



## **Sisterhood and *sorority*** **The paradigm of women relations in Rome**

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### **Abstract**

The subject of this research is the sister-sister relationship in Latin literature: the aim is to identify the prescribed and forbidden cultural attitudes governing it in order to understand in what forms they were expressed and interpreted not only in the circumscribed sphere of kinship relations, but also in the broader context of the Roman civic and political system. It is intended to focus the investigation on the relationship between sister and sister without considering, except preliminarily and with the intention of noting notable points of affinity or divergence, the relationship between sister and brother and between male siblings. In fact, the space of female interaction as it was set up and perceived in Rome is identified as a more general field of research. As complementary to the bond of sisterhood, the bond of *sorority* will consequently be considered, by which we will mean the relationships of affection and complicity that Roman women could establish among themselves regardless of consanguinity. In particular, we will set out to explore the personal, public or sacral nature of such relationships; the contexts in which they were encouraged or, possibly, discouraged or forbidden; and the relative modes of representation selected by the Roman man – keeping well in mind that the only real perspective assumed in Latin literary production is the male perspective and that, therefore, for the Roman woman we cannot speak of self-representation but only of *sermocinatio*.

### **Current state of research**

The project is set in the context of anthropology studies, relating in particular to kinship relations, and gender studies applied to the classical world. Regarding the first area, the contributions of Bettini 1990 and Bettini 2009<sup>1</sup> will be taken as indispensable points of reference. An illustrative selection of studies that can be framed in this strand, of which we propose to follow the comparative method of reading texts, is the following: Guastella 1985, Mencacci 1996, Beltrami 1998, Lentano 2008. Studies on kinship in the ancient world that do not necessarily take an anthropological perspective are, for example, the conference proceedings J. Andraeu - H. Bruhns 1990 and Bresson 2006. Of the investigations into the representation of the feminine and women in the Greco-Roman world, which have been experiencing an exponential flowering in recent years, it is difficult to



structure a comprehensive overview. Account will be taken of texts of a different nature, having a more historical-legal approach or more focused on literary analysis. We mention only a few of the most relevant ones. Cantarella 1996 (last edition in 2015) provides an essential but solid approach to women's issues in Rome. Abroad, it is particularly the Anglo-Saxon milieu that has been devoting more time and regularity to the topic, often offering rich bibliographical references; the most up-to-date studies include Doherty 2015 and Foxhall 2013. An important miscellany on the history of women in antiquity is Schmitt - Pantel 1994 (last edition in 2017). For a review of profiles of matrons see Frascchetti 1994 and the very recent Brescia - Lentano 2024. On Roman women as political agents see Bauman 1994 and Rohr Vio 2019 – and the related bibliography organized by theme. An indispensable and up-to-date work on women's legal status is Peppe 2016. Studies employing mainly epigraphic material are Cenerini 2009 and Hemelrijk 2023.

Several specific investigations have already been conducted on the figure of the sister in Latin culture and literature. Harders 2008 is devoted to the relationship between sister and brother through case studies drawn from republican-era historiography to the relationship between Augustus and his sister Octavia. In relation to sororal relationships, on the other hand, we note Brescia 2012, a review of sister pairs drawn from Latin literature that will constitute the necessary starting point of the present research-both, of course, because of the common themes and the sources used. Aiming to constitute a systematic work, the project will also take into consideration studies related to specific occurrences of sisters in Greek and Roman literature. A few examples are given below: Gagliardi 2022 (on Anna and Juturna in the Aeneid), Manioti 2016 (on Antigone and Argia in the Thebaid), Keith 2016 (on representations of sisters in Flavian-era epics), Vaïopoulos 2014 (on Hypermetra in the Heroides). The project includes, at least as an implicit theoretical substratum, an in-depth study on the anthropology of kinship both in its classical meaning and in its more recent and updated implications. Milestone remains Lévi-Strauss 1949 from which flow, by opposition or alignment, more or less all subsequent work on the subject; among the most recent, we point to Delière 2008, Solinas 2010 and Sahlin 2013. On the relationship between genders from an anthropological perspective, however, Bourdieu 1998 and Héritier 1998 are fundamental.

### Project

The core of the investigation consists in analyzing the ways in which a given figure, defined precisely by the sororal role, is represented, responding more to culturally shared predispositions and conditioning in a given society than to a need to imitate the empirical reality of that society. In other words, then, the initial and most substantial part of this course will attempt to understand what a sister *should* and *should not be*, not what she *was*.

