive merchants left dedications to the god calling him by the name Hercules “The Olive Merchant.”¹⁹¹ There is no conclusive evidence to support Mommsen’s objection that women worshipped Hercules. The commentary on the inscription, “Anna consecrated this to Hercules Julianus, Caelian Juppiter, and the Genius of Mons Caelius,” grudgingly read, “since it is certain that this inscription existed, and that there is nothing contained in it which is contrary to proper wording or to certain indications of antiquity, I conclude that it must be withheld from doubt.”¹⁹² Furthermore, the editors of *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* noted that they found no evidence of fabrication on any female dedicated inscriptions to Hercules.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Mommsen, *Inscription 337*; 6: 63.

¹⁹⁰ Schultz, “Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis,” 295.

¹⁹¹ Mommsen, *Inscription 33936*; 6: 3623.

¹⁹² Mommsen, *Inscription 334*; 6: 62.

¹⁹³ Mommsen, *Inscription 334*; 6: 62

The findings of anatomical votives at Hercules's temples further illuminate women's involvement in the cult. Anatomical votives had pragmatic purposes: to seek a cure, to offer thanks for healing, or a metaphorical significance. For example, ears left at a temple might represent a request for the god to listen to a prayer, or it could represent a medical issue, such as an ear infection. Romans left terracotta molds of body parts and internal organs at altars to offer answers in a time before medical professionals were common. One of the only recourse available to an individual suffering from a physical ailment was to leave an anatomical votive at a local sanctuary in hopes of that god offering a cure.

Surprisingly, the largest deposit of anatomical votives found at Hercules's temple in Praeneste¹⁹⁴ were parts of women's anatomy.¹⁹⁵ Archaeologists have unearthed terracotta breasts and uteri proving that women regarded Hercules highly, and sought his intervention even in matters of traditional feminine concerns. The terracotta breasts, which could have represented concerns with breastfeeding, could have been left as thanks for a wet-nurse, abundant milk production, or as seeking a cure for a lack of milk production. However, there are no certainties when drawing these conclusions, though Schultz concludes that the breast votives were left for and represented women's milk production and

¹⁹⁴ Ancient city, modern Palestrina, located twenty-three miles southeast of Rome.

¹⁹⁵ The Praenestine deposit is unpublished, but Schultz notes in her article that she had the opportunity to examine the collection in 1998. She concluded that the deposits were genuine and no different from other anatomical deposits. See Schultz, "Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis: Female Worship of Hercules at Rome," 296-297.

breastfeeding. We must not rule out the possibility of the votives being left for the enjoyment and pleasure of Hercules.

However, the breast votives paired with the uteri votives at Hercules's temple at Praeneste leads me to conclude in agreement with Schultz. The uteri votives, which Schultz argues were left to seek a safe pregnancy, offer insight to the Romans' medical knowledge, but also reveal that mothers and fathers sought Hercules in matters of pregnancy and fertility.¹⁹⁶ The Romans clearly understood that the uterus, or womb, is vital to the growth and protection of a fetus. Other votive deposits of reproductive organs found throughout the Italian peninsula were left most at goddesses' temples. For example, at the temple of Juno in Gravisca, about 64 miles north of Rome, 222 uteri were unearthed along with breasts and swaddled babies. Also, the temple of Minerva at Lavinium, 33 miles south of Rome, contained almost exclusively swaddled babies along with breasts and uteri.¹⁹⁷ The breasts and uteri accompanied with swaddled babies left at Juno's and Minerva's temples, who were both goddesses concerned with fertility, certainly leads to the conclusion that the uteri were thanks for fertilized wombs. While the breasts and uteri were unaccompanied by swaddled babies at Hercules's temple in Praeneste, it could still be suggested that they were also left for matters of fertility. To support my conclusion more, when the four hundred uteri votives from the sanctuary at Vulci, 50 miles northeast of Rome, were

¹⁹⁶ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 114-116.

