

## Paul Chrystal

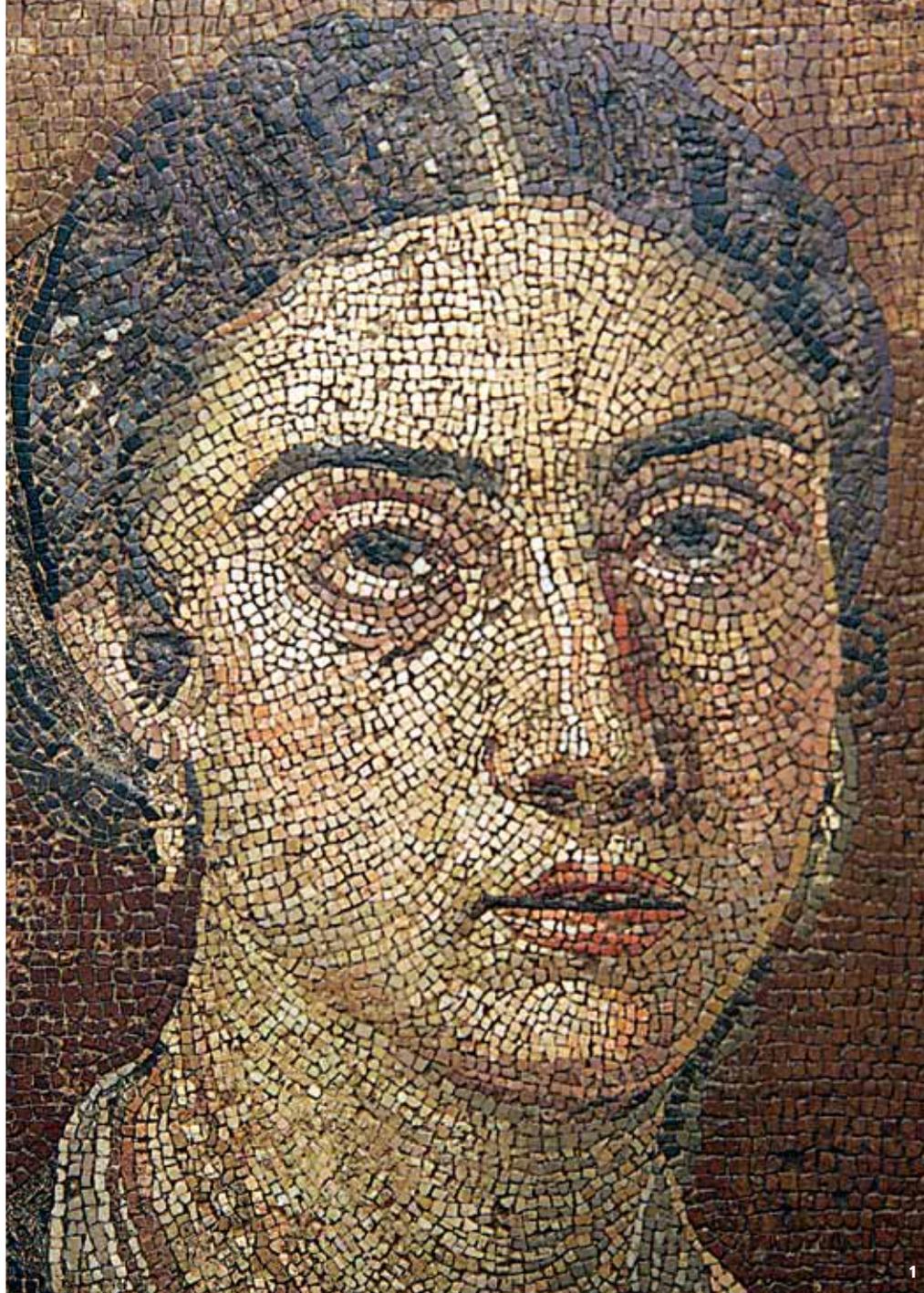
describes the roles that women played in Roman society and compares with how men thought they should behave

The history of women in ancient Rome is a fascinating and exhilarating subject. It gives an important insight into one of the world's most dynamic and successful super-power civilisations has seen and, at the same time, illuminates any number of admirable, exciting, sophisticated, slatternly, dangerous and evil women fighting to be heard and seen against insurmountable odds in a world run by men for men.

