



CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

## *Time, Space, Source Material, and Methods*

At the end of the second century B.C., Athenian worshippers set out in procession, marching from Athens to the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi to celebrate the Pythais festival. The pageant was held in a grand manner “worthy of the god and his particular excellence.” One individual stood out among the participants: Chrysis, priestess of Athena Polias. For her role in making the occasion one that befitted both Athens and Delphi, the people of Delphi bestowed upon Chrysis the crown of Apollo. The city also voted to grant her, as well as all her descendants, an impressive series of rights and privileges: status as a special representative of Athens to Delphi (*proxenos*), the right to consult the oracle, priority of trial, inviolability (*asylia*), freedom from taxes, a front seat at all competitions held by the city, the right to own land and houses, and all other honors customary for *proxenoi* and benefactors of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Back in Athens, Chrysis’s cousins, Dionysios, Niketes, and Philylla, set up a statue of their famous relative on the Acropolis. They themselves were prominent Athenians from a family distinguished by its numerous cult officials. Chrysis had a great-great-grandfather who was a sacred supervisor (*epimeletes*) of the Eleusinian Mysteries and a grandfather who was a priest of Asklepios.<sup>2</sup> The decree set up by the people of Delphi and the statue base from the Athenian Acropolis provide a tantalizing glimpse into the life of an exceptional woman. While scores of inscriptions survive to honor men in this way, Chrysis stands out as one of the few women who received special privileges by decree.<sup>3</sup> Her public record brought substantial rights for her and all her descendants. She further enjoyed the honor of having her statue set up on the Athenian Acropolis, ensuring that she would be remembered always in her priestly status.

Despite wide contemporary interest in the role of women in world religions, the story of the Greek priestess remains elusive. Scattered references, fragmentary records, and ambiguous representations confound attempts to form a coherent view of women who held sacred offices in ancient Greece. Yet the scope of surviving evidence is vast and takes us through every stage on the path through priesthood. It informs us about eligibility and acquisition of office, costume and at-

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tributes, representations, responsibilities, ritual actions, compensation for service, authority and privileges, and the commemoration of priestesses at death. Only by gathering far-flung evidence from the epigraphic, literary, and archaeological records can we recognize larger patterns that reveal the realities of the women who held office. This evidence provides firm, securely dated documentation from which we can bring to life the vibrant story of the Greek priestess.

This narrative is particularly important because religious office presented the one arena in which Greek women assumed roles equal and comparable to those of men. Central to this phenomenon is the fact that the Greek pantheon includes both gods and goddesses and that, with some notable exceptions, the cults of male divinities were overseen by male officials and those of female divinities by female officials.<sup>4</sup> The demand for close identification between divinity and cult attendant made for a class of female sacred servants directly comparable to that of men overseeing the cults of gods. Indeed, it was this demand that eventually led to a central argument over the Christian priesthood, exclusively granted to male priests in the image of a male god. As Simon Price has stressed, the equality of men and women as priests and priestesses in ancient Greece was nothing short of remarkable.<sup>5</sup> In a world in which only men could hold civic office and enjoy full political rights, it would have been easy enough for cities to organize their priesthoods on the model of magistracies. But the power of gender in the analogy between sacred servant and deity was so strong that it warranted a category of female cult agents who functioned virtually as public-office holders. Price has challenged us to consider the deeper question of why the Greeks so emphasized both genders for their gods.<sup>6</sup> We will take up this line of inquiry in chapter 2.

Evidence for priestesses can be found in nearly all categories of Greek texts, from Linear B tablets to epic and lyric poetry, histories, tragedies, comedies, political speeches, legal documents, public decrees, and antiquarian commentaries.<sup>7</sup> Inscribed dedications attest to the generosity of priestesses in making benefactions to cities and sanctuaries, their pride in setting up images of themselves, and their authority in upholding sanctuary laws. Inscriptions also provide evidence that these women were publicly honored with gold crowns, portrait statues, and reserved theater seats. Priestesses are represented in nearly every category of visual culture, including architectural sculpture, votive statues and reliefs, funerary monuments, vases, painted shields, wooden plaques, and bronze and ivory implements. In the face of this abundant evidence it is hard to understand how the prominent role of the Greek priestess has, until recently, been ignored by modern commentators or, worse yet, denied.<sup>8</sup>

Never before has the archaeological evidence for priestesses been systematically examined within the broader context of what is known from the epigraphic and literary spheres. From the late nineteenth century, inscriptions have been the primary source for our understanding of ancient priesthoods.<sup>9</sup> In her dissertation of 1983, Judy Ann Turner brought together wide-ranging epigraphic evidence for feminine priesthoods, focusing largely on the acquisition of sa-

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cred offices.<sup>10</sup> In 1987, Brunilde Ridgway pioneered the study of material evidence for women in ancient Greece, including images of female cult agents.<sup>11</sup> Alexander Mantis's comprehensive monograph on the iconography of priesthood, male and female alike, followed in 1990.<sup>12</sup> This groundbreaking work brought together a wide corpus of images, many of which had been unknown. In the years that have followed, additional monuments representing priestesses have been published, and broader studies on women and religion have made some limited use of visual material.<sup>13</sup> In her important study of priesthoods, dedications, and euergetism, Uta Kron has called for the viewing of archaeological and epigraphic data together with and in contrast to what we know from literary sources.<sup>14</sup>

A central contribution of *Portrait of a Priestess* is the recognition of the authority of the archaeological record and its integration into our broader understanding of the women who served Greek cults. In this, I follow Anthony Snodgrass, Gloria Ferrari, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, and others who have emphasized the independent existence of the archaeological record from the textual tradition that has, in so many ways, subordinated it.<sup>15</sup> As the long-neglected visual material has its own history, its own "language," motivations, and influences, we should not expect it to illustrate facts recorded in texts. Instead, it will be seen to reflect aspects of priestly service not preserved elsewhere, significantly broadening our understanding of sacred-office holding. In many cases, it contributes evidence for periods and regions that do not have the benefit of a surviving textual heritage. Beyond this, archaeological and epigraphic evidence sometimes can be seen to contradict the picture given in literary sources. It thus provides an important correction to the distorting effects of the voice, intent, and context of the author, as well as the accidents of survival and the benefits of privilege that have focused our attention on only a fraction of the original corpus of texts.

Two important developments in scholarly thinking have made conditions ripe for a seasoned and comprehensive review of the evidence for Greek priestesses. One is a reassessment of the alleged seclusion of women in classical Athens and the implications of this for our understanding of their public roles. The other is a new questioning of the validity of the category of regulations called "sacred laws," long viewed as distinct and separate from the larger body of legislation within the Greek polis. This opens the way for understanding female cult agents as public-office holders with a much broader civic engagement than was previously recognized. These two paradigm shifts make for a fresh and forward-looking environment in which we can evaluate the evidence, one that allows for a new understanding of the ancient realities of priestly women.

First, let us track developments on the question of the "invisibility" of women. Over the past thirty years, it has become a broadly accepted commonplace that Athenian women held wholly second-class status as silent and submissive figures restricted to the confines of the household where they obediently tended to domestic chores and child rearing.<sup>16</sup> This has largely been

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based on the reading of certain well-known and privileged texts, including those from Xenophon, Plato, and Thucydides, and from certain images of women portrayed in Greek drama.<sup>17</sup> The consensus posture of this view has, to a certain extent, been shaped by the project of feminism and its work in recovering the history of gender oppression.

