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Women of Italy: Gender, Power, and Everyday Life from Antiquity to the 20th Century

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Introduction

This book examines Italian history through the lens of women's lives, tracing how gender shaped power and everyday experience from antiquity to the close of the twentieth century. Rather than treating women as a marginal footnote, it centers their actions and perspectives, asking what changes when we place wives, widows, workers, nuns, patrons, intellectuals, migrants, and activists at the heart of the story. Using legal documents, literature, and personal narratives, the chapters that follow recover voices that have too often been filtered out of national histories. The goal is not to add a separate "women's history" beside familiar events, but to reveal how women's contributions were pivotal to social change, economic resilience, and cultural production across the peninsula's diverse regions.

Our sources are intentionally varied. Legal records—dowry contracts, wills, guild statutes, poor-relief registers, and the testimony preserved in criminal and ecclesiastical courts—show how norms were negotiated in practice and how power operated in households, workshops, parishes, and city halls. Literary texts—from Roman elegy to Renaissance epistles and modern novels—offer metaphors, anxieties, and aspirations that shaped gendered expectations, while also preserving women's authorship and patronage. Personal narratives—letters, diaries, memoirs, oral histories—open a window onto intimate experience: care work, migration decisions, religious callings, and political commitments. Read together, these materials allow us to reconstruct not only elite strategies but also the daily calculations of servants, seamstresses, market sellers, farm laborers, and factory operatives.

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The story begins with Roman matrons, slaves, and freedwomen who navigated a world where household authority and civic identity intertwined. It moves through the Christianization of late antiquity, when virginity, widowhood, and sanctity offered new avenues for influence and constraint. In the medieval period, we encounter women embedded in urban guild economies and rural households; we also find them in convents and courts, reading, writing, negotiating, and sometimes litigating. The Renaissance and early modern eras reveal powerful patrons and regents alongside midwives, healers, and artisans whose knowledge sustained communities; here, the arts and the book trade became arenas where women funded, commissioned, and shaped cultural production.

Modern Italy reframes the relationship between gender and the state. The Napoleonic legal order, the Risorgimento, and the formation of the nation altered property rights, education, and civic participation, while industrialization multiplied women's paid and unpaid labor. The early twentieth century sharpened debates over suffrage and social welfare; fascism re-scripted motherhood and work even as women resisted,

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accommodated, or subverted the regime in their daily lives. World War II and the Resistance transformed public roles and solidarities, and the postwar “economic miracle” reconfigured family economies, consumption, and media culture. By the long 1968, feminist movements and consciousness-raising groups challenged the regulation of bodies and sexuality, pressed for legal reform, and reimagined care, citizenship, and work.

Throughout, this book treats “power” not only as domination from above but as a set of negotiations and competencies exercised in constrained circumstances. Power appears in a widow’s skillful use of inheritance law, a nun’s management of convent finances, a peasant’s seasonal migration strategy, a factory worker’s participation in mutual aid, a duchess’s artistic patronage, and an activist’s clandestine press. Attention to regional diversity—north and south, city and countryside, mainland and islands—prevents easy generalizations, as do differences of class, faith, age, and status. The aim is to show how gender relations were made and remade through institutions and everyday practices, and how women’s agency shaped outcomes we typically attribute to kings, councils, and captains of industry.

Finally, this is a book about method as much as narrative. It invites readers to think with the evidence: how to interpret silence in the archive, how to weigh prescriptive norms against lived realities, and how to read between the lines of court records and literary tropes. By juxtaposing statutes with stories and account books with poems, we can see how economic resilience, social change, and cultural creation were collective accomplishments in which women were indispensable actors. If the chapters sometimes challenge familiar period boundaries, it is because women’s lives often crossed them, weaving together family obligations, labor markets, devotions, and political moments in ways that standard timelines obscure.

