

IUNIA RUSTICA: TEACHING RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AS A ROMAN PRIESTESS OF CARTIMA

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the role of *Iunia Rustica*, a Roman priestess from *Cartima*, in transmitting and teaching religious practices to her local community. As a Roman priestess, *Rustica* held a position of spiritual authority, extending beyond ritual performance to include the education of community members in religious norms, moral values and ceremonial traditions. Drawing on epigraphic evidence, archaeological findings and historical sources, the study examines the ways in which her role contributed to the continuity of Roman religious and cultural practices in provincial towns. Particular attention is given to the pedagogical dimension of her priesthood, demonstrating that rituals served as structured opportunities for learning and social cohesion, as well as acts of devotion. The article argues that an understanding of *Rustica*'s activities provides valuable insight into the intersection of religion and education in the Roman Empire, demonstrating that priestesses could act as educators, mediators of knowledge and moral guides. By situating *Iunia Rustica* within the broader framework of Roman provincial religious life, the study emphasizes the significance of female religious authority in shaping local traditions and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Ultimately, it sheds light on how ritualized teaching practices reinforced communal identity while preserving the religious heritage of *Cartima*.

KEYWORDS: Community, cultural transmission, education, gender roles, priestess, religion.

Introduction

Recent studies agree that the writings of Greco-Roman authors reflect an idealized model of the Roman matron, formed from the roles and stereotypes of women that shaped perceptions of aristocratic women in society and education.¹ This topic has

¹ Garlick 1992, 22.

sparked significant academic interest, particularly within the field of women's history in antiquity. However, much of the research has focused on gender analysis without considering how Greco-Roman historiography contributed to the historical and cultural construction of a diverse world.² Classical literature often reinforces an ideological narrative that makes it difficult to understand women as anything other than virtuous, presenting a limited vision of the ideal matron within an unmistakably patriarchal context.³

The feminine ideal is reconstructed through terms such as *amantissima*, *dulcissima*, and *carissima*, which describe women as pious, chaste, and devoted to their husbands. Yet these descriptions do not encompass the full scope of women's experiences, and the omission of information in predominantly male sources has perpetuated a historical bias against women.⁴ Nevertheless, recent studies have examined women from literary, historical and archaeological perspectives, offering a more comprehensive view of their role in both the public and domestic spheres, and their function as transmitters of cultural values.

Gender archaeology has played a crucial role in highlighting women's silence and reinterpreting material evidence.⁵ This has given value to the past and broadened our understanding of women's presence in antiquity. Interest in this area of research has grown significantly over the past two decades, particularly among American and European scholars. Spanish researchers have also contributed to this field, emphasizing the importance of material culture and women's studies.⁶ However, the limited availability of archaeological material remains a significant obstacle to a comprehensive reassessment of Roman women.⁷

Epigraphic documentation, on the other hand, provides an objective view of women's position in Roman society, supplementing literary accounts. Funerary, votive and honorific inscriptions link women to their religious practices, funerary customs and social visibility.⁸ Although these sources mainly concern upper-class women, they reveal their presence in public spaces and their participation in civic honors, contributing to a redefinition of urban history and the monumentalization

² Boëls-Janssen 1993, 11.

³ Centlivres 2013, 49.

⁴ Milnor 2010, 820.

⁵ Hurcombe 2000, 38.

⁶ Oria 2017, 77.

⁷ Chrystal 2013, 111.

⁸ Hemelrijk 2020, 34.

of cities in antiquity. Nevertheless, female representation remains lower than that of men, reflecting the predominance of public honors traditionally conferred upon males.

In this sense, epigraphy also reveals the construction of the ideal female identity, which integrates civic virtues and family conduct. In Hispano-Roman funerary dedications, especially in *Baetica* and along the Mediterranean coast, women's emotions and affections are emphasized, reflecting a balance between their public and private roles.⁹ These inscriptions honor the deceased and make the presence of women in Roman society visible, shedding light on the ways in which they actively participated in the cultural, moral, and civic life of their communities.¹⁰

A particularly noteworthy example is *Iunia Rustica*, who probably came from one of *Cartima*'s most influential families. Her importance transcended the family sphere; her civic generosity allowed her to attain remarkable social prestige and significant public influence, recognized by her fellow citizens. Her actions reflect her position within local society and make her a paradigmatic case of female integration in the Romanization process in *Baetica*.¹¹ They demonstrate how women could play an active role in municipal life and in transmitting Roman cultural values.¹²

The Roman Matron Ideal: The Case of *Iunia Rustica*

Iunia Rustica, the perpetual and first priestess of the municipality of *Cartima*, is one of the most remarkable examples of a Romanized woman fully integrated into the urban elite of *Baetica*. She lived during a period of great splendor for the city of *Cartima* — modern-day Cártama in the province of Málaga — at the end of the 1st century CE, when it was granted municipal legal status (municipium). This transformation entailed political recognition and the community's full incorporation into the Roman administrative and cultural system.