While there have been some voices of dissent from early on, the chorus of opponents to this oversimplified position has grown steadily over the years, gathering strength from the economic, political, and social/historical arenas.<sup>18</sup> Already in the 1980s, David Cohen stressed the importance of distinguishing between “separation” and “seclusion,” and pointed out serious contradictions between cultural ideals and real-life social practices.<sup>19</sup> Edward Harris has now elucidated the active role of women in the economic sphere, where they exercised informal, but highly effective, methods for influencing decisions about money.<sup>20</sup> Lin Foxall has shown that women had considerable control over property within their households, particularly those women who brought large dowries, and took initiatives in economic matters in which they held a vested interest.<sup>21</sup> Examining archaeological remains from domestic contexts, Lisa Nevett and Marilyn Goldberg have offered a new understanding of gendered space and the regulation of social relations within the Greek household.<sup>22</sup> Josine Blok has shown that women’s public speech in Athens had everything to do with where they were and when they were there.<sup>23</sup>

Jeffrey Henderson and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood have made compelling cases for the presence of women at dramatic performances in Greek theaters, despite a modern reluctance to accept it.<sup>24</sup> Early on in the debate, Cynthia Patterson considered the possibility of citizen identity for women described as *hai Attikai*.<sup>25</sup> Josine Blok has now argued on linguistic grounds that Athenian women of citizen families were, in fact, recognized as citizens. Importantly, she has shown that their leadership roles in matters of cult were, in effect, political offices that directly engaged women with the broader enterprise of *politeia*.<sup>26</sup>

Even those who persist in maintaining an “invisibility” for Athenian women recognize that cult worship offered the single stage on which women could enjoy some measure of prominence. But this religious stage has too often been dismissed as secondary and peripheral to the political and economic nucleus of the polis. This attitude is clearly a product of our own contemporary cultural biases and has nothing to do with the realities of the ancient city. By marginalizing the importance of sacred-office holding, interpreters persist in presenting a pessimistic picture of the possibilities for Athenian women, subjected to utterly passive roles in an entirely secondary status.

This is why new developments in our understanding of so-called sacred laws are so important. Each sanctuary had its own rules and regulations to direct the behavior of worshippers and the functioning of cult. Often, these were inscribed on stone *stelai* set up for all to see. Such regulations were first designated as “sacred laws” more than a hundred years ago; the validity of

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grouping them together as a fixed category of thought has now come under review.<sup>27</sup> Robert Parker has demonstrated that these sacred laws differ in no way from other laws and decrees issued by ancient communities. Most meetings of the citizen Assembly at Athens had split agendas that first took up decisions on religious matters, followed by discussion of secular issues. Religious matters took up a large proportion of the Assembly's time, and the city spent great sums of money in financing cult affairs.<sup>28</sup> Parker clarifies for us that sacred laws are simply laws of the state concerned with religious action, no different except in subject matter from any other laws.<sup>29</sup>

The implications of Parker's insights are profound, particularly for our understanding of female officeholders. If the Greeks did not distinguish between "church" and "state," then the long-standing binary model of "sacred" and "secular" is an erroneous construct that has outlived its usefulness.<sup>30</sup> If things religious were not considered separate from things secular, then the positions of leadership held by priestly women were primary, not peripheral, to the centers of power and influence.

Just as the sacred/secular binary model is under review, so the construct of public/private will be revisited at several points in this study.<sup>31</sup> To be sure, we can recognize cases in which the public/private model provides a valid and useful lens through which the Greek experience can be considered. Still, there are ways of understanding a more complex reality than this construct allows. When it comes to ancient women, it may be not only impossible but also inappropriate to make hard-and-fast distinctions between public and private life.<sup>32</sup> Josine Blok has shown that public space and private space are relative concepts whose meanings are determined by use and, therefore, by time.<sup>33</sup> She tracks the mobility of Athenian women through their city and on their own schedules, in which time dictates their experience of public space. Lin Foxall has long questioned the privileging of power in the public sphere over that of the "less important" power of the domestic realm. She has shown that "use" is just as important as "possession" when it comes to household property. By shifting away from the public/private binary construct and the "subordination theory" way of managing these terms, we can appreciate the more complex realities that characterized ancient life.

A central theme of this book is directly related to the public/private quandary. This is the correlation between domestic ritual, in the care of the house, and public ritual, in the care of the temple. The agency of the women who circulated between these two spaces is paramount in this. Some interpreters view women's work in the ritual sphere as a mere "rehearsal" for the conventionally sanctioned female role of subservience within the Greek household.<sup>34</sup> But a case can be made that things actually worked the other way around. Since the temple was effectively the "house" of the cult statue, it needed to be cared for just like a private domestic space.<sup>35</sup> Much of this care involved the traditional household work of ancient women: cleaning, decorating, weaving, and cooking. Social behavior experienced at home was thus codified in public ritual per-

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formed within the formal setting of the sanctuary.<sup>36</sup> This process of codification will be examined in chapter 2.

Reconstructing the life experience of ancient priestesses from fragmentary texts and images is a daunting task. The job is made more difficult because, by its very nature, Greek priesthood does not lend itself to generalization. Our clearly defined modern Western view of Christian priesthood denies the plurality inherent in the ancient religious offices required by the existence of so many gods. Unlike what exists for our modern institutions, Greek religion had no sacred book that set down a universal system of beliefs and laws; no single, unified church with central authority; and no clergy to instruct in beliefs. Instead, religion was embedded in every aspect of life and was intensely local, highly dependent on regional tradition.<sup>37</sup> The Greeks did not even have a separate word for religion, since there was no area of life that lacked a religious aspect.<sup>38</sup> We are faced with what Angelos Chaniotis has called a “bewildering plurality” of terms given in the sources, not just for the cult associations that he has focused upon, but for virtually all aspects of Greek worship.<sup>39</sup>

I am deliberately adopting a broad and encompassing view to embrace this “bewildering plurality” and the full range of possibilities for women’s agency that it reflects. I shall include examples of girls, maidens, and women who are not, strictly speaking, priestesses, but whose engagement in cult activity sheds light on the broader system within which priestesses functioned. The Greek priestess is best understood within the context of this system, which allows for more flexibility in the identification of sacred women than modern interpreters may like. I include cult agents of varying ages and ranks, not because I shy away from clearly defining my subject, but because I do not find the binary model priestess/nonpriestess a useful one in understanding the contradictions and complexities of the lived experience of Greek women.<sup>40</sup> Priesthood was, in most cases, a temporary status and women could move in and out of a number of priesthoods over the course of a lifetime. Methodologies drawn from anthropology and social archaeology are especially helpful here, as they focus on the ways in which life cycle, age, and gender structure social identities.<sup>41</sup> Much more will be said about the methodological framework of this study at the end of this chapter. But for now, let it be said that I will combine a variety of approaches and examine the widest range of material in order to gain the fullest understanding of the lived experience of Greek priestesses.

### Chronological and Geographical Scope

I shall also adopt a broadly inclusive chronological scope with an aim to present the best-preserved evidence from the widest range of sources. This will include documentation for priesthoods from the Archaic through the Hellenistic periods and even into Roman Imperial times

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when I see useful points for comparison. I understand and accept the risks of this approach and the methodological difficulties that it invites. The long chronological view is by no means meant to create the impression of an unbroken continuity in practice from the Archaic through the Roman period. Quite the contrary, it illustrates that real change happened, often carefully designed as a return to tradition. We have benefited from a number of careful studies with well-defined chronological and regional limits.<sup>42</sup> But the long and broad view enables us to see what is not so apparent in narrowly focused studies. Rarely has the evidence from classical Athens been viewed within the larger context of later material from the wider Hellenized world. Never has the sculptural type of the standing draped female figure been viewed diachronically from its early appearance, for example, on the Archaic Athenian Acropolis through the later examples in Hellenistic and Roman sanctuaries of Asia Minor. This long view allows us to call into question whether the Archaic and classical periods, in fact, represent the golden age of ancient Greek religion. The abundance of cults, and opportunities to serve, that proliferated during the Hellenistic period may suggest otherwise. The profound changes in the organization of private worship, including the wide diffusion of voluntary cult associations, attest to a shift in focus to individuality and personal piety that is unattested in earlier periods.<sup>43</sup>

Fundamentally, this is a book about Greek cities. But I shall adopt a broad scope on the geographical front, again, allowing for useful points of comparison. The intention is to include the highest-ranking evidence from South Italy to Asia Minor, right across the Mediterranean basin. Again, the selection of evidence is not meant to argue for continuity. Rather, it is to balance a view that is inescapably Athenocentric in character, owing to the rich but disproportionately large body of material that survives from classical Athens. This is particularly true for visual culture, for which Athens has contributed such a significant corpus of images of women engaged in cult activity. It is vitally important to consider representations from the so-called periphery of the Greek world in order to balance this view. Limestone statues of key-bearing priestesses from Hellenistic Cyprus, jewelry from what might be the grave of a priestess at Taras in South Italy, and the large corpus of funerary reliefs for priestesses of Hellenistic Asia Minor give a more accurate picture of feminine priesthood across the Greek world. This material serves as a necessary control in evaluating evidence from “center” and “periphery” and checks a tendency to generalize from the more accessible examples.

The uneven nature of the evidence makes for a situation in which we know a great deal about certain priesthoods and very little about others. In chapter 3, we will take an in-depth look at a few priesthoods of prominence for which the surviving source material is great: Athena Polias at Athens, Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, Hera at Argos, and the Pythia at Delphi. In the chapters that follow, we will take a broader view, tracking the experience of priestesses from across the Greek world. In this, we will look at the collective evidence for priestly costume, votive statuary, rit-

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ual duties, perquisites, privileges, authority, and funerary memorials. This dual approach, which combines a focused examination of a few priesthoods from the Greek mainland with a broader overview of disparate material from the greater Mediterranean basin, is meant to make best use of the strengths of the surviving evidence. Specific in-depth investigations of a few detailed cases is methodologically interesting when related to long-term processes. We shall thus combine the microanalysis prescribed by Bourdieu and Adorno with the *longue durée* of Braudel, in an effort to examine the ways in which the general can be found to lie hidden in the particular.<sup>44</sup>

### *Language and Definitions*

A primary obstacle to our understanding of ancient priesthood is the problem of language, particularly that of finding adequate English equivalents for ancient Greek terms. The Greek words that we generally translate as “priest” and “priestess” are based on the root *hieros*, which means “holy.” *Hiereus* in the masculine and *hiereia* in the feminine are literally translated “those who are in charge of” or “those who take care of the holy things.” These “holy things” can include ritual objects, sacred rites and liturgies, and even religious festivals as a whole. Attested as early as Linear B tablets of the late Bronze Age, the words *hiereia* (written in Linear B as “i-je-re-ja”), and *hiereus* (i-je-re-jo), are found in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and in Greek texts right through the Roman period. These words meant different things in different regions for different cults over more than a millennium. In contrast, our word *priest* derives from a contraction of *presbyter*, from the Greek *presbuteros*, meaning “elder.” In view of the broad range of responsibilities encompassed by the Greek titles *hiereus* and *hiereia*, the English translations “priest” and “priestess” are wholly inadequate.<sup>45</sup>

Following the practice of women being ordained as ministers in certain Christian churches over the past quarter century, some contemporary writers choose to drop the gender-specific suffix *-ess* when referring to Greek priestesses and call both male and female sacred servants *priests*. This can lead to real confusion.<sup>46</sup> Since priests usually served the cults of male divinities, and priestesses the cults of female divinities, use of the term *priest* for both genders obscures the highly interesting cases in which divinities were served by officials of the opposite sex. I shall maintain the use of the word *priestess*, as it more closely reflects the Greek use of feminine endings and because gender differentiation had real meaning in the ancient society in which these women functioned.

Modern Western theories of priesthood generally define a priest as one who mediates between gods and human beings. But in ancient Greece, all individuals had direct access to their gods. Private people could offer prayers, requests, thanks, and gifts and even perform sacrifice directly to divinities without the intervention of a priest.<sup>47</sup> The historian Herodotos (1.132), writing as an outsider looking at Persian religious practices, found it strange that Persians required the



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presence of a priest (*magus*) for every sacrifice. This is not to say, however, that sacrifices offered by priests and priestesses may not have had a special status of their own.

Cult hierarchy included a host of religious officials, some of whom had specific duties and others who assumed more general responsibilities. In setting out his “ideal state,” Plato (*Laws* 6.75) saw the need for temple attendants (*neokoroi*) as well as priests and priestesses. Aristotle (*Politics* 6.11) distinguished sacred officials who were members of the priesthood from those who were not. The latter group included *hieropoioi*, the “doers of holy things”; *naophylakes*, or “temple guardians”; and *tamiai*, or “stewards of the sacred funds.” *Hieropoioi* have been further distinguished from priests and priestesses in terms of their differing relationship to god and state. *Hieropoioi* represented the state in religious affairs, while priests and priestesses acted as servants of the gods.<sup>48</sup>

Titles of cult agents who looked after sanctuaries were often expropriated from household care.<sup>49</sup> This can be observed in our very earliest documentation of sacred offices preserved in the Linear B tablets from Pylos. Here we have thirty women’s occupations listed among the workers in service of the goddess.<sup>50</sup> We hear of the wool carders, “pe-ki-ti-ra” (*pektriai*); spinners, “a-ra-ka-te-ja” (*alakateiai*); and weavers, “i-te-ja-a” (*histeiai*). We also have grain grinders or flour makers, “me-re-ti-ri-ja” (*meletriai*), and baking women or grain pourers, “si-to-ko-wo” (*sitokhowoi*). There are also sanctuary sweepers, “ka-ru-ti-je-ja-o,” and key bearers, “ka-wa-ri-po-ro.” Many of these occupations can be found mirrored in cult titles from the historical period, including key bearers (*kleidouchoi*), worker-weavers (*ergastinai*), and grain grinders (*aletrides*). This is not to argue for continuity in religious practice from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age, but merely to suggest that, over time, much of the activity taking place in and around the sacred precinct was similar to that of household care. Cleaning, weaving, washing, dressing, decorating, grinding, cooking, and feeding can all be seen as the work of women in both house and sanctuary across the ages. It is this powerful analogy between house and temple that provides a critical foundation for female agency in Greek religion.