'Silent' is a word that is often used to describe Roman women. First, because of the paucity of contemporary, direct evidence for their lives; 'silent' too because for 1,500 years they were relegated to the shadows of history, largely ignored by ancient historians until an explosion of scholarly articles and books covering every conceivable aspect of Roman women's lives in the 1970s which has continued ever since.

'Silent' can also be used to describe how the typical Roman man liked his women: silent, unobtrusive, and at home. This silence is deepened because the Roman familia was a very private institution in which the woman was encouraged as wife, daughter or mother to be discreet; what she said and did in the home tended to stay in the home; only writers extolled, or vilified, exceptional, high profile, women.

Any study of women in ancient Rome is beset by a problem of evidence, or rather, the lack of it. Just like slaves and children, women were second class citizens on the margins of society: they were, technically at least, always under the control of a man – be it father or husband or guardian, depending on time of life and circumstances. They were barred from holding public office and excluded from the Roman war-machine. They were also politically invisible because they had no vote and, Vestal Virgins apart, they played only a limited role in state religion. From what survives of Roman literature they are largely



# A powerful

**1. Mosaic of a stylish lady from Pompeii**  
Date? Size? Naples Archaeological Museum. Photo © Andante Travels Ltd, Salisbury.

**2. Dido showing her plans to Aeneas by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (1610-62)**  
© The Norton Simon Foundaiton, Pasadena.

**3. Minerva, sculpted by John Wolstenholme in 1801, Petergate, York.**

reticent; their education was delimited by early marriage, with managing the household and by serial childbirth. In the 4th-century AD John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople, summed it up in his *The Type of Women Who Ought to be Taken as Wives*:

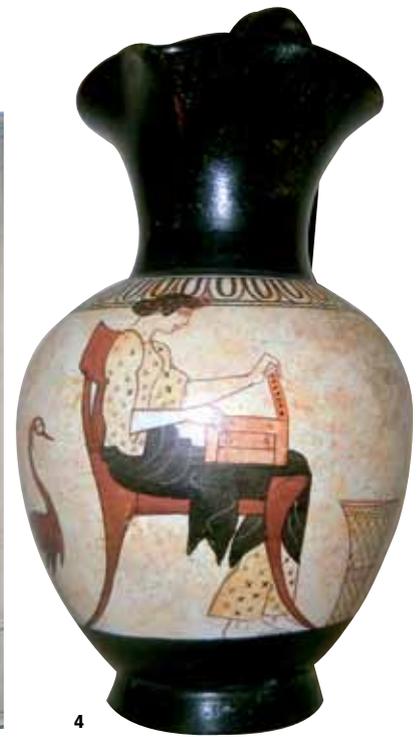
*'A woman's role exclusively is to care for children, for her husband, and for her home...God assigned a role to each of the sexes: women look after the home, men take care of public affairs, business and military matters – in other words, everything outside the home'.*

In this he was echoing the words

of Livy, from the end of the 1st century BC, who voiced the predominant male attitude when he described the debate on the repeal of the Oppian Law in 195 BC, a rare example of woman-power exerting itself in Roman politics:

*'Women cannot hold magistracies, priesthoods, celebrate triumphs, wear badges of office, enjoy gifts, or booty; elegance, finery, and beautiful clothes are women's emblems, this is what they love and are proud of, this is what our ancestors called the world of women'.*

In other words, let them go shopping and, according to Philo of



# body of women

Alexandria writing soon after Livy, woe betide any woman who acts immoderately, or indeed who acts like a man. For Philo, things had already gone way too far; women should keep their hands to themselves, or lose one of them:

*‘But as it is now, some women are advanced to such a pitch of shamelessness as not only, though they are women, to give vent to intemperate language and abuse among a crowd of men, but even to strike men and insult them, with hands practised rather in works of the loom and spinning than in blows and assaults... but that is a shocking*

**4. Copy of an Attic oinochoe, circa 475 BC, showing a woman working the wool (like Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*) symbolising chastity, fidelity and industry, which became a role model for the good matrona.**

**5. Funerary relief of potter and his wife working together, late 1st-early 2nd century AD. Size???????**  
Virginia Museum of Arts, Richmond, USA.