Against the backdrop of urban prosperity and institutional change, the city underwent a process of monumentalization and reorganization of its public spaces, reflecting established Romanization. The construction of forums, temples, baths and porticoes became a means of expressing civic identity, local prestige and ad-

⁹ Molina 2024b, 28.

¹⁰ D'ambra 2007, 56.

¹¹ Bendala 2006, 291.

¹² MacLachlan 2013, 38.

herence to the Roman urban model. During this period, women from wealthy families began to play a more prominent role in public life.¹³ Although Roman law formally limited their political participation, many found legitimate avenues for public engagement in religion, patronage, and civic beneficence. Between the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, particularly in *Baetica*, elite women used their economic resources to finance projects of public interest, ranging from building construction and restoration to the organization of banquets, games, and land donations.¹⁴ These manifestations of female evergetism — the practice of civic generosity — were not merely expressions of piety or philanthropy, but also strategies for achieving prestige, projecting their families, and gaining social legitimacy.¹⁵

Within this framework, the inscription dedicated to *Iunia Rustica* is exceptional in its testimony to the scope and diversity of public actions undertaken by a woman in the Western Roman Empire.¹⁶ Dated to the latter half of the 1st century CE, the epigraphic text reads as follows:

"Iunia D(e)ci f(ilia) Rustica sacerdos perpetua et prima in municipio Cartimitanico porticus publicas uetustate corruptas refecit solum balinei dedit vectigalia publica uindicauit signum aereum Martis in foro posuit porticus ad balineum solo suo cum piscina et signo Cupidinis epulo dato et spectaculis editis d(e) p(ecunia) s(ua) d(edit) d(edicauit) statuas sibi et C(aio) Fabio Iuniano f(ilio) suo ab ordine Cartimitanorum decretas remissa impensa item statuam C(aio) Fabio Fabiano uiro suo d(e) p(ecunia) s(ua) f(actas) d(edit)"

This inscription reveals her deep involvement in the city's civic, religious and symbolic life. She was not just an occasional benefactress, but a true patron of the city, who directed private resources towards public works with a strong sense of communal service and a clear understanding of her social role. The scope of her donations, which included both material works and public celebrations, demonstrates a typically Roman model of patronage adopted by a woman of the provincial aristocracy.¹⁷

¹³ Hemelrijk 2004, 420.

¹⁴ Parker 2015, 75.

¹⁵ Beard, North, Price 2007, 91.

¹⁶ CIL II, 1956.

¹⁷ Trümper 2012, 293.

The Roman ideal of femininity, represented by the chaste, pious and virtuous matron, was a moral model constructed and perpetuated by literature and patriarchal ideology. Authors such as Livy, Valerius Maximus and Seneca portrayed the *perfectissima femina* as the domestic counterpart of the ideal citizen: faithful, discreet and devoted to family life. However, this literary archetype did not reflect the diversity of women's actual experiences within the Empire.¹⁸ In the Romanized provinces, particularly *Baetica*, some women transcended the symbolic boundaries of domesticity by participating actively in public life through priesthood, beneficence, or municipal patronage.¹⁹

Iunia Rustica is a prime example of this transcendence of traditional boundaries. Her title of *sacerdos perpetua* conferred upon her a position of great prestige and visibility within the community. The female priesthood, especially that associated with the imperial cult and the tutelary deities of the city, granted its holders moral and religious authority comparable to that of local magistrates. Being a *sacerdos perpetua* involved serving as a mediator between the human and divine spheres, ensuring a privileged place in rituals, public ceremonies and civic memory.²⁰ In *Iunia Rustica's* case, this priestly dignity reinforced her legitimacy as a benefactress and promoter of public works.

One of the most notable aspects of her benefactions was her involvement in the reconstruction of public porticoes and her donation of land for the construction of baths. Both initiatives were part of an urban monumentalization program typical of Romanized municipalities, in which architecture served as a tangible expression of power and prosperity. Her donation of land for public baths demonstrates a profound appreciation for the social significance of public infrastructure: baths were spaces of social interaction, hygiene, and civic engagement—genuine centers of community life where Roman values were enacted on a daily basis.

Even more striking is her role in managing the *vectigalia publica*, or municipal taxes and revenues. According to the *Lex Flavia Malacitana* and the *Lex Ursonensis*, it was usually the responsibility of local magistrates to administer these funds. The fact that *Iunia Rustica* assumed this responsibility and oversaw its collection demonstrates her exceptional financial autonomy and administrative capability. According to Donahue, she is the only woman in the western Roman Empire

¹⁸ Navarro 2017, 83.

¹⁹ Cenerini 2002, 123.

²⁰ Pérez 2014, 69.

known to have taken on such an obligation, which highlights her unique position within the civic framework.²¹

Her sculptural dedications — a statue of *Mars*, another of *Cupid*, and several in honor of herself and her family — carry a dual meaning. On the one hand, they express religious devotion and loyalty to traditional values, while on the other, they construct a visual narrative of power and memory.²² The placement of her statue in the forum, the central space of civic representation, indicates that her presence was officially recognized by the *ordo decurionum*, the municipal council. Consequently, *Iunia Rustica* is among the public benefactors whose names were perpetuated in stone and bronze, ensuring the transmission of their prestige to future generations. The relationship between religion, power and Romanization is particularly evident in her case.²³ Priestesses played a vital role in spreading imperial cults and consolidating Roman identity in the provinces.²⁴ At the same time, the practice of civic beneficence strengthened social cohesion and helped to legitimize Roman authority at the local level. From her privileged position, *Iunia Rustica* embodies the convergence of religious piety, civic commitment and family prestige.²⁵

Ultimately, she was not only a prominent figure in *Cartima*, but also a prime example of the phenomenon of female Romanization in *Baetica*. She exemplifies how women of the provincial elite could adapt to Roman structures while actively participating in their symbolic and material construction. Through her works, donations and honors, she helped to strengthen urban identity, perpetuate her family's memory and consolidate the Roman city model in southern Hispania. Beyond her local context, *Iunia Rustica*'s legacy offers valuable insights into the dynamics of gender, power, and religion in the Roman Empire. Her story reminds us that Romanization was not an exclusively male or unidirectional process, but rather the result of multiple agents, including women, who actively participated in shaping the Roman world from diverse positions.²⁶

²¹ Donahue 2004, 880.

²² Molina 2024a, 158.

²³ Rüpke 2007, 97.

²⁴ Hemelrijk 2007, 333.

²⁵ Schultz 2006, 124.

²⁶ Foxhall 2013, 82.

Religion as Education: Epigraphic Evidence of Cultural Transmission

Archaeology has made a significant contribution to clarifying several uncertainties surrounding the religious practices of women in Roman Hispania. Over the past few decades, the study of material evidence has revealed the presence and influence of women in cultic, civic and domestic spheres. Interpreting the archaeological record through the lens of gender archaeology offers a renewed perspective on women's roles in antiquity, encompassing multiple forms of material expression, from domestic and funerary architecture to iconography, votive epigraphy and honorific dedications.

Nevertheless, the available material evidence is insufficient for a comprehensive archaeological analysis of women in Hispania. The diversity of findings and the scarcity of well-documented contexts hinder a holistic interpretation of women's roles in provincial Roman society. Added to this is the inherent bias of the sources: most epigraphic and sculptural representations depict women from socially privileged classes who could afford to commission inscriptions, statues or funerary portraits. Consequently, women who were economically or socially disadvantaged remain largely invisible in the material record, which limits our understanding of the true diversity of the Hispano-Roman female world.²⁷

In the context of Baetican epigraphy, *Iunia Rustica*, the *perpetua et prima sacerdos* of the municipality of *Cartima*, represents an exceptional case for examining the intersection of religion, gender, and civic power. Her decision to dedicate a cult to *Mars*, a male deity traditionally associated with war, is particularly significant from a gender perspective.²⁸ In the Roman world, women usually directed their devotion towards goddesses associated with fertility, fecundity and life cycles, such as *Ceres*, *Juno* or *Venus*, whose attributes were more closely aligned with the moral ideal of the Roman feminine order. Therefore, Iunia's decision to dedicate a cult to *Mars*, a male deity traditionally associated with war, challenges traditional patterns and suggests a more nuanced and adaptable interpretation of women's religious practices.

However, this singularity does not imply a rupture with traditional Roman religiosity, but rather an adaptation to the local context and the community's sym-

²⁷ Chaniotis 2009, 56.