One of the most characteristic aspects of cult titles is that they reflect the ritual action performed by the attendant. From the sixth century onward, the prefix *hiero-*, or “holy,” could be joined to a noun describing a specific function to form a compound title. We find that *hieragogoi* led sacrifice, *hierophoroi* carried sacrifice, *hierarchai* presided over sacred rites, *hieronostoi* searched for holy things, *hierakomoi* took charge of temples, *hieronomoi* were temple managers, *hieroparektes* attended priests, and *hieroskopoi* observed sacrifices and read omens. Some titles reflect specific functions: *hierogrammateis* (sacred scribes), *hierophylakes* (sacred guards), *hierotamiai* (sacred money collectors), and *hieropsaltai* (sacred harpists or singers). Cults could thus create whatever office suited local needs simply by fixing the word *holy* to the action that the agent performed. Emily Kearns has demonstrated how the “language of the sacred” reflects the ways in which Greeks

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thought about their relations with their gods and gives insight into a two-way process through which words and connotations can direct modes of thought.<sup>51</sup> The sacred language does not merely reflect an objective reality of how things are, but reveals the concepts behind the words and the experience of the society that created and used them.<sup>52</sup>

Religious titles also made use of the *-phoros* ending, combining it with the name of the implement that the sacred servant carried within the ritual. *Kanephoroi* carried the *kana* (baskets), *arrephoroi* brought the *arreta* (secret things), *hydrophoroi* carried the water, and *anthesphoroi* brought flowers. Other titles focus on the action of the servant in tending the cult statue. *Loutrides* washed the statue, while *kosmeteriai* decorated it. The author Harpokration, quoting the fourth-century orator Lykourgos, records that the priestess of Athena Polias at Athens was attended by two helpers called *kosmo* and *trapezophoros*.<sup>53</sup> These words may reflect the roles of the “decorator” and the “table carrier” in performing specific duties within Athena’s rites.

The ease with which titles could be invented to suit local needs demonstrates the extraordinary flexibility of Greek religious offices. Some titles are site specific, incorporating the name of the divinity or the location of the shrine: *Deliades* (handmaidens of Apollo on Delos), *Dionysiades* (maidens who ran a race for Dionysos at Sparta), *Leukippides* (virgin priestesses of the daughters of Leukippos at Sparta), and *Lykiades* (thirty young women who carried water to Lykeion at Sparta).<sup>54</sup> For other cults, groups of girls and women went by names descriptive of the local ritual: *arktoi* (bears of Artemis at Brauron), *melissai* (bees of Demeter at Delphi, Eleusis, and elsewhere), *poloi* (foals of the Leukippides at Sparta).<sup>55</sup>

It has been estimated that there were some two thousand cults operating in Attica during the classical period. With roughly 170 festival days a year in its sacred calendar, Athens hosted a religious hierarchy that was a very crowded arena.<sup>56</sup> The organization and performance of cult activities was a widely shared experience within the citizen body, and a good part of one’s life would have been spent preparing for and participating in religious festivals. As cult practice was locally ordained, the number and names used for sacred-service titles across the Greek world were vast and varied. A broad view is, therefore, essential to our full understanding of the dynamics of time and place in shaping ritual practice.

## Source Material

### *Literary Evidence*

Literary texts are particularly helpful in reconstructing the religious sentiments behind the practice of service of the gods. This is because they offer longer narratives than do other sources. People served gods because they expected something from them in return. Gods also wanted something from mortals, and usually, this was honor.<sup>57</sup> Women were particularly conscientious in their

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attention to ritual practice. For priestesses, failure to observe cult requirements represented not just a lapse in duty but a serious crime. It could arouse the wrath of the divinity and cause disorder in the harmonious functioning of the community. It is from Greek literature that we learn much of this in lively accounts of priestly women, their exploits, and experiences.

Homer gives us our first image of a Greek priestess in *Iliad* book 6 (297–310) where the women of Troy go to the priestess Theano to elicit Athena's support against the invading Greeks. Theano opens the doors of Athena's temple, places a beautifully woven robe on the knees of the cult statue, and leads the women in a supplication ritual asking for the death of Diomedes. She then prepares to offer twelve perfect cows in sacrifice to the goddess. Theano's actions can be matched in later historical sources that attest to the role of the priestess as key bearer of the temple, caretaker of the cult statue, leader of prayers, and initiator of sacrifice.

Theano comes to represent the archetype for priestly women. Indeed, her name, based on the very word for "goddess," *thea*, is attested for priestesses in both literary and historical sources. Plutarch tells of a priestess of Demeter and Kore named Theano who famously refused to curse Alkibiades during his trial for profanation of the Mysteries in 415 B.C. (*Alkibiades* 22.5).<sup>58</sup> We hear of a mythical priestess at Argos named Theano, whose dutiful sons Kleobis and Biton pulled her in a cart to Hera's temple on the festival day.<sup>59</sup> The mother of the Spartan king Pausanias was named Theano and served as priestess of Athena Chalkioikos (*Polyinos* 8.51). During the Roman period, we hear of a little girl named Theano who served in the special cult role of *ar-rephoros* at Athens.<sup>60</sup> Tradition may have led her family to presume that she would hold religious office one day and the girl may have been named with this in mind.<sup>61</sup>

Greek tragedy presents compelling images of sacred women, but it is not always easy to tell if they reflect the realities of historical priesthood.<sup>62</sup> Aeschylus wrote a tragedy titled *Hiereiai* (*The Priestesses*), for which only a few fragments survive.<sup>63</sup> One can only wonder what an impact this production may have had on the visual arts, particularly on costuming and stage properties used to communicate priestly status. Aeschylus opens his *Eumenides* (lines 1–33) with the Pythia speaking about her role as priestess of Apollo's temple. Dramatic characterizations owe much to the special interests of individual authors. Euripides shows a lively interest in priesthood and focuses on the sacral aspects of his characters Iphigeneia (*Iphigeneia at Tauris*), Cassandra (*The Trojan Women*), and Theonoe (*Helen*).<sup>64</sup> The fragments of Euripides' *Captive Melanippe* will be considered at the opening of chapter 6. In them, he makes clear that it is women who hold the central role in things religious. Euripides is preoccupied with etiological and topographical issues and is a valuable resource for our understanding of foundation myths and the rituals that commemorated them.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps the most celebrated female character in all of Greek literature is Aristophanes' Lysistrata. Fifty years ago, David Lewis thoughtfully suggested that her character was drawn

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from the model of a historical priestess named Lysimache.<sup>66</sup> This Lysimache served as priestess of Athena Polias on the Athenian Acropolis for sixty-four years, spanning the late fifth and early fourth centuries. The association of the historical Lysimache with the heroine of Aristophanes' comedy has significant implications for our understanding of name recognition for Greek priestesses, a topic that will be examined in chapter 3. Our corpus of priestly personalities in Greek comedy has recently been augmented by the discovery of a new papyrus preserving the opening scene of Menander's *Leukadia*.<sup>67</sup> This preserves a dialogue between a girl coming to fetch water and the *zakoros* who looks after the temple of Apollo on Cape Leukas.<sup>68</sup>

In historical sources, priestly women are present but not described in great detail. Herodotos's *Histories* is particularly valuable as it includes some sixty-two references to priestesses, roughly half of which concern the Pythia at Delphi.<sup>69</sup> Since Herodotos's accounts were gathered largely from oral sources and assembled from all across the Mediterranean world, some scholars have seen them as relatively free from the prejudices of any one particular state or literary convention.<sup>70</sup> For this reason, Herodotos has been viewed as a particularly valuable source for local traditions.

Herodotos's historical successors are less obliging. Thucydides never mentions priestesses except when he dates the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides 2.2.1) to the forty-eighth year of the priesthood of Chrysis at Argos. In this, he employs the historical chronology structured by Hellanikos upon the consecutive priesthoods of Hera at Argos.<sup>71</sup> Plato is more forthcoming and discusses priests and priestesses in the functioning of his "ideal state" (*Laws* 6.759a–c). The fourth-century orator Lykourgos had special insight into priestly offices, having served as priest of Poseidon-Erechtheus at Athens. He was a member of the Eteoboutad clan that controlled the hereditary priesthoods of Poseidon-Erechtheus and Athena Polias. Surely, Lykourgos relied on his firsthand experience when writing his treatise *On the Priestesses* (frag. B 5). Unfortunately, this speech does not survive and is mentioned only in the most general way by antiquarian critics. Both Demosthenes and Plutarch, who served as priest of Apollo at Delphi for some thirty years, provide valuable anecdotal references to priestesses. Among our most informative sources is the second-century-A.D. traveler Pausanias, who gives us a wealth of information on the activities of priestesses at sanctuaries throughout Greece. From him we learn a great deal about local rituals and the role that priestly women played in them.