*thing if a woman were to proceed to such a degree of boldness as to seize hold of the genitals of one of the men quarrelling... and let the punishment be the cutting off of the hand which has touched what it ought not to have touched’.*

When, in *The Bacchides*, the comic playwright Plautus (254-184 BC) wrote the line *‘there’s nothing more miserable than a woman’*, was he referring to her mood or social status? Probably both. While a nostalgic Cicero (106-43 BC) stated:

*‘Our ancestors, in their wisdom, wanted all women to be under the power of guardians because*

*of their feebleness of mind’.* In his *Institutiones*, written around AD 160, the jurist Gaius, confirmed that, on reaching puberty, boys were freed from their guardians, but not girls – the reason being *‘propter animi levitatem’* – generally girls were considered to be what today some would disparagingly call ‘airheads’.

These assertions, which no doubt received general acceptance, remind us how we receive what we know about Roman women. It is almost always seen through, and distorted by, the prism of middle class, educated or powerful men. Descriptions

of women and their actions are often refracted from the margins of a male world through descriptions of men's actions and achievements. What little the historians and politicians do tell us about women is, therefore, a kind of ricochet, almost secondhand and derivative, often edited to embellish the description of a man and his actions.

The essence of Roman womanhood was the *matrona*: the Roman wife and woman of the household. The *matrona* was the glue which held the Roman family together and provided the offspring essential to the running of the farm or business, to the recruits needed for bar and battlefield, and for the ever-burgeoning administration at home and in overseas provinces and dependencies. We can identify the qualities expected of a *matrona* in funerary inscriptions, where we read time and time again of *pudicitia* (sexual propriety), modesty, virtuousness, loyalty, docility, unobtrusiveness, strength of character and fortitude, *pietas* towards the family, stay at home, one-man-women (*univirae*), and unswerving devotion to children. The ability to run the home (*domum servat*) and work the wool (*lanam fecit*), became badges of the *matrona*. A girl, often in her very early teens, took on these responsibilities and obligations from the minute she arrived in her husband's house during her wedding and was judged for the rest of her life on how far she lived up to this paradigm. The famously virtuous *matronae* of Rome – Lucretia, Verginia, Cornelia, Aurelia Cotta – all reputedly had these qualities in spades.

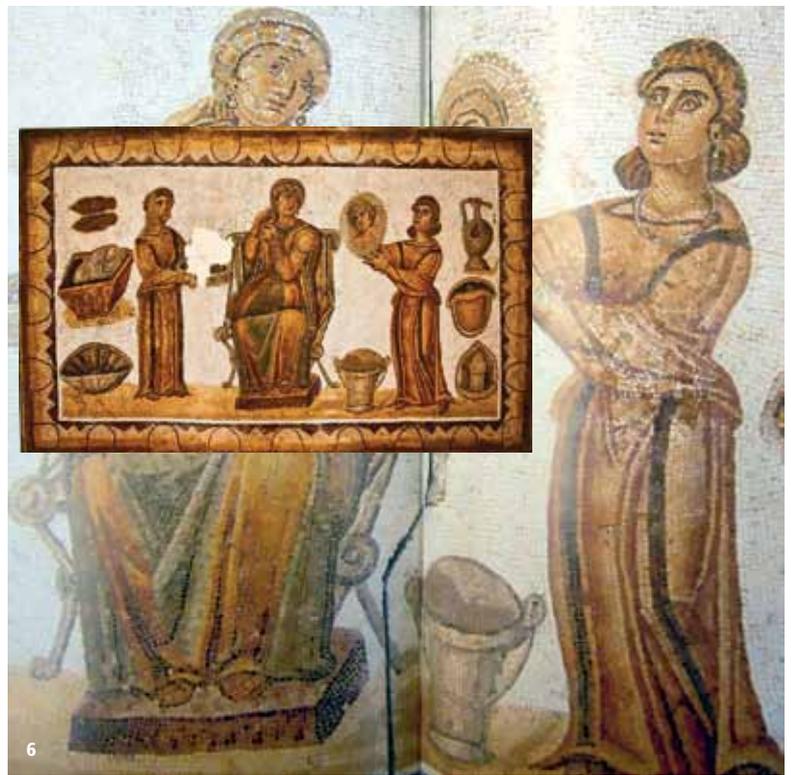
All the more impressive, then, was the achievement and impact of