²⁸ Keegan 2014, 71.

bolic needs. In *Cartima*, the goddess Venus also enjoyed special devotion, as evidenced by two inscriptions,²⁹ in which the Porcia and Vibia families paid her homage. The joint presence of Mars and Cupid in *Iunia Rustica*'s dedication could therefore be linked to the well-established Venus cult in the region, since Cupid, Venus's son, appears as a figure subordinate to his mother. Consequently, the selection of these deities may demonstrate a deliberate adherence to the traditions of religio Romana, while also serving as a display of cultural prestige and loyalty to the imperial order.

Moreover, the figure of Cupid is rare in the Hispano-Roman record. Beyond a few Baetican coins and two bronze sculptures from the 2nd century CE—discovered in Cabra (Córdoba) and El Arahal (Seville)—representations of this deity are scarcely attested on the Iberian Peninsula. His inclusion in *Iunia Rustica*'s religious programme alongside Mars was probably no coincidence. It could be seen as an act of devotion to the divine lineage of Venus, which the gens Iulia had worshipped fervently since the Caesarian period. This symbolic association with the mother goddess of the imperial lineage could be seen as a sign of political and cultural allegiance to the authority of Rome, which would have reinforced Iunia's social position within the municipal hierarchy of *Cartima*.

From a functional standpoint, *Iunia Rustica*'s devotion to *Mars* does not seem to allude to his warlike nature, but rather to his role as protector of fields and harvests. In Roman religion, Mars also served as the guardian of agriculture, and his cult was associated with the fertility of the land and the defense of productive territory. This interpretation is particularly pertinent when considering *Cartima*'s economic context as an eminently agricultural region whose prosperity depended largely on the exploitation of the *ager cartimitanus*. It is possible that the cognomen 'Rustica' was not merely a family designation but reflected the priestess's rural origins and her symbolic connection with the land and its cultivation.

The discovery of a small bronze statue of *Mars Ultor* in *Cartima* supports this hypothesis, as do the numerous dedications to Mars recorded in other agricultural areas of *Baetica*, such as *Singilia Barba* (CIL II, 2013; CIL II², 5, 773), *Barbesula* (CIL II, 1938), *Ipagrum* (CIL II, 1515; CIL II², 5, 582) and *Isturgi* (CIL II, 2121; CIL II², 7, 56). Similarly, the discovery of the head of the goddess Ceres—associated with the agrarian cycle—in *Cartima* highlights the coexistence of cults devoted to the protection of agriculture, a central concern for Baetican communities. Much of the

²⁹ CIL II, 1951–1952.

local elite's power was underpinned by the economic prosperity generated through agricultural production, and within this context, the veneration of deities safeguarding the fields assumed profound civic and symbolic significance.

Beyond the religious sphere, she played an active role in the public life of her municipality. The inscription commemorates her organization of banquets and public spectacles, activities that formed part of the Roman tradition of evergetism. Besides providing entertainment, these events reinforced social bonds and allowed benefactors — in this case, a woman — to increase their prestige and popularity within the community. While the precise expense of these celebrations remains unknown, their objective is evident: to solidify her social status, nurture her network of clients, and garner recognition from the *ordo decurionum*.

As a matron and priestess, Iunia must have cultivated an extensive network of personal and familial connections, which would have solidified her influence within the civic fabric. The generosity she displayed with her inheritance strengthened her public image and enhanced her family's prestige. In the inscription, her husband, *C. Fabius Fabianus*, and her son, *C. Fabius Iunianus*, are mentioned, albeit in a secondary position. This order of precedence is no accident; it seems to reflect a deliberate intention to emphasize Iunia's prominence as the main benefactress and figure of authority within the family and wider society.

Public recognition of her deeds was formalized when the *ordo cartimitanus* granted statues in her honor and in that of her son, while Iunia herself financed a third statue in honor of her husband. This triple homage, centered on the family, underscores the importance of endogamous strategies and the continuity of local power within a select circle of leading families. Such familial alliances were common in *Hispania Ulterior Baetica*, ensuring the transmission of wealth, political stability, and control over municipal offices. While the epigraphic record does not confirm whether her husband or son held magistracies, all signs point to the fact that *Iunia Rustica*'s family belonged to the small group of Romanized municipal aristocrats.