### *Epigraphic Evidence*

Inscriptions are our richest source of information on ancient priesthoods, providing us with narrowly focused views into the realities of cult organization. How could we have imagined a world in which priesthoods were bought and sold like commodities, bid for at auction, and bequeathed to children? Certainly not from the sketches of Homer's Theano, Aeschylus's Pythia, or Euripi-

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des' Iphigeneia at Tauris. Primed with the expectation of seeing women in wholly subordinate positions, readers may be surprised to find inscriptions attesting to the financial compensation of women for their service, the erection of portrait statues in their honor, and their agency in enforcing sanctuary laws. We may never have suspected the broad network of women who passed jealously guarded priesthoods through their family lines generation upon generation, or the benefactions that they proudly lavished on the sanctuaries they served.

Epigraphic evidence thus gives insight into realities unattested in literary texts and focuses on the micrology of the lived experience. It reminds us of the dangers of privileging texts written largely by, for, and about men living in and around Athens during just a few hundred years' time. Above all, inscriptions provide us with the names of historical women who actually held office, allowing us to pursue important prosopographical work. This enables us to reconstruct the roles of inheritance, pedigree, and preparation in the securing and transferring of priesthoods through family lines.

Much work remains to be done in the collection of epigraphic documentation for priestesses across the Greek world. The evidence is uneven, dependent on accidents of survival and the varying epigraphic habits of local institutions. We have relied heavily on a few general collections, as well as on some narrowly focused studies of individual inscriptions.<sup>72</sup> It is not the ambition of this book to provide a corpus of all epigraphic evidence for feminine priesthoods, but rather to present a sampling that helps us make the widest range of points.

Although the late Bronze Age is well outside the parameters of this study, it should be noted that the first attestation of a Greek priestess is found in Linear B texts dating back to the fourteenth century B.C. A tablet from the Mycenaean palace at Pylos preserves for us the name of E-ri-ta, who served as priestess at the local sanctuary. Although the meaning of the text is not entirely clear, it seems that E-ri-ta was a woman in charge of considerable lands and property, that she had legal standing within her community, and that she was assisted in her work by sacred servants.<sup>73</sup> We are certainly not arguing for continuity here, but it must be said that what little we know of E-ri-ta does seem to prefigure the agency of priestesses in the historical period.

### *Archaeological Evidence*

The material culture gathered in this study comes from different sources, technologies, and traditions, reflecting a variety of intentions and serving very different functions. Each category of object has its own distinct language that must be read independently from other source material. Reading these objects and images, internally as a group and externally with regard to local myth, cult, and ritual, enables us to approach an "archaeology of cult" within the broader context of Greek cultural history.<sup>74</sup> Ivory implements, buried deep in foundation deposits at Ephesos, were the very tools used by cult agents in their rituals. In a sense, these instruments can be understood

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to be extensions of the sacred servants themselves. For this reason, their ornamentation often mirrors the image of the cult attendant, incorporating her face, hand, or whole body into the decorative program (see figs. 5.1, 5.3). The choice of ivory may reflect a communality with sacred servant as well. As we shall see in chapter 5, ivory is a material long associated with the female gender, owing to the quality of its white color and smooth texture. Portrait statues of priestesses erected before and within temples functioned quite differently (see figs. 5.12–14, 5.22–24, 5.26–29; pls. 16–18). These were highly visible, permanent testaments to the prestige of local priestesses across generations of service. The statues became part of the sacred landscape, witnesses to the intimacy of goddess and priestess who shared the ritual space. Funerary markers similarly ensured that priestesses would be remembered always for their agency and give us rare, specific records of the “occupation” that these women undertook in life (see figs. 8.1–2, 8.4–23; pls. 20–25). While inscribed names identify historical women on votive and funerary sculptures, images on cult utensils and in vase painting may be better placed in a mythical past where they depict characters whose actions inspired the rituals observed in historical times.

Iconographic studies of gods and goddesses or heroes and heroines generally rely on attributes, costumes, poses, and narrative contexts to establish identity. But how are we to distinguish images of priestesses from among the many representations of women who moved in and out of priestly status over the course of a lifetime? Everyday life in Greece was full of ritual. Nuptial preparations, funerals, the tending of a loved one’s grave, and the departure of a soldier for war—all engaged women in ritual acts that duplicated those performed by sacred officials in public sanctuary settings. As practitioners of household worship and the host of rituals occasioned by domestic life, Greek women assumed the role of “priestess” within their own families. They trained their daughters to perform these rites along with other household duties expected of a good wife and mother. This is why it is so difficult to be certain about identifications of priestly women in the visual repertory, and why we must live with more ambiguity than we may like.

One attribute serves as the preeminent iconographic signifier of priestly status: the temple key. From the late Archaic period on, sculpture and vase paintings show women carrying large, rodlike keys, signifying the function of the *kleidouchos* in communicating priestly status.<sup>75</sup> So powerful is this attribute that, on its own, it can confirm sacral identity for women who appear otherwise unremarkable. The placing of a key in the hand of a young woman, shown on a skyphos in London, endows the generic maiden with priestly status (fig 1.1).<sup>76</sup> It is because of the image of a young man on the reverse side of the vase that the girl has been identified as Iphigeneia, shown in tandem with her brother Orestes in her role as priestess of Artemis at Tauris.

A full repertory of ritual paraphernalia can be manipulated in vase painting to communicate cult activity: libation bowls, wine jugs, baskets, offering trays, lustral branches, and ribbons. Each of these figural elements, what Claude Bérard has called “minimal syntagmata,”

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*Fig. 1.1*

Apulian skyphos, the Sydney Painter. London, British Museum F 127. Photo © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

and Gloria Ferrari has termed “sign-components,” can be combined to yield complex configurations through which signification takes place.<sup>77</sup> The ways in which these signs are juxtaposed, combined, and even omitted can be read like a language that transmits the essential acts of procession, libation, sacrifice, and feasting. Setting elements, such as columns, temple facades, altars, lustral basins, and incense burners, can be further employed to communicate the context in which the action takes place: city sanctuary, rural shrine, or household.

A woman depicted on a cup in Toledo, Ohio, neatly illustrates the problems of signification that confront us (fig 1.2).<sup>78</sup> She stands before an altar, manipulating a number of ritual implements, including a sacrificial basket and a large oinochoe from which she pours a libation. Behind her, an incense burner further establishes the sanctuary setting. The combination of sign-components would appear to convey her special agency within the cult action. Can we call her a priestess? We have recognized the maiden on the London skyphos (see fig. 1.1) as a priestess, solely through the presence of a temple key and despite the fact that there are no other ritual indicators to support this identification. In contrast, the woman on the Toledo cup is surrounded by a host

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*Fig. 1.2*  
Attic red-figure cup, Makron. Toledo Museum of Art 1972.55. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edmund Drummond Libbey.

of sacred signifiers, yet, for modern interpreters, she is of uncertain status, because of the absence of the key. The challenge of this study lies in setting parameters within which we can read the signifiers and interpret their meanings. We must guard against narrowing the criteria by which we associate attributes with identity, and allow for some flexibility in our readings. Narrative intent, function of the image, and function of the object that carries the image are but a few of the variables at play in the selection of signs for the communication of meaning.<sup>79</sup> Beyond this, it is likely that there are codes that we simply do not recognize. In addition to searching for patterns among schemata known to us, we must be open to signifiers that have gone previously unrecognized.