**6. Mosaic from the baths at Sidi Ghrib near Tunis, showing a woman at her toilet while a slave holds up a mirror, 4th century AD. Size????**

© National Museum of the Bardo, Tunis.

**7. Idylle d'Amour painted by Henri Daudin in 1914, showing a modest *puella* pursued by her lover, reminiscent of scenes described in the poems of Ovid, Catullus, Propertius or Tibullus. Sie? Medium? Credit? ©?**

**8. Funerary relief showing Lucius Vibius, his wife and son, end of the 1st century BC.**  
© Vatican Museums.



the women who did break through this ancient glass ceiling. Some were social paradoxes: conspicuous, capricious, assertive and influential, everything they should not be. By the end of the Republic and during the early days of the Empire a number of elite Roman women attained levels of intellect, power and responsibility, directly or indirectly, through male politicians, lovers and emperors, unimaginable less than a century before.

These women say little themselves but, down the years, Roman men describe these exceptions to the rule of silence. In politics, law, business, religion, the fine and the dark arts we meet extraordinary and notorious women who excelled and won the admiration, or otherwise, of their male counterparts. They shook off their traditional restrictions and

forged an identities of their own in a largely suspicious, paranoid, patronising and critical male world.

Occasionally though, Roman women, themselves, do speak to us: through poetry, graffiti and through funerary inscriptions. Thankfully, the latter are not always the impersonal and formulaic eulogies they are often made out to be; some are achingly personal and heartfelt.

Even more occasionally, we hear women speaking through literature. The words of Sulpicia, active in the same coterie as Tibullus (*circa* 55-19 BC), survive but surely there were others who put stylus to parchment. Sometimes we get an oblique eloquence, for example, through the recipients of letters from Cicero or Pliny the Younger, or in the textbooks of the Greek gynaecologists like Soranus, where we can assume a patient interview or a physical examination has occurred to substantiate his findings. Hortensia was a fine orator; and we can add another later Sulpicia – Sulpicia Caleni, a female poet praised by Martial (AD 40-102/104).

Are the outstanding women that we hear about the exception rather than the rule, or do they represent the tip of the iceberg? The answer is that we simply do not know how far those who are celebrated represent Roman women in general. So it seems prudent to assume that the truth lies somewhere in between – we should not take what little evidence there is as typical, but see it as a mould being broken – examples of out-of-the-ordinary women who reacted against type and tradition:





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obtrusively, impetuously, valiantly, cleverly, salaciously or notoriously.

Stereotyping is another problem as many of the more conspicuous women of Rome are defined in terms of their sexual mores or their deficient femininity, or both. There are many examples: Sempronia, the Catilinarian conspirator; Fulvia, wife and military comrade of Mark Antony; Clodia, the mistress of Catullus and Cicero's hated harridan; Julia, wayward daughter of Augustus; Agrippina the Younger; Mesallina; even Cornelia, that paragon of feminine virtue. All these women were the subjects of sexual slurs doled out by male politicians or writers. Powerful women ignited in them a sense of insecurity and misogyny that found stereotypical expression in hostile references to female sexual conduct.

As women could not be charged with offences against the state, *maiestas*, the next best thing were allegations of sexual impropriety and lewdness. Charges of immorality were repeatedly made against prominent women, many of them pure calumny. Similarly, exceptional achievement in a woman, good or bad, is often expressed and explained away as masculine behaviour. In the eyes of the Roman male the impressive, outstanding woman is exceptional only because she exhibits masculine qualities; she is, in effect, defeminised, and is seen as the archetypal virago.