¹⁹⁷ Steven Oberhelman, "Anatomical Votive Reliefs as Evidence for Specialization at Healing Sanctuaries in the Ancient Mediterranean World," *Athens Journal of Health* 1 no., 1 (March 2014): 57.

subject to x-ray, the films revealed that a large number of them contained clay spheres inside. These spheres are argued to be representations of embryo.¹⁹⁸ Other uteri votives found throughout the Italian peninsula, especially a deposit found at the mouth of the Tiber River, have appendages on them, probably representing a tumor, cyst, or fibroma.¹⁹⁹ Schultz, however, made no note of appendages on the uteri votives she studied that were left at Hercules's temple and no other uteri votives have been subject to x-ray, leading me to conclude that the uteri votives at Hercules's temple were indeed left for fertility thanks and issues.

The possibility that men could also have left these votives in honor of their wives or daughters must also be considered. However, the evidence of votive deposits, combined with epigraphic material, support the conclusion that women took part in the Cult of Hercules, and the cult was not concerned only with masculine issues, but also feminine. In fact, at the time of Hercules's abandonment as an infant, he was taken in by Hera (Juno) unknowingly that Hercules was the product of her husband's (Zeus/Jupiter) infidelity. Hera even nursed Hercules—her divine milk made Hercules's powers even stronger. For this reason, is why I suggest that men and women often sought Hercules in matters of milk production. Also, because Hercules, of all the Roman deities, knew the importance of a wet-nurse.

¹⁹⁸ Oberhelman, "Anatomical Votive Reliefs as Evidence for Specialization at Healing Sanctuaries in the Ancient Mediterranean World," 58.

¹⁹⁹ Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 110.

The evidence of breast and uteri deposits at Hercules's temple must not lead one to assume that all women who participated in the worship of the deity were addressing him for matters of traditional female concern. The women who worshipped, left dedications and inscriptions, and gifted votives to Hercules could have held high regard for god for a multitude of reasons. Hercules could have been attached to women's fathers or husbands, or they could have sought Hercules for their sons. It also must not be excluded that women may have sought Hercules for strength. While Hercules may have had connections to fertility and breastfeeding that scholars have not considered near enough due to his hyper-masculinity, we also must not exclude the possibility that women sought him for non-traditional feminine concerns. As Schultz states, "in the end, the persistence of the idea that women were excluded from Hercules' cult can be attributed partly to a widespread assumption about the interests of Roman women: that their concerns were limited to marriage, childbirth, and raising of their offspring, and that their religious concerns were restricted to the same issues."²⁰⁰ In the end, too many possibilities exist, but whatever the reasoning, women clearly participated in the cult of Hercules on a regular basis, which is the more important conclusion drawn from this study.

Hercules represents the official sphere of masculine religion that women often participated in, however female participation in dominantly male cults was also obviously common in the realm of lived religion. This is most clear when concerning the Cult of Silvanus. Silvanus has been viewed as overwhelmingly

²⁰⁰ Schultz, "Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis," 296.

popular among men, to a point where he was even thought to exclude women from his rites.²⁰¹ Women were no doubt less active in the cult, but their underrepresentation does not offer enough evidence to assume that it was taboo for women to worship the god. There are a few contemporary Roman authors who attest to female exclusion from the cult, but belief that Silvanus was actually anti-woman stems from early Christian church fathers' writings of the god, while inscriptions actually reveal that women did actively participate in the cult, alongside men.²⁰²

The earliest indication of female restriction comes from Cato the Elder when he accounts for the annual sacrifice to Mars Silvanus for the health of cattle,

Perform the vow for the health of the cattle as follows: Make an offering to Mars Silvanus in the forest during the daytime for each head of cattle: three pounds of meal, four and one-half pounds of bacon, four and one-half pounds of meat, and three pints of wine. You may place the viands in one vessel, and the wine likewise in one vessel. Either a slave or a free man may make this offering. After the ceremony is over, consume the offering on the spot at once. A woman may not take part in this offering or see how it is performed. You may vow the vow every year if you wish.²⁰³

The strict exclusion of women from this rite may be just that—a restriction from this particular rite that involved a sacrifice. The nature of the sacrifice or the fact that the rite took place in the woods may have been enough to exclude women.

²⁰¹ see Robert Palmer, *Roman Religion and Roman Empire: Five Essays* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 222.

²⁰² Peter F. Dorsey, *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1992).

²⁰³ Cato the Elder, *De Agricultura*, published in the Loeb Classical Library, 1934. Scholars date this text to around 198-149 B.C.E.

The inclusion of slaves in this rite will be discussed in the next chapter. Almost three hundred years later, Juvenal, the author of a collection of satirical poems, referenced sacrificing a pig to Silvanus as a particularly masculine act, “she may as well be a man, hitch her tunic knee-high, sacrifice a pig to Silvanus, and only be charged a farthing at the baths.”²⁰⁴ It might be possible that the main objective of the satire was the mention of a woman sacrificing a pig, and rather not the deity to whom that pig was sacrificed.

To further support the misconception that Silvanus was an anti-female deity, historians often turn to early church fathers. St. Augustine, writing in the fifth century, accused Silvanus of being a god that preyed, attacked, and sexually harassed women. Supposedly citing Varro, though it is unclear what text, Augustine said,

...(Varro) nevertheless mentions three gods who are used to protect a woman after the birth of a child, lest the god Silvanus enter by night and trouble her. For the sake of representing these guardians, at night three men go around the thresholds of the house and first strike the threshold with an ax, next with a pestle, and third they sweep it with a broom, so that Silvanus is prevented from entering by these symbols of agriculture: because trees are not cut down nor pruned without iron, and grain is not ground without a pestle, and produce is not gathered without a broom; from these three acts three gods are named; Intercidona, from the cutting down with an ax; Pilumnus, from the pestle; Deverra, from the broom. The baby was safeguarded against the violence of the god Silvanus by these guardian divinities. And so, the watchfulness of the good gods did not prevail against the cruelty of the harmful god, unless there were many of them against one, and unless they repelled the harsh, terrible, crude deity of the forests with the symbols of agriculture, just as if they were enemies.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Juvenal, poem 4.455-456.

²⁰⁵ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 6.9.

Also, in book fifteen of *City of God*, Augustine described Silvanus as a cruel deity, “whom some commonly call *incubi*, often harassed women, and wickedly sought and succeeded in having sex with them.”²⁰⁶ However, it is quite possible that Augustine was not knowledgeable in the folk religions of Roman mythology. Also, as Peter Dorsey suggests, Augustine could have mixed up Silvanus and Faunus. Faunus was the god of forest and *uncultivated* fields, in fact, Faunus threatened agriculture. Faunus was also a god of official religion with temples and official festivals, while Silvanus was a private deity, mostly worshipped more widely by common people. While the two deities have similar attributes and epithets, this does not make them complementary of each other. It would make sense for Augustine to attack the more familiar Silvanus whose cult was a better target for anti-pagan criticism than a deity with little followers.²⁰⁷

The only epigraphic evidence that survives that might attest to a female exclusion in the cult of Silvanus comes from a plaque posted in Rome, by Silvanus’s command, prohibiting women from entering a man’s pool.²⁰⁸ However, the costume of segregated men’s and women’s baths is well attested in many surviving sources. From this text, it may reveal Silvanus’s partiality towards the male sex, but no evidence is found in this to conclude that women were denied access to Silvanus’s sacred areas or the right to worship the god.²⁰⁹ If any

²⁰⁶ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 15.23.

²⁰⁷ Dorsey, *Cult of Silvanus*, 37-39.

²⁰⁸ Mommsen, *Inscription 579*; 6:109.

²⁰⁹ Dorsey, *Cult of Silvanus*, 127.

argument could be made from this, I would suggest that Silvanus is protecting women from a possible hostile situation that would threaten their chastity.

There is some surviving evidence for scholars to suggest that Silvanus prohibited women from worshipping him or in Augustine's view was a misogynistic deity; however, from epigraphic evidence, I suggest that women worshipped Silvanus regularly, because a significant portion of dedicatory inscriptions survive from women to the god. Actually, forty-one inscriptions erected by women to Silvanus total 4.1% of the entire corpus of dedications to the deity. Of the forty-one inscriptions, thirty were erected by women alone, eight were joint dedications with husbands, seven by women and men with unknown relations, and one joint father-daughter dedication.²¹⁰ As with most of Silvanus's worshippers, the female dedicants were mostly from lower social classes. Female dedications to Silvanus are similar to those that men left behind: often to fulfill a vow, prayer for ill sons, and because Silvanus was a part of the domestic cults, to honor the dead. One inscription, left by a mother, prayed for the health of her son;²¹¹ similar to reasons why women often left dedications to Hercules. Since private family worship, which Silvanus was a considerable part of, was usually controlled by the *paterfamilias*, it would make even more sense for women to make offerings on the behalf of male family member, especially sons. While just over four percent of the dedications come from women, this is still a considerably large portion given that women had lower literacy rates than men,

²¹⁰ Dorcey, *Cult of Silvanus*, 128.

²¹¹ Mommsen, Inscription 1152; 4:463.

and the money it took to erect expensive inscriptions, statues and other dedications.

Although often believed, gender assignment to a particular cult was atypical. The Cults of Hercules and Silvanus are not the only source of female dedications left at male dominant cults. There also exists inscriptional evidence for female worshippers of Jupiter, Apollo, Mars, and Mercury, none of whom are concerned with feminine issues. The assumption that women only concerned themselves with traditional feminine matters is asinine. Even further, ample evidence exists that suggests men participated in traditional feminine cults such as Bona Dea, Diana, and Juno Lucina.²¹² Schultz states that, “the predominance of one gender or the other among devotees of a certain god was more often due to personal preferences rather than official cult restrictions on who might attend the god’s rites.”²¹³ This partition of males and females in preference to deities worshipped was also prevalent in ancient Mesopotamia, however, this was largely based on name giving traditions. Mesopotamian girls would often receive names that invoked goddesses, leading scholars to assume that women sought their welfare from only goddesses.²¹⁴

²¹² See Mommsen, *Inscriptions* 359, 610, 972, 1436; 1: 67, 112, 179, 313, and *Inscriptions* 59 and 75; 6: 11, 12 for examples of male-authored dedications to these deities.

²¹³ Schultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, 51.

²¹⁴ Karel van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (England: JSOT Press, 1994), 23.

Ancient women commonly broke tradition. *Naditus* betrayed their family and adopted other women to receive their inheritance, and broke scholarly tradition of viewing all women's roles as a-historical. Ample evidence survives that accounts for Roman women breaking the scholarly tradition of women remaining separate from men in religious practices, also the belief that women only worshipped goddesses and that some cults strictly prohibited female participation. Hercules, arguable the most masculine deity, had large numbers of female worshippers; as did Silvanus, the popular god of the domestic, family cults, who was the protector of cultivated fields and agriculture. As argued before, it is detrimental to the understanding of women's history to only categorize women in roles that are outside of history: wives, mothers, daughters, whores, prostitutes, ect. It is when women break outside of these roles that reveal the trends of women's history that deserve scholarly attention the most.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Examining women's religious roles and experiences in ancient cultures offers a greater understanding to the histories of their respective societies. Ancient religions were not so much about faith, but rather proper performance, and this performance was most often implemented by men. However, women also had their duties within the religious sphere. The previous chapters have focused on the religious duties, roles, and experiences of women from varying classes, offices, and times and the religious rituals that were a part of their lives. Many times, these religious rituals were confined to the private sphere, the 'proper' place of the woman; however, through the religious roles offered to elite women in both Mesopotamia and Rome, religion brought some women into the public sphere and troubled the traditional methods of studying women in history as silent, homebound, and confined to feminine matters.

It has been fairly recently that scholars have turned their attention to focus solely on the female experience in history, especially ancient history. While this field deserves the attention in hopes of uncovering a women's history in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome, an all-inclusive recollection will never be revealed. The

results of feminist studies in the past decades have resulted in efforts to indicate that ancient women did not exist outside of history. While their roles as mothers, daughters, wives, ect., shaped our historical understanding of them, they also often stepped outside of these roles, expressed agency, and were active participants in society, including religious life.

The domestic cults, such as the cult of the hearth and familial ancestral cults, of ancient cultures reveal the most about women's religious lives in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome. While I used the study of private religion to uncover the "common woman's" roles in religion, these rituals were a part of every woman's life. Venerating the family gods and domestic deities was instrumental to not only the women, but to the family, therefore making the female religious roles within the home critical to upholding family piety. Also, family slaves had special places in the realm of private, family religion, most certainly female slaves. Rites of passage, notably marriage, had religious implications that altered women's lives. These lived religious experiences uncover the most information on the religious experiences of women in both ancient Mesopotamian and Rome.

By looking at women's religious roles outside of the home and in the public sphere, especially the roles of Old Babylonian *naditus*, Vestal Virgins, and the matron dutied with conducting Bona Dea's December rites, it is clear to see that when women held official religious roles they were often dependent upon their family's economic standing, their reputation as virtuous women, and they always served as extensions of the family or representations of the state. While some women holding priestess roles were celibate and lived separately, like the

Old Babylonian *naditus* and Vestal Virgins, married women also participated in religious life, perhaps to a greater extent in the Roman context, such as the matrons who were selected to perform religious rites, however, even these married women were often partitioned from men in religious rituals. The fact that their sacred roles often meant they were seclude or separate from men in religious matter, does not mean that their roles was of any less importance. Often women came to these positions conditioned by the men in their lives or based on their reputation as good wives and daughters. No matter how many privileges women in official religious positions were granted to her, she was still subject to the words and actions of men. Still, the greatest religious honor a woman could have was the opportunity to serve her family or her state publically in the realm of religion.

Through surviving legal documents and epigraphic evidence, it is revealed how women often broke tradition of religious societal norms and scholar's understandings of these women and their cultures. While scholars study *naditus* as religious women, less is known of that aspect of their lives, it seems that they were actually independent business women who were responsible with looking after the family wealth and keeping it safe. *Naditus* betrayed their families by adopting other women so that family wealth would not divert back to the male kin at the time of her death. Roman mythology and a long scholarly tradition is troubled when considering epigraphic and archaeological evidence left by Roman women. Ample evidence survives that accounts for Roman women breaking scholarly assumptions of remaining separate from men in religious practices and

the belief that women only worshipped goddesses and that some cults prohibited female participation. For example, the cult of Hercules, which scholars believed prohibited women from participating based upon the mythology and the god's masculine qualities, actually had a large number of female worshippers. As did Silvanus, another masculine deity and domestic god. It is the women in religion that break outside of the traditional female roles and participate in non-feminine aspects of society that deserve scholarly attention the most.

By studying ancient women in Mesopotamian and Rome a broader understanding of ancient cultures is revealed. These time periods book end the era of ancient, pagan history and both are characterized military exploits, agriculturally focused, and patriarchal societies. However, these two periods of time also offer historians an interesting study on how women functioned in society, particularly in the religious realm, during a very male-dominated time in history. Here, we see women in unexpected places and showcasing agency in all realms of life, especially in religion. By looking at ancient Mesopotamia and Rome together, it is revealed that ancient women were more engaged in the religious life of their families and communities than often believed. Religion offered ancient women more opportunities for participation than often considered.

Women in ancient Mesopotamia and Rome were essential participants in a wide range of religious rituals that had civic, political, and personal importance. These women still observed religious concerns of feminine issues, such as marriage and childbirth, but these qualities should not confine the study of women's religious experiences and roles to a narrow understanding.

Mesopotamian and Roman women were not excluded from the religious history, but actually actively participated in religious celebrations, donated to the pantheons, and sometimes conducted rites that ensured goodwill for everyone.

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