## Methodological Framework

The diversity of the source material requires a diversity of strategies for coming to grips with it. Therefore, I shall draw upon a number of approaches and modes of analysis to examine multiple



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aspects of the problems presented. I articulated this multimethodological approach in 1993 in a study focused on narrative intent in Attic vase painting.<sup>80</sup> In this I was, and continue to be, influenced by the contributions of Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, who has called for the use of “many different approaches and methods as tools . . . to diminish the risk of distortion and illuminate as many aspects as possible.”<sup>81</sup> Josine Blok has similarly emphasized the importance of a “pluriformity in methodology” for dealing with the subject of ancient Greek women, as this increases the tensions between traditional and new analytical approaches, yielding optimal results.<sup>82</sup>

The breadth of Sourvinou-Inwood’s work, which touches on so many issues of concern to this book—gender, life cycles, ritual, tragedy, visual culture, and theory—has provided a welcome road map for navigating the challenges of disparate sources.<sup>83</sup> Our work is inescapably one of reconstruction, the task of shaping a view into what is fundamentally an alien culture. In meeting this challenge, Sourvinou-Inwood has advised independent lines of inquiry for the discreet bodies of evidence—literary, epigraphic, and visual.<sup>84</sup> She urges neutrality in the examination process in order to avoid prejudices caused by the contamination of one line of inquiry by another. Sourvinou-Inwood’s second major methodological guideline is one that encourages the establishment of parameters within which the source material is considered, eliminating, as much as is possible, biases that result from viewing ancient evidence through culturally determined filters.<sup>85</sup> Of course, the process of filtering is complex, and one can never fully escape the perspectives embedded in one’s own experience. Nonetheless, the effort to remove filters repays itself and makes us conscious of the forces that shape our questions and, thus, our answers. Before we continue, let us confront some of the most common culturally determined biases that bedevil our view of the Greek priestess and prevent us from seeing her through “ancient eyes.”

### *Romanizing and Christianizing Assumptions*

One of the most frustrating aspects of the study of religion is that those closely bound by a shared system of beliefs rarely have cause to write about them in a comprehensive manner. It is from outsiders looking in, as with missionaries and ethnographers, that we get detailed commentaries on religious practice.<sup>86</sup> For Greek religion, with its highly localized character, the situation is even more impenetrable. In the absence of sources that could put the evidence within a broader context, it is easy to rely on that which is familiar and allow Romanizing and Christianizing assumptions to slip in.<sup>87</sup> Our understanding of feminine priesthoods is especially undermined, as, until relatively recently, most religious institutions excluded the possibility of women priests altogether. The first critical step in approaching ancient offices is the elimination of all comparisons with the priests and nuns of the Christian tradition.

Contrary to Christianizing presuppositions, very few priesthoods were held for life. Most cults required women to serve a much shorter period, a year or even a single festival cycle.

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Priesthoods with a prerequisite of virginity were held for a short time, after which maidens were free to marry. Priesthoods requiring perpetual celibacy were rare and usually held by older women, who had raised their families, been widowed, and finished with their days of sexual activity. Lifelong priesthoods were typically held by married women leading “normal” lives, complete with husband and children. Greek religious offices were enormously practical, enabling women to serve at each stage in life without sacrificing the full experience of marriage and motherhood.

Unlike the lifelong celibacy practiced by clergy in Roman Catholicism and some other contemporary religions, virginity was viewed as a temporary state for ancient Greek priestesses. Indeed, the Greeks defined virgin (*parthenos*) status quite differently from how we do today. For them, it was the condition of a maiden who had passed through puberty but was not yet married. Emphasis was not focused on a state of intactness, which the modern definition requires.<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, the example of the Vestal Virgins of Rome has sometimes distorted our view. The Vestals were appointed as girls aged six to ten years old who were committed to virginity, in our modern sense of intactness, for a period of thirty years.<sup>89</sup> At the end of their tenure, they were free to marry, though most elected to stay on as virgins, at this point having forgone most of their child-bearing years. The potency of their state of chastity, the excessive suspicion of any compromise visited upon their purity, and the appalling gravity of punishment by live burial for Vestals who transgressed, make for an extreme case that stands outside the norms of anything known in the Greek world.<sup>90</sup>

A second area of belief that has distorted our view is the anomalous position of the virgin in early Christianity. She was set apart from the rest of society, described as a “sacred vessel dedicated to the Lord,” a “human votive offering,” and “a royal palace hall.”<sup>91</sup> The veneration of the virgin, influenced by Marian devotion, has no parallel whatsoever in the Greek experience, where virginity represented neither a state of perfection nor a guarantee of salvation.<sup>92</sup> On the contrary, Greeks regarded *parthenos* status as a necessary stage through which girls had to pass on their way to full integration into society as wives and mothers. Unlike the Christian virgin, who was subject to “no man but God alone,” the Greek virgin priestess remained very much under the control of her male guardian, or *kyrios*, be it her father, uncle, or some other male relative. Greek women were represented by male guardians in all legal and financial affairs. Indeed, their legal and social identities were utterly embedded in familial connections with male members of the *oikos* to which they belonged.<sup>93</sup> Priesthood provided no avenue to social or financial independence from male kin, and virgin priestesses were neither “set apart” and independent, nor venerated as blessed. Focus on virginity not only obscures the full range of possibilities for feminine sacred service, it takes our eyes off married, widowed, and elderly priestesses who were probably much more widespread within the totality of Greek cult.

A third area of popular preoccupation merits only the briefest mention. This is the

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“myth” of Greek priestesses in the service of sacred prostitution, for which there is no firm evidence.<sup>94</sup> Three cities for which this practice is often alleged—Corinth, Ephesos, and Paphos—were all port towns to which Christianity, and Saint Paul, came very early on.<sup>95</sup> Port cities and their transient populations have characteristic social dynamics in which sailors and prostitutes often figure. But to link what was fundamentally a social and urban phenomenon with local cult practice is a stretch, and most likely the product of negative Christian attitudes toward traditional religious establishments.

### *“Presentist” Assumptions*

The Greek priestess presents something of a dilemma, one that is often misunderstood by those who look to ancient models to find support for contemporary views. Any leap from Greek female priesthood to contemporary claims regarding ancient matriarchy or “Goddess cult” is off the mark and not founded upon hard evidence.<sup>96</sup> Other misconceptions are more subtle and, understandably, emerge from the often-contradictory evidence. It is profoundly true that priesthood offered women a unique opportunity for public life, one in which they played leadership roles equal to those of their male counterparts. But this opportunity is too often described as a vehicle for a temporary “escape” from the private sphere of the household. “To choose to become a priestess meant a choice for becoming extraordinary,” writes one scholar, though how much choice a woman had in the acquisition of priesthood remains doubtful.<sup>97</sup> Her family’s social status and financial resources were the determining factors in qualifying her for sacred office. She is more likely to have followed a family tradition of priestly service rather than to have schemed for an escape from household life. The equation of priesthood with independence suffers from the distorting effects of modern feminist hindsight.