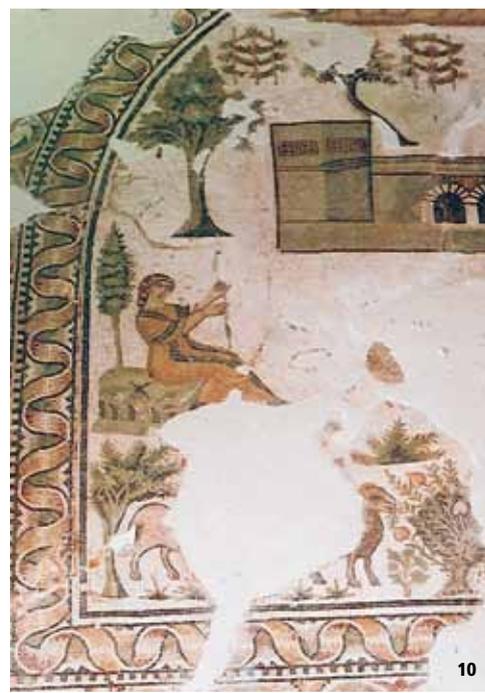
The absence of husbands for extended periods, when they were fighting wars or administering overseas territories, led to more

independence amongst the women left behind to run the households. Another by-product of the constant warring was the influx of foreign goods and slaves, both male and female, with all sorts of skills: from doctors, midwives, and teachers to astrologers and prostitutes.

Exotic culture began to percolate into hoary Roman traditions via Egyptian religion, Spanish dancers, Greek actors and mimes, foreign musicians, and multilingual, educated and urbane women of independent means with minds, bodies and independent lives and lovers of their own. Catullus' Lesbia typifies the unattached, or readily detachable, sophisticated ladies of the day who could exert considerable sexual, psychological, even political influence over their male friends.

A real Roman man would never be a slave to a woman, or to love. But in the world of the love poets women were *dominae*, while the men were slaves, lovesick, cuckolded, or languishing locked-out on the doorstep, and their only combat was as the distinctly un-Roman soldiering in the war of love.

As the Republic battered itself into an Empire forged by Augustus, gradually women, as the wives, daughters and mistresses of the triumvirs and emperors, began to assume unprecedented influence both as king-makers and as assassins. Even in that seemingly unassailable bastion of male exclusivity that was the Roman military machine, two women were able to demonstrate rare but highly effective influence and skill in military



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**9. A Victorian view of the Vestal Virgins tending the Sacred Flame in the Temple of Vesta in Rome. This engraving appeared in *Aunt Charlotte's Stories of Roman History for Little Ones* by Charlotte M Yonge published in London in 1884.**

**10. Corner of a mosaic found in a house in Carthage, showing a woman (a good *matrona*) working the wool (*lanam fecit*) in her garden, with sheep nearby, 4th century AD. © The National Museum of the Bardo, Tunis.**

matters. Velleius Paterculus indignantly records how Fulvia Flacca Bambula, wife of Mark Antony and mutilator of Cicero's decapitated corpse, was active in the Perusine Wars (41-40 BC) making a thorough nuisance of herself with her man-like activities: '*she who had nothing of the woman in her except her sex was creating general confusion by armed violence*'. Nevertheless she was the first Roman woman to appear on a coin.

Agrippina the Elder, the wife of Germanicus, also showed impressive military skill and panache in AD 15. Pursued by enemy troops the Romans made a dash back to the Rhine where Agrippina, pregnant, stood encouraging the soldiers and, replenishing field dressings for the returning legions as she stood at the head of the bridge. Tacitus reveals how she prevented the bridge over the Rhine at Vetera (Xanten) from being destroyed in panic which would have cut off the Romans on the wrong side of the river. In a rare case of giving credit where credit is due, he calls her *femina ingens animi* ('a great-minded woman'), assuming the qualities of a general, *munia ducis*. Apart from two powerful foreign women, Cleopatra and Dido, *dux* is normally only used to describe a man. These are only a few examples from what Livy describes as *ingens mulierum agmen* ('a powerful body of women'). ■

*Women in Ancient Rome* by Paul Chrystal is published in hardback by Amberley Publishing at £20.