Women of Italy is, in short, a history of the peninsula told through those who cooked and copied, bargained and blessed, protested and patronized, nurtured and negotiated. It asks readers to reconsider what counts as politics, where economies are made, and how culture is produced. By following women from the Roman domus to Renaissance courts, from workshop floors to factory gates, from parish sodalities to feminist collectives, the book recovers a past that is at once more complicated and more complete—one in which gender is not an afterthought but a driving force in the making of Italian history.

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CHAPTER ONE: Household and Citizenship in the Roman World

The Roman Republic and its successor empire offered a complicated stage for women's lives, where domestic authority and civic identity mingled in ways that still puzzle historians. Public life was dominated by men who held magistracies, commanded armies, and debated in the Senate, yet the household—the *domus*—was a jurisdiction in its own right. Inside it, food, finance, and family reputation were managed daily, and women played central roles in these tasks. The street-facing front room might host a client seeking a morning greeting, while deeper rooms held looms, nurseries, and account tablets. A well-ordered home was, in Roman eyes, a miniature of a well-ordered state.

Legal definitions of womanhood were shaped by the concept of *manus*, a form of marital guardianship that placed a wife under her husband's legal authority. Not all marriages operated under *manus*, however, and over time the less restrictive *sine manu* union became common, allowing a woman to remain under the legal power of her father. That status affected property rights, inheritance, and personal liability. The *paterfamilias*, the male head of household, held the legal "power" over children, property, and, in theory, even adult sons living under his roof. These structures did not erase women's practical agency but framed the channels through which it could operate.

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Citizenship for Roman women was a limited category. They were citizens insofar as they enjoyed legal protections and certain rights, but they could not vote or hold office. Citizenship, however, mattered for children: a Roman citizen mother passed citizenship to her offspring, a vital fact in a society that expanded through conquest and colonization. Women's status also intersected with class and freedom. Elite women could command resources and networks, while enslaved women experienced the most severe constraints. Freedwomen often navigated a hybrid identity, using economic opportunities and social ties to stabilize their position in the city's crowded hierarchies.

The household was the stage for everyday power negotiations. Wives managed domestic budgets, negotiated with suppliers, and oversaw the education of children. In wealthier homes, they supervised enslaved and free workers, tracked storerooms, and cultivated social ties with neighbors and kin. While public oratory was reserved for men, persuasive conversation—especially within the *domus*—was a recognized skill. A woman's capacity to advise, nudge, or redirect her husband or sons could shape the family's public reputation, which in turn affected marriage alliances, business

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partnerships, and political support.

Roman law, evolving across centuries, prescribed and proscribed women's behavior, but practice often diverged from text. The Twelve Tables, an early legal code, touched on inheritance and guardianship but said less about daily decision-making. Later jurists elaborated rules about dowry, divorce, and guardianship, creating a patchwork of obligations and rights. Widows, in particular, held a distinctive place: as heads of their own households, they could manage property and direct the upbringing of children, provided they observed legal formalities. Guardianship might be required for certain transactions, but guardians were often chosen from the family, opening space for negotiation.

Literature offers glimpses of women's voices and the pressures they faced. Sulpicia's love elegies, brief but potent, reveal a woman's perspective on desire and reputation in a social world where modesty was publicly celebrated. In satire, writers like Juvenal caricatured powerful women as meddlers, reflecting anxiety about female autonomy rather than documenting its full scope. Historical accounts by Livy or Tacitus, while not focused on women, occasionally spotlight female figures—like Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi—whose moral authority and parenting were praised as models of civic virtue. These texts are prescriptive, but they also encode the respect many Romans felt for women's shaping influence.

Religious life provided another channel for public participation. Vestal Virgins were the most visible female religious officials, serving for decades in the heart of Rome's civic cult. Their vows of chastity and ritual responsibilities conferred unique privileges, such as the right to own property and make a will. Their presence in the urban landscape—tended by public funds, exempt from certain guardianship rules—reminded citizens that female bodies and behaviors were tied to the state's spiritual health. The penalties for violating their vows were severe, underscoring how closely female conduct was linked to collective fortune.