In summary, the story of *Iunia Rustica* vividly illustrates how women of the Baetican elite could transcend the conventional boundaries of private life to participate actively in the religious, civic, and economic spheres of their communities. Her devotion to Mars and Cupid, her patronage of the city and her prominence within her family bear eloquent witness to the complex intersection of gender, religion and power in Roman Hispania. Her example shows us that Romanization

transformed spaces and institutions, reshaping identities and expanding the forms of female participation in the ancient world.³⁰

Conclusion

The *perpetua et prima sacerdos* of the municipality of *Cartima* stands as one of the most emblematic figures of female presence and agency in the civic and religious life of Roman Hispania. Reconstructed through epigraphic testimony, her biography reveals a woman who succeeded in combining piety, public service, and social prestige within the institutional framework of a Romanized municipality. Her actions demonstrate that women of the Baetican elite could play an active role in urban development and the consolidation of Roman civic values.

Iunia Rustica's activities, as documented in the *Cartima* inscription, must be understood in the context of the wider phenomenon of female evergetism in the western provinces. From the 1st century CE onwards, women of the upper classes began to engage in public benefactions that had previously been the preserve of men. Through donations, building projects, and religious dedications, they contributed to the monumentalization of cities and the reinforcement of civic identity. In return, they gained visibility, honors, and symbolic capital, thereby securing the continuity of their family's prestige within the local elite.³¹

Her case also highlights the important role that religion played in providing women with a space in which to participate in public life. The title of *sacerdos perpetua* not only conferred moral authority upon Iunia but also provided her with a legitimate avenue for civic influence. Priesthoods, particularly those associated with the imperial cult and tutelary deities, were among the few institutional frameworks through which women could exert power, act as intermediaries between the divine and political realms, and embody the moral virtues of the Roman matron.³² In this sense, religion functioned as a genuine form of education and socialization, transmitting the values of piety, duty and civic commitment that defined Roman identity.

The cults of *Mars* and *Cupid* promoted by *Iunia Rustica* demonstrate her profound understanding of religion as a vehicle for personal and communal expression. Her choice of these deities was not arbitrary: Mars, the protector of fields and

³⁰ Mcauslan, Walcot 1996, 88.

³¹ Martínez et al. 2019, 81.

³² Holland 2012, 208.

cities, symbolized strength and stability, while *Cupid*, associated with Venus and, by extension, the gens *Iulia*, represented devotion to the imperial lineage. Together, these deities reveal a conscious desire to integrate local traditions into the universal framework of Roman religion, expressing loyalty to Rome while simultaneously highlighting the prosperity of *Cartima* and its agrarian territory.

At the same time, her donations of land for the baths and restoration of the public porticoes reveal the close link between female generosity and urban identity. The public bathhouse, a space for hygiene, leisure and socializing, epitomized Roman civilization; its construction or restoration signified the local elite's commitment to the community.³³ By making contributions, *Iunia Rustica* enhanced her personal prestige and helped shape the city's collective memory — a memory materialized in stone, bronze, and ritual.

From a gender perspective, the inscription of *Iunia Rustica* provides invaluable insight into how women navigated the boundaries of Roman public life. Although they were excluded from political offices, they found in religion and beneficence a means to achieve influence and visibility. Their actions demonstrate that the so-called 'domestic sphere' was not isolated or passive, but part of a broader continuum of social interaction where family, religion and politics were deeply intertwined.³⁴ In this context, the Roman matron appears as an agent of cultural mediation and moral authority, far from being a static or marginal figure.

Furthermore, her example shows that Romanization was not an exclusively masculine or uniform process, but rather a dynamic and negotiated phenomenon involving both men and women. Female benefactors such as *Iunia Rustica* played an active role in shaping civic culture, integrating local traditions into Roman frameworks and transmitting values that would define provincial identity for centuries. Their contributions, which were long overshadowed by androcentric historiography, are now recognized as being fundamental to our understanding of the complexities of ancient societies.³⁵

The case of *Iunia Rustica* emphasizes the significance of epigraphy in reconstructing female agency in antiquity. Although limited in number, funerary and honorific inscriptions preserve the names, virtues and deeds of women who would otherwise have remained invisible. These texts provide access to individual biog-

³³ Rantala 2019, 33.

³⁴ Kraemer 2010, 51.

³⁵ Hemelrijk, Woolf 2013, 44.

raphies and the collective memory of communities that valued moral virtue, religious devotion and civic responsibility — qualities embodied in the ideal of the Roman matron.

In conclusion, *Iunia Rustica* represents far more than a local benefactress of *Baetica*. She embodies women's ability to adopt and reinterpret the values of *Romanitas* within their own social and cultural contexts. Her life, carved in stone, reminds us that the history of Rome was also shaped by women—through their generosity, piety, and dedication to the *res publica*.³⁶ Through her, the ideal of the Roman matron ceases to be a mere literary abstraction and becomes a tangible force in the civic life of provincial Hispania.

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³⁶ Lipka 2009, 21.

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