This “escape” is regularly and wrongly described as one into a marginal position, that of the religious sphere, a place peripheral to the political and economic center of the polis.<sup>98</sup> One common view holds that the dominant patriarchal ideology manipulated a supposed female aptitude for making contact with things dirty, dark, and polluted by assigning to women ritual presidency over transitional experiences, such as mourning and death. This is, by extension, seen as a justification for women’s marginalized position within society at large.<sup>99</sup> To be sure, women did oversee the tending of corpses and funerary rites. But while corpses were certainly considered polluting, women themselves were not at all regarded as dirty. The Greek attitude stands in contrast to how women were viewed within some Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>100</sup> A second common theme is one in which priesthood is understood as part of a strategy by which women, disenfranchised from the social and political life of their communities, could “establish indirect claims to status and attention.”<sup>101</sup> We are told that ritual enabled women to vent their aggression and frustration and to negotiate imbalances inherent in their subordinate positions. Ritual con-

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firmed the constraints on women's lives and at the same time provided a release from them, a place where they could "develop a position of dissidence."<sup>102</sup> The tone of these arguments seems to be colored by late twentieth-century political sensibilities. A third approach sees ritual as a respite for the drudgery of women's daily routine, a reward for good behavior in the home.<sup>103</sup> Religious service has been described as one of the few "forms of entertainment open" to women.<sup>104</sup> While there may be some truth in each of these positions, when taken together they leave us with a rather depressing, and not wholly accurate, view of the prospects for female cult agency. They seem to result from a theory of gender oppression that leaves little room for balancing or mitigating factors. The cumulative force of these arguments strips feminine sacred service of a measure of its dignity and discounts the potency of female agency within the totality of Greek cult and culture.

Religious festivals provided women and girls with important opportunities for public exposure and interaction, including the chance to see and be seen by potential candidates for marriage. A position of power in the organization of festivals allowed for increased opportunities to advance family interests. While festival participation has been viewed as an opportunity to satisfy the "male gaze," and surely there was some of this at work, we can recognize a far more complex reality than this.<sup>105</sup> Advancing family interests benefited women as well as men, and the priestesses presented in this study had a real stake in making the system work. One can, of course, take the position that priestly women were simply manipulated by a system that subjected them to the requirements of a male-dominated society. But one can also consider the force of the material evidence brought forward in this book and recognize a world in which women realized genuine accomplishment through their agency within the system. Greek priesthood was a religious, social, political, and economic business and women were indispensable in making this business a success.

### *Reading the Language of Images*

The reading of images as a symbolic system or "language," based on strategies drawn from semiotic theory, has enjoyed real staying power in the study of the visual culture of ancient Greece. Vase painting is ideally suited to this mode of analysis, as it comprises a large body of homogeneous material through which sign-components can be traced and meaning recovered.<sup>106</sup> Scholars at the University of Lausanne and the Centre Louis Gernet in Paris have defined and developed this system from the early 1980s, working in research groups and drawing heavily upon anthropological theory in the analysis of myth and ritual.<sup>107</sup> I shall employ strategies derived from methods developed by the French school, especially in my reading of images from vase painting in chapters 4 and 6.

Among the most significant developments of this approach is a new understanding of the function of ancient images as *mnemata*, or "memorials," for what once was, that is, the leg-

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endary days of the distant past.<sup>108</sup> Ferrari has articulated the difficulty in recognizing just how much ancient images reflect reality and how much they describe a world imagined by the artist. She has questioned the traditional identification of “genre” and “daily life” scenes, demonstrating that many of these, in fact, show a mythical or utopian past.<sup>109</sup> Conditioned as we are today by the documentary role of images in capturing the present, we must adjust our way of seeing in order to view them as windows onto the past. My approach will be one that first looks for meaning within a mythological context before considering alternatives. It must be said, of course, that historical experience greatly influenced the ways in which myths were represented. There is, indeed, a powerful dynamic between myth and *realia* in the image-creation process.

### *Gender, Agency, and Identity*

One goal of this study is to collect and evaluate evidence for ancient women so that they can be reinstated into a long-term cultural history. This effort finds its roots in what some have called “second wave” feminism, of the 1970s and 1980s, when women’s studies, gender studies, and other newly established fields sought out long-neglected source material.<sup>110</sup> In classical studies, it was philologists, including Mary Lefkowitz, Maureen Fant, Ross Kraemer, and others, who led the way in compiling comprehensive sourcebooks, and Sarah Pomeroy who first put this material into a historical framework.<sup>111</sup> Certain scholars then pushed the boundaries of traditional classical studies, taking up issues of the family, otherness, sexuality, death, time, the household, ownership, and other topics.<sup>112</sup>

We can recognize something of a divide between classicists and classical archaeologists at this point, as archaeologists did not engage with developments in the study of gender until somewhat later on. To be sure, the task of gathering archaeological evidence is slower, since the material culture is so widespread, both geographically and in terms of publication, requiring searches through excavation reports, databases, museum storerooms, and other locations.<sup>113</sup> But the crux of the problem lies with a basic restructuring of the questions asked of the data, approaching an “archaeology of gender.”<sup>114</sup> Most archaeological material was not excavated with these new lines of inquiry in mind and requires restudy, from first field reports on. New World and prehistoric archaeologists have been quicker to adopt innovative theoretical frameworks than have classical archaeologists, and many of the strategies that I employ in this book have been borrowed from the former’s groundbreaking work.<sup>115</sup>

Lynn Meskell has laid out a useful framework for the phases of feminist analysis that have been experienced within the discipline of archaeology.<sup>116</sup> Separating contemporary feminism from the suffragist movement (1860–1930), Meskell starts with what she calls “first wave” feminism of the 1960s, which focused on women’s political, social, and economic liberation from and equality with men. A second wave developed in its wake during the 1970s, bringing new emphasis on

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the “inherent” difference between men and women and the special bond between women and Nature.<sup>117</sup> The second wave, which continues to this day, tends to view women as a homogeneous, nomothetic group. Meskell defines a third-wave deconstructive feminism, arising in the 1980s and continuing to the present, that has focused its energies on difference, plurality, ambiguity, embodiment, the transitory, and the disruptive.<sup>118</sup>

The approach of this book is influenced by the third wave, insofar as it concentrates on the complexity of the lived experience and the difference, contradiction, and individuality attested in the ancient record. I shall look at the broad structures of organization within the Greek polis, as well as the micrology of lived relations within this system. Central to this work is consideration of the circulation of power within the bureaucracies of cult, the polis, and the “culture industry,” as defined by Adorno.<sup>119</sup> Taking his cue, I shall endeavor to move beyond binary constructs and consider a multiplicity of factors, particularly in approaching the long-standing commonplace of visible/invisible for male/female within Greek culture.<sup>120</sup> Adorno’s model of “constellation,” as appropriated from Benjamin, serves as a guiding framework within which to understand the relationships of the particular to the universal, of the “actor” to the structure.<sup>121</sup> Following Bourdieu, I shall consider the ways in which priestesses used social, cultural, and symbolic capital to propel their agency and to work as effective players within the micropolitics of the Greek city.<sup>122</sup>

It must be said that we stand at an unsettled moment at which there is little consensus as to which phases of which feminisms will survive poststructuralist transformation and critique. The strategies of traditional feminism have been found to lead in directions that are at odds with theoretical movements that have followed in its wake. Judith Butler’s questioning of “woman” as a fixed category, in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, of 1990, signaled a fork in the road. She exposed the ways in which traditional feminist constructs decontextualize individuals from their historical, political, and cultural settings and identities.<sup>123</sup> The intervening fifteen years have witnessed a further fracturing of the project into many different feminisms and the rise of theoretical movements focused on difference, multiplicity, performance, and alterity.<sup>124</sup> Writing from the perspective of contemporary human rights law, Janet Halley has now made a case for “taking a break from feminism.”<sup>125</sup>