Women's property and economic activities were central to household resilience. Dowries were substantial transfers from a bride's family to the couple, managed in various ways depending on marital regime and legal agreement. In *sine manu* marriages, a wife technically retained control of property brought from her father's household, though practical control often involved negotiation with husbands and kin. Women engaged in commerce, lent money, and invested in land, especially in urban contexts where trade was lively. Legal documents—contracts, receipts, and tablets from places like Pompeii—show women initiating transactions and sometimes litigating to protect their interests.

Slavery underpinned Roman households and the broader economy, and enslaved women's labor was indispensable. They cooked, cleaned, cared for children, spun wool, and worked in workshops or fields. Some held specialized roles as midwives,

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hairdressers, or entertainers; others were trained as scribes or nurses. Enslaved women could be subject to sexual exploitation, and their reproductive capacity was often treated as an economic variable. Yet, there were pathways to manumission, and once freed, women could become citizens, own property, and build new familial and commercial networks. Freedwomen often appear in the historical record as business owners and benefactors.

The legal mechanism of *peculium* allowed enslaved people to manage small amounts of money or property with the owner's permission. For women, this could mean control over a stall, a set of tools, or a small capital fund. While owners ultimately retained legal claim, successful management of a *peculium* could lead to increased responsibility and eventual freedom. Many women used these opportunities to create stability for themselves and their children, sometimes negotiating contracts and interacting with urban authorities. The city's economy was in part sustained by enslaved and freedwomen's labor, often invisible in grand narratives of Roman prosperity.

Urban life structured women's routines. Market days brought vendors, buyers, and gossip into crowded streets; baths were spaces of hygiene and sociality, though with gendered divisions. In neighborhoods, women exchanged favors, pooled resources, and organized small-scale credit. Religious festivals offered public roles—processions, offerings, and communal banquets—where female participation was expected and visible. Domestic architecture often featured atrium spaces where elite women received visitors and displayed family heirlooms, a material performance of lineage and respectability. The rhythm of city life made household management a public-facing activity.

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In rural areas, women's labor was woven into agricultural cycles. Planting, harvesting, and processing crops required hands-on work, often coordinated by household heads but performed by women as a matter of course. Small-scale crafts—cheese making, weaving, tool repair—supplemented farm incomes. Estate managers, sometimes women, oversaw labor, storage, and local marketing. The seasonal cadence of rural life also shaped family strategies; marriages could be timed to align with harvests or labor shortages, and children's labor was mobilized to meet peak demands. These patterns produced a complex geography of work, where home and field were closely linked.

The military's influence on women's lives was felt both at home and on the frontiers. Soldiers' wives and families remained in cities or on farms, managing households while husbands campaigned. Marriages to soldiers carried specific legal provisions regarding property and inheritance. In frontier towns, women interacted with diverse populations—traders, auxiliaries, and local communities—fostering cultural exchange and economic adaptation. On campaigns, some women accompanied the army as caregivers, cooks, or laundresses, though this was less common. The empire's

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expansion thus reached into domestic spaces through legal norms and economic demands.

Education for women varied by class and region. Elite girls might receive tutoring in literature, rhetoric, and philosophy, though formal schooling was rare. Many learned practical skills—numeracy, household accounting, and textile work—from mothers and female relatives. In urban contexts, some women became known for intellectual pursuits; Hypatia of Alexandria, though not Italian, illustrates the broader Roman world's capacity to recognize female scholars. Literacy enabled women to write letters, manage business correspondence, and preserve family memory. The ability to read and write was not universal, but it was a significant tool for navigating legal and economic institutions.

Marriage and divorce were regulated by law but managed within families. The ceremony, exchanges of consent, and dowry arrangements formed the legal backbone. Divorce, more accessible in Rome than in many contemporaneous societies, required formal declarations and property settlements. Women's reputations were tied to conduct in both spheres, and accusations of adultery or impropriety could affect standing and alliances. Yet, evidence suggests that women could initiate divorce and pursue remarriage, making marital life a domain of negotiation rather than simple submission. Family strategies often trumped ideology.