The first phase of the research will focus entirely on finding the texts to be examined and compared. First, lexical research will be undertaken on the term *soror* to identify the typical and,



conversely, more unusual contexts in which it is employed; the differences between literal and translational meanings, if any (with particular attention to metaphors); any synonyms or connections with other nouns or adjectives; and any referents other than sisters in the biological sense. This will make it possible to identify the most interesting texts for further study. In parallel, some figures of sisters from Latin literature will be chosen. In particular, Anna and Dido, Tullia Minor and Tullia Major, Philomela and Procne, Driope and Iole, Medea and Calicope, Phaedra and Ariadne, Antigone and Ismene, Hypermestra and the Danaids, Psyche and the two sisters will be identified on a preliminary basis. Divine figures depicted as sisters – for example, the Parcae – will not be overlooked. Characters of Greek ancestry will be examined purely in their Latin declinations, but also in a more systematic comparison with their Greek counterparts. A horizon of investigation will be the sisters included in historiographical narratives with sharper contours: for example, whether and how Tacitus, Suetonius or Cassius Dione described the relationship and interaction between Agrippina Minor, Drusilla and Julia Livilla. Then, for each selected case, we will implement a systematic analysis of the occurrences aimed at comparing the most notable variants attested or alluded to in the ancient authors: each of the features omitted or selected from time to time in each representation conveys a precise cultural meaning that we will attempt to recognize and distinguish from the overall and standard portrait of the character. For example, if we consider Anna, Dido's sister, direct and indirect occurrences in Virgil (*Aen.* 4), Ovid (*her.* 7; *fast.* 3), Silio Italico (8), Varro (Serv. auct. Verg. *Aen.* 4, 682; Serv. Verg. *Aen.* 5, 2) will be analyzed and compared.

The second phase will be devoted to lexical and philological analysis of the selected texts. This is the essential core of the research: attention will be paid to the use of unusual terms and expressions from a comparative perspective with respect to *loci paralleli*; thematic nodes and lexical plots recurring limpidly or in filigree will be explored; possible textual problems assessable in the light of the results detected will be discussed.

Finally, in the third phase, in order to offer as complete a picture as possible, from what the sister *was supposed to be* we will move on to define what she *was* by employing non-literary material; that is, we aim for an interdisciplinary opening that integrates elements of Roman law and Latin epigraphy. Specifically, in relation to the latter area, using the online databases *EDCS* (*Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss/Slaby*) and *EDR* (*Epigraphic Database Roma*), we will try to detect occurrences of the term *soror* and related: although from an initial search carried out, the most conspicuous number of inscriptions in which *soror* appears are in the funerary sphere, constituting them dedications to deceased sisters or placed by sisters to deceased relatives, it is not excluded that investigating further may reveal remarkable data on the function performed by sisters in other contexts, such as the sacral one, which would unveil alternative values of the lemma *soror* than the primary one of biological sister.



Defining the anthropological category of «atteggiamento» as «quel particolare schema di comportamento che è assegnato di volta in volta ad un individuo nei confronti delle persone in base a cui il suo “ruolo” familiare è stabilito», among the primary objectives of the present research is an attempt to determine the sororal attitude and to identify, by contrast, the cases in which this pattern is disregarded. While for the master's thesis an attempt was made to explore the daughter paradigm in the negative, the protagonist of the present project remains the Roman woman but from the perspective of another of the roles she could assume: that, precisely, of sister. Compared to the previous work, two substantial novelties emerge: the relationship examined is mutual in the sense that, at least in appearance, the parties involved are mirrored and not conceived in a hierarchical dichotomy; in other words, the relationship considered is no longer vertical, but horizontal and expanded - in that sisters can be more than two. Finally, and this is the aspect that perhaps most demands a change in approach and perspective, none of the subjects considered is male: the Roman man is an outside observer of an exclusively female interaction. Consequently, in addition to delving into the positioning of the sister in the Roman family – which, as we have seen, has already been the subject of important studies – and the cultural value of the relationship between sisters, among the hoped-for results is an advancement in the investigation of the male-female relationship in Rome and, more in detail, of the cultural representation of the Roman woman as an interlocutor in an exchange in which all other actants are also women.

The mass of work attributable to gender studies that has developed in recent years within the Sciences of Antiquity does not respond to a fad, but to a collective need of our times. Contemporary cultural and social changes seek new forms of representation, new means of expression and, even before new answers, new questions: it is a process that naturally flows into every area of humanistic research bringing with it enormous potential to be regulated and ordered with conscious scientific rigor. The theme of sisterhood, transcending the biological sphere and of consanguinity, has traversed feminist theory since the second wave of the 1960s and 1980s, and arrives to the present day as a claim to personal and communal identity; we mention as an example just a few of the titles recently published in Italy on the relationship between sisters, which suggest a lively interest in plumbing this theme in different areas: Giovannelli 2017, Ceo - Guglielmi 2018, Pigozzi 2021, Farnetti 2022. Thinking about the condition of Roman women, so foreign to our own, arouses in us the «*sentimento della differenza*» that is an engine of new questions not only about ourselves, but also about the Other that Romans represent for us. The indispensable prerequisite of this research is, in addition to always assuming an emic perspective – that is, one that does not aim to «assimilare la cultura studiata alle proprie categorie di pensiero, ma vuole individuarne, e salvaguardarne, la specificità» –, to employ the tools derived from other disciplines with a firm respect for the means and ends on which philology and textual criticism are structurally based, and the insurmountable limits they draw. It is not intended, therefore, in any way to apply the contemporary and completely



divorced from classical culture concept of *sorority* to Latin texts: it is, however, the underlying starting point for new questions to be addressed to those texts. In conclusion, the present project makes sense if carried out in the assurance of a vigilant and conscious effort to avoid overinterpretation.

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