A related methodological force that has contributed to this study is agency theory, developed in the 1990s and still in its early stages as applied to archaeology.<sup>126</sup> While the definition of what is meant by *social agent* varies and, in many cases, still needs to be worked out, this approach is mapping new directions for our understanding of the ancient past.<sup>127</sup> Irene Winter has demonstrated, for example, that the agent/patient model is far better suited to understanding relationships recorded through the lens of Sumerian grammar than is the subject/object construct.<sup>128</sup>

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So, too, in art history, the precept of female agency is directing new lines of inquiry into the culturally manipulated circulation of power and ways in which women have claimed it as artists, viewers, patrons, and shapers of aesthetic sensibilities.<sup>129</sup> It was the possibility of female agency, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard tell us, that inflicted the first casualty in poststructuralist gender studies.<sup>130</sup> The idea of a history “consisting of monolithic patriarchal control over women as passive victims, interrupted by sporadic feminist interventions,” has been discredited.<sup>131</sup> It must be said, however, that agency theory is not without troubles of its own. Joan Gero has argued against its adoption into feminist dialogue because of its inherent masculinist bias, which implicitly links social action to male agency. Her “Troubled Travels in Agency and Feminism” may mark one more fork in a road that has now spawned a whole network of side streets and deviations.<sup>132</sup>

How does agency theory effect this study? Let us consider the ways in which language colors our understanding of women engaged in cult activity. The designation *sacred servants* conveys an image of dedicated helpers, caretakers of rites and sanctuaries. When we call these same women *cult agents*, a very different image comes to mind, that of active players within the administration of a bureaucracy, invested with power to act and to effect results. This represents not merely a shift in vocabulary but a change in the thinking behind the words and the ways in which we can understand ancient realities. I will use both these designations, in recognition of the fact that there is agency in service and service in agency. The complexity of the lived experience of ancient women leaves room for both truths.

As Henk Versnel has emphasized, ancient women were not an undifferentiated group.<sup>133</sup> The women considered in this book were individuals of privilege, distinguished from others by their class, economic status, or both. Ancient sources tend to be more abundant for the top strata of society than for elsewhere and, in the case of Greek priesthoods, pedigree, wealth, or both were basic requirements for attaining office.<sup>134</sup> Our priestesses may have had more in common with men of the same social and economic standing than they had with women from the lower ranks. We must bear this in mind as we consider the forces that defined their identities and propelled their agency.

These forces can be found in their social, cultural, and symbolic capital, as defined by Bourdieu.<sup>135</sup> Priestly women had significant resources based on group membership, relationships, and networks of influence and support. Kinship, including *genos*, and family unit, as well as collective groupings, including choruses and ritual age-bands, all equipped Greek women with social capital that served them well. Knowledge of ritual practice, local myths, and ancestral traditions invested priestly women with a cultural capital that made them invaluable to their communities. Finally, the accumulated prestige of priestesses, in leading public processions, overseeing polis festivals, sitting in reserved seats at the theater, and having their images erected in sanctuaries, guaranteed them a symbolic capital that must not be underestimated in a world in

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which status carried long-lasting power. As Bourdieu recognized, it is economic capital that lies at the root of all these other forms of capital. Within the ancient *habitus*, past experience, tradition, and habit joined together with the forces of pedigree and wealth to create the opportunities and constraints that produced Greek priestesses as we know them.<sup>136</sup>

### *Time, Locality, and Complexity*

This study is about time. First and foremost, it is about time in the distant past to which we have access only through fragments left behind. We collect, identify, and attempt to interpret these fragments by searching for patterns and relationships from which we can extract meaning. But it still remains that the fragments are left from a culture that is, in so many ways, foreign to us. Meskell has emphasized the “fundamental difference between women past and present, and between issues which interest us today and which were operative in the past.”<sup>137</sup> This is why it is so important to evaluate the evidence on its own terms and within the parameters of the ancient realities in which it was created. Second, this study is about the specific years during which these women lived, their shared histories within a “common time” specific to a unique period, place, and community. The third time to be considered is the “personal time” through which these individuals passed in their life experiences as girls, maidens, women, and old women. As life cycle profoundly affects the ways in which time is experienced, it is a critical lens through which the evidence should be evaluated.<sup>138</sup>

When we turn to locality and the place-specific nature of myth and ritual, the inherent complexity of Greek religion is revealed. Landscape and local geography direct the myth-creation process through which human beings attempt to explain how things came to be. Scores of ancient Greek communities developed their own myths out of their landscapes, along with their own gods, temples, rituals, festivals, and hierarchies of cult personnel to look after them. This complex system of localized cults, flourishing in the absence of a unified “church,” made for a vast network of independent constructs. Locality-based worship bound individuals with their landscapes and shared histories under a tightly knit common identity. Multiply this phenomenon thousands of times over, then spread it across a millennium, and the complexity of the Greek religious system begins to emerge. Complexity theory has much to offer the study of Greek worship, just as it has benefited such diverse fields as literary analysis, the social sciences, and architecture.<sup>139</sup> *Where* things happen is central to *how* things happen, and examination of the complex system of localities within Greek worship allows for a fuller understanding of the ways in which cults functioned.<sup>140</sup>

The Greeks themselves had diverse and sometimes contradictory ways of looking at their own religion.<sup>141</sup> But one thing is clear. Theirs was a system in which myth, cult, ritual, and visual images were utterly interdependent and mutually supportive.<sup>142</sup> The process of representa-



## INTRODUCTION

tion through words and images cannot be separated from the rituals that gave expression to the underlying systemic structure. Ritual fueled the visibility of Greek women within this system. It sent them on daily paths, traversing their cities, as they made their way up to sanctuaries and out to cemeteries. Requirements for the regular visitation of family tombs and the desire for frequent worship in shrines and temples made for a reality in which scores of women crossed their towns daily. If we add to this mix the highly visible roles of women on festival days, the emerging picture is one of far-ranging mobility for women across the polis landscape.<sup>143</sup> Within this landscape, visual culture supported and reflected the dynamic of myth, cult, and ritual agency. It placed images of priestesses in sanctuaries and cemeteries, on painted vases, sculptured reliefs, sacred implements, and statue bases, populating the polis with the mirrored reflections of the women who served.



The title *Portrait of a Priestess* is not meant to convey a belief that there is any single image that can be painted for Greek feminine priesthood. As we have seen, the intensely local character of priesthood over such a broad sweep of geography and chronology defies generalization. Instead, the title reflects my focus on visual culture and my desire to respond to a complaint sometimes directed at archaeological research for having produced a history of “genderless, faceless blobs.”<sup>144</sup> It is my intention to restore some measure of humanity to the women behind the evidence and to sketch portraits of actual lives lived. I shall bring forward by name the contributions of more than 150 historical women whose lives have been long neglected, slipped between the cracks of the more regularly chronicled accounts of ancient history, politics, and warfare.

A further inspiration for the title is my wish to underscore the narrative quality of the material presented.<sup>145</sup> The fragments of sculpture, paintings, inscriptions, and texts gathered here preserve stories of lived experience. They are not just distant data onto which we can project the concerns and agendas of our own times, but are robust survivors of authentic ancient narratives to which we should, instead, listen. These fragments preserve a rich cultural history of women and status, money and marriage, property and patronage, household and community, that teaches us about what mattered most in the ancient past. They enable us to see the ways in which age, class, gender, family, social institutions, and economic resources shaped the lives of women and affected the circulation of power among and around them. Let us follow these women along the path of priesthood from birth to death and experience the responsibilities, privileges, and agency that distinguished their lives.