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Public health and childbirth were predominantly women's domains. Midwives guided deliveries, cared for mothers and infants, and offered remedies rooted in local medical knowledge. While elite physicians wrote texts, most everyday care was provided by women within households and neighborhoods. The risks of childbirth were high, and mortality rates shaped family structures and inheritance plans. Women's networks transmitted practical wisdom—nutrition, hygiene, infant care—that sustained urban populations. In the context of frequent epidemics and seasonal illnesses, these informal systems of care were vital for community resilience.

Property transfers reveal how women participated in legal and economic life. Wills and dowry contracts show women as both donors and beneficiaries. Guardianship rules might require a female relative's consent for certain transactions, but practice varied. Women sometimes funded public works—baths, temples, fountains—attaching their names to civic benefactions. These acts carried social weight and could confer prestige on families. In cities like Ostia and Pompeii, inscriptions commemorate women's contributions to building projects and cult endowments, hinting at the informal power that accompanied material generosity.

Law courts were not exclusively male spaces, even if the advocacy roles were. Women appeared as witnesses, plaintiffs, and defendants in a range of cases—from property disputes to accusations of theft or assault. Their testimonies were recorded in formal language, but the circumstances often reflect domestic quarrels, economic tensions,

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or social rivalries. The rhetoric of honor and modesty shaped how judges and juries interpreted women's accounts. Nevertheless, the courts provided a venue for women to assert rights, especially around dowry recovery, guardianship disputes, and inheritance claims. The legal system was a tool that could be skillfully wielded.

Dining and hospitality were arenas where household reputation was displayed. Women oversaw menus, seating arrangements, and the flow of conversation, even if the public face of hosting fell to male heads. The quality of food, the choice of guests, and the tone of entertainment were all reflections of domestic management. In smaller homes, hospitality might involve sharing resources with neighbors or clients. The ritual of dining, with its rules of speech and behavior, also taught children social norms. For women, success in these tasks reinforced family status and maintained networks useful in business and politics.

Religious associations and patronage offered collective identity and influence. Women participated in voluntary associations—funerary clubs, trade guilds, and cult groups—that pooled resources for banquets, burial, and small benefactions. These organizations provided social support and a degree of public recognition. In some cities, women are recorded as sponsors of festivals or donars of statues. The boundaries between private devotion and civic religion were porous; participating in communal rites demonstrated loyalty to community values and underscored women's place in the city's spiritual landscape.

Migration and mobility affected households across classes. Soldiers, merchants, and administrators moved across the empire, and families adapted to new locales. Women sometimes relocated with husbands or remained behind to manage properties. In port cities, intercultural households formed, blending languages, foods, and customs. Legal statuses could shift with movement; a freedwoman might move for economic opportunity, while an enslaved woman could be transferred with an owner's assets. These transitions demanded flexibility and negotiation, as women forged new ties in neighborhoods and markets, redefining home in a dynamic empire.

The ritual calendar structured daily life. Festivals honoring gods and ancestors punctuated the year, shaping labor routines and public activities. Women prepared offerings, organized domestic rites, and participated in communal processions. These events carried social meaning; participation signaled respectability and belonging. At the same time, festivals offered temporary releases from strict norms—music, dance, and revelry could blur boundaries. For women, the calendar created rhythms of work and rest, ritual obligation and social pleasure. It also tied households to the wider civic community through shared practices and public visibility.

Literary representation often reduced women to types—virtuous matron, dangerous adulteress, noble widow—yet real lives exceeded these templates. Monumental portraits and funerary inscriptions offer counterevidence. A tombstone for a

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freedwoman might list her trade, her civic benefactions, and her children's names, projecting a life of work and respect. Epitaphs crafted by husbands or children provide insight into affection, grief, and social expectations. These materials complicate literary stereotypes by presenting women as economically productive, socially embedded, and mourned as individuals whose contributions mattered.

