

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AS MOTHERS OF THE SYNAGOGUE

A. The Evidence for Mothers of the Synagogue

1. The Inscriptional Evidence

There exist two Greek inscriptions in which the title mētēr synagōgēs occurs (reconstructed), one Greek inscription in which a woman bears the title mētēr, two Latin inscriptions in which the title mater synagogae occurs, and one Latin inscription in which a woman bears the unusual title pateressa. All six of the inscriptions are from Italy, three being from Rome, two from Venosa in Apulia and one from Venetia in Brescia. They range in date from around the second century C.E. until perhaps as late as the sixth century.

Rome

CII 523 (= CIL VI 29756).¹ Sarcophagus fragment decorated by a shofar, a lulav and a seven-branched menorah; known since the late sixteenth century, but no longer extant. Date unknown. The manuscripts differ on points of spelling; for the variants see CII, ad loc. The text of Leon is:

Beturia Pau-
2 lla F domi
heterne quos-
4 tituta que bi-
xit an(nos) LXXXVI meses VI
6 proselyta an(norum) XVI
nomine Sara mater
8 synagogarum Campi
et Bolumni
10 en irenae ai cymysis
autis.

Shofar Lulav Menorah

L. 3: read aeternae con-.

L. 4: read quae vi-.

L. 5: read menses.

Ll. 10-11: read ἐν εἰρήνῃ (ἡ) κοίμησις αὐτῆς.

Veturia Paulla F(?), consigned to her eternal home, who lived 86 years, 6 months, a proselyte of 16 years, named Sara, mother of the synagogues of Campus and Volumnius. In peace her sleep.²

Veturia Paulla,³ a proselyte to Judaism at the age of seventy, had taken on the name Sara, most likely as a sign of her conversion. Campus probably means Campus Martius, a plain of around six hundred acres on the left bank of the Tiber. CII 88⁴ and 319⁵ refer to fathers of the synagogue of the Campesians, which may be the same congregation.⁶ These three inscriptions are the only evidence for the synagogue of the Campesians. While it would be quite dangerous to generalize on the basis of three inscriptions, it is striking that of the four title-bearers mentioned, three bear the title mother/father of the synagogue, which raises the question whether this might have been a central title in that congregation. As to the infant archon, which must indicate archon-to-be, it seems reasonable to assume that the boy was given his title because of his father's active leadership in the congregation. (This inscription is thus indirect support for the view that the title mother/father of the synagogue was functional, rather than honorific, a point which will be discussed below.)

Our knowledge of the synagogue of the Volumnesians is based on four inscriptions (CII 343,⁷ 402,⁸ 417,⁹ 523). Leon locates it among the Transtiberine group of congregations. CII 343, 402 and 417 were found in the Monteverde catacomb, which according to Leon, was the earliest of the Roman Jewish catacombs, perhaps going back to the first century B.C.E. and remaining in use until at least the end of the third century.¹⁰ With the exception of CII 523, the title mother/father of the synagogue does not occur in connection with the synagogue of the Volumnesians. The titles which do occur are archon (archōn: CII 343), archon-to-be (mellarchōn: CII 402) and (archon?)-for-life (zabiou = dia biou?: CII 417).

Veturia Paulla, then, was the mother of two synagogues, one in which the title mother/father of the synagogue may well have been a key term of leadership and one in which archon may have been a major function. Her functioning as mother of two synagogues is not unparalleled, for CII 508¹¹, also from Rome, mentions a father of synagogues. There is no difficulty in imagining that a person could be actively involved in two synagogues. Note that no husband is mentioned in the inscription. If Veturia Paulla did not become Jewish until the age of 70, then, considering the life expectancy of that period, her husband was most likely already dead when she converted, if indeed she had been married. In any case, the inscription gives

us no reason to assume that she received her title through her husband.

CII 496.¹² Sarcophagus fragment. Found in the Via Anicia; may have come from the Monteverde catacomb (1st C. B.C.E. - 3rd C. C.E.).¹³

[Ἐνθά]δε κεῖτε
 2 [Μαρ? Ἰουλ?]ια Μαρκελ-
 [λα μή]τηρ συνα-
 4 [γωγῆς] Αύγουστη-
 [σιων. Μ]νησθῆ
 6 [...έ]ν εἰρήνῃ
 [ἡ κοίμη]σις αὐ-
 8 [τῆ]ς.

L. 1: read κεῖται.

Here lies (Maria? Julia?) Marcella, mother of the synagogue of the Augustesians. May [. . .] be remembered (?). In peace her sleep.

The form of the letters would indicate a second- or possibly third-century C.E. dating. That Markella was a woman is indicated by the fragmentary -ia before Markel- and by the final sigma for au[τ]ῆς. "Mother of the synagogue" is also partially reconstructed: mētēr synagōgēs, but seems to be quite a plausible reconstruction.

Six inscriptions bear witness to the Synagogue of the Augustesians (CII 284,¹⁴ 301,¹⁵ 338,¹⁶ 368,¹⁷ 416,¹⁸ 496). The other titles mentioned are scribe (grammateus) and archon-to-be (mellarcon = mellarchōn: CