

Exploring the social mobility and influence of women in Roman public life from the 1st to the 3rd centuries A.D.



Artistic rendition of Eumachia of Pompeii by author

Pulling together data from archaeology, art history, and anthropology, this research seeks to provide answers to essential questions concerning the lives of elite benefactresses in the Roman Empire from the 1st to the 3rd centuries A.D. The project focuses on what these women donated, how they are depicted, and on their roles in the family and society.

Objective

This research creates a comparison between the lives of elite women who lived in Roman Italy, Asia Minor, and North Africa. By looking at case studies in each defined region, we aim to gain an understanding of the cultural and social similarities of female access to social power and the “selfless” distribution of wealth by high status women throughout the empire.

Methodology

Previous studies have explored singular regions or individual sites in the Roman Empire to characterise the economic freedom of elite women and their chosen donations of buildings for public use.

Creating a large database of elite benefactresses in less studied areas outside Italy from this historical and archaeological data will allow us to identify trends over time and in varying cultural regions.

Research Themes

The University of York maintains seven research themes in order to align our work with the challenges the world is facing.

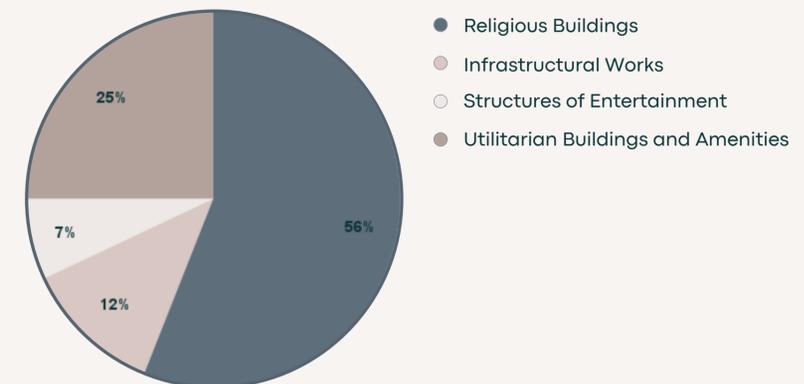
This research seeks to address the themes of:

- Culture and Communication
- Justice and Equality

Shedding light on elite women's choices and interests contributes to a unique understanding of Roman social and gendered culture, and it enables us to grasp how women also of other classes may have expressed themselves within society.

Key Questions

- What is the impact of different cultures in the Roman Empire on women's social mobility and the perception of women with power?
- Where in the empire was it more common for women and men to jointly donate gifts to the community?
- How does the language of benefaction in inscriptions on buildings commissioned by women vary regionally?
- How was independence represented in varying regions, and what do visual depictions tell us about cultural differences in representation?
- How do the cultural and social structures in each of these regions facilitate or hinder women in their public roles?
- How did women in different regions choose to represent their ethnic and cultural identities in contrasting or complementary ways, and in what circumstances were women allowed to deviate from Roman cultural norms in favour of their indigenous family and ethnic traditions?



Graphs similar to the one to the right will emerge from this research. While Emily Hemelrijk's chart shows trends in the Latin West (primarily regions in Italy, North Africa, and modern-day Spain), this research will include new comparisons with the Roman East as well.

Application

My research is crucial to further understanding how women were perceived in public roles in the Roman Empire. Thus far, we have established that **women were not confined to the household and domestic sphere**, but we have not addressed the environments which provided Roman women the opportunity to rise in social influence. The results of my synthesis and examination will allow researchers to recognize **which elements created a channel for women's benefaction** in the public sphere.

Once we are able to understand the factors that aided or hindered women in the public realm, we can **begin to grasp the challenges that women faced and overcame**. Additionally, once we understand the roles of elite women, we will be able to draw more accurate conclusions about women whose lives are not as well represented in the material record. Focusing on regions outside of Rome will **put the spotlight on women whose endeavours are often overlooked**, and will lead to a deeper understanding of **how cultures and gender values blended and clashed** over time within the Roman Empire.

Author

Research is being completed by Melissa Kays, under the supervision of Prof. Maureen Carroll.

Bibliography

Hemelrijk, E. (2013). Female Munificence in the Cities of the Latin West. In *Women and the Roman City in the Latin West*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. Available From: Brill https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004255951_006 [Accessed 23 November 2021]