Neighborhood dynamics shaped opportunities and constraints. In apartment blocks and insulae, women formed informal networks for childcare, shopping, and small-scale lending. Information flowed through these ties—job openings, marriage prospects, rumors about grain supplies. Solidarity could be crucial during shortages or crises. At the same time, close quarters produced conflicts and surveillance; reputation was a fragile asset. Women negotiated these pressures by cultivating trustworthy relationships and observing communal norms. The neighborhood, therefore, was both a resource and a stage where daily negotiations about respectability and survival played out.

Slavery's reach into households meant that everyday routines relied on coerced labor. Enslaved women's days could be long and varied: cooking, cleaning, childcare, textile work, and sometimes more skilled tasks like hairdressing or music. The moral economy of the household depended on their labor, and owners recognized this dependence even while exploiting it. For enslaved women, the possibility of manumission—and the social ties created with owners and children—could provide a pathway to new identities. Yet, the ever-present threat of sale or punishment shaped their choices and constrained their agency in profound ways.

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Guardianship (*tutela*) could be a persistent constraint, but also a negotiable relationship. A woman's guardian—often a male relative—was supposed to oversee major transactions, but in practice guardians might defer to her judgment or be absent. The law allowed women to petition for changes in guardianship or seek support from other family members. Some women developed reputations for financial acumen, prompting guardians to rely on their expertise. The interplay between legal oversight and practical competence was an everyday reality, revealing how institutions mediated between formal power and lived experience.

Education in the arts of negotiation—whether in the marketplace, the neighborhood, or the home—was central to women's success. The capacity to bargain, to persuade, to build alliances mattered in a world where written contracts coexisted with oral agreements. Women learned to read social cues, to manage reputations, and to deploy networks. This education happened not in classrooms but in kitchens, shops, and courtyards. Over time, these skills produced resilience: the ability to adapt to changing economic conditions, to secure resources for children, and to maintain stability in households subject to wider political and military pressures.

War and conquest brought wealth and also disruption. Captured goods and people

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flowed into Roman households, expanding the labor force and the range of goods available. Yet war also meant absence, uncertainty, and sometimes violence. Women managed households during long campaigns, dealt with the arrival of war booty, and adapted to new economic realities. In border regions, the lines between civilian and military life blurred; households accommodated soldiers, traders, and displaced populations. Women's labor—both paid and unpaid—helped absorb shocks and stabilize communities in the aftermath of conflict, even as they navigated legal and social risks.

The Roman emphasis on family reputation—*dignitas* and *pudicitia*—created a complex negotiation between private behavior and public image. Elite women were expected to model modesty and restraint, though actual practices varied widely. For non-elite women, the calculus was often pragmatic: securing a livelihood, protecting children, maintaining respect within the neighborhood. Legal penalties and social judgments attached to perceived transgressions, but communities also offered support. The tension between ideal norms and lived realities is evident in court cases and inscriptions, which show women defending their reputations and seeking justice when wronged.

Economic crises—grain shortages, inflation, or the pressures of heavy taxation—affect households in tangible ways. Women's roles in procuring food, adjusting budgets, and seeking credit became critical. Urban markets responded to scarcity with price fluctuations and rumor; women's networks could mitigate these shocks through pooling and exchange. In rural areas, crop failures forced adjustments in labor allocation and migration. The state's interventions, including public grain distributions (*annona*), relied on logistical coordination that touched households directly. Women's daily management was thus linked to imperial supply systems and broader economic trends.

Inscriptions commemorating women's achievements suggest that public recognition was not exclusively male. A freedwoman who funded a street repair, a matron who endowed a shrine, a wife praised for loyalty and charity—these records reveal a spectrum of female contributions. The language of these inscriptions is formal and often gendered, but they nonetheless carve out a place for women in civic memory. They also hint at the values communities prized: generosity, duty, maternal care, and economic stewardship. Such commemorations were not merely symbolic; they could affect family status and influence local politics.

The rhythms of domestic labor structured the day. Tasks were organized around cooking, cleaning, childcare, and textile production, with variations by region and class. In many households, spinning and weaving were constant activities, producing cloth for family use and sometimes for sale. The organization of work within the home required coordination among women of different ages and statuses. These routines, though repetitive, were essential to household economies. They also taught

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values—discipline, cooperation, stewardship—that shaped children's outlooks and prepared them for adult responsibilities in a society that prized order and predictability.

Urban governance intersected with households in practical ways. Local officials managed markets, sanitation, and water supply; households interacted with these systems daily. Women's complaints about quality or price, their participation in neighborhood associations, and their compliance with regulations were part of civic life. In some cities, women served as priestesses or managed public cults, blending religious and administrative roles. These functions were limited but significant, demonstrating that the boundaries between private and public were permeable. Household order and civic order were mutually reinforcing, and women contributed to both.

Public discourse about women often oscillated between admiration and anxiety. Orators praised mothers who raised citizen-soldiers, while satirists mocked women who challenged male authority. This tension reveals how central women were to Roman society's self-understanding. Even when critics complained about female influence, they acknowledged its reality. The stories told about women—in poetry, law, and anecdote—were part of the cultural toolkit Romans used to negotiate power. For women themselves, these narratives set expectations, offered role models, and sometimes provided warnings, but they also left space for improvisation.

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The legal framework of the Roman household was never static. Reforms and interpretations evolved with changing political circumstances and economic needs. In the late Republic and early Empire, shifts in marriage practices and property management reflected broader transformations in social structure. Women's experiences varied across regions—from northern Italy's urban centers to southern farms and island communities. Local customs interacted with Roman law, producing diversity in practice. Understanding these patterns requires reading legal texts alongside everyday documents and narratives, attentive to both formal rules and the negotiations that shaped their application.

The management of honor and shame was a collective enterprise. Families monitored each other's conduct, and women's behavior reflected on entire lineages. This pressure could constrain choices but also mobilize support; a woman in trouble might rely on female kin to advocate on her behalf. Honor was performed in public rituals, neighborhood interactions, and legal arenas. The negotiation of reputation involved both adherence to norms and strategic adaptation. Women navigated this terrain carefully, aware that respectability was crucial for social mobility, marriage prospects, and the safety of their children.

In the countryside, the division between household and farm was less pronounced. Women moved between indoor tasks and fieldwork, especially on small holdings.

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Seasonal labor demands required flexibility; children and elders contributed as able. The proximity to nature—gardens, orchards, livestock—shaped daily routines and resource management. In regions with sharecropping or tenant farming, women negotiated with landlords or stewards, balancing obligations and survival needs. Rural households were often resilient units, drawing on diverse skills and mutual aid. Women's labor, woven into the fabric of agricultural life, was fundamental to subsistence and modest accumulation.

Religious festivals and rites of passage—births, marriages, funerals—structured social time. Women organized preparations, guided rituals, and sustained communal ties. These events reinforced identities and provided opportunities to display wealth and status. They also created spaces for female sociability, where information and support flowed. The ritual calendar was not merely religious; it was economic and social, aligning labor cycles with communal life. Women's expertise in these domains was recognized and valued, even if formal authority remained male-dominated. The continuity of these practices anchored households in the wider civic fabric.

Across the empire, Roman women encountered diverse cultures and adapted their practices accordingly. In Italy, the blend of indigenous traditions and Roman norms produced local variations. In ports like Ostia, cosmopolitan interactions influenced dress, food, and religious observance. In rural regions, older customs persisted, sometimes coexisting with Roman law. This diversity enriched daily life and created hybrid identities. Women were central to this cultural negotiation—transmitting recipes, stories, and rituals across generations, and integrating new influences while preserving continuity. Their labor and creativity made the Roman world livable and coherent.

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The legal and social frameworks of Roman Italy shaped women's possibilities but did not exhaust their ingenuity. From elite matrons to enslaved caregivers, women navigated institutions with a mixture of compliance, negotiation, and resistance. Their labor sustained households, their management stabilized economies, and their social ties wove communities together. While public power belonged largely to men, the domains of home, neighborhood, and cult offered arenas of influence that mattered profoundly. The evidence—legal, literary, epigraphic—presents a mosaic of experiences, reminding us that Roman history is incomplete without attention to the everyday worlds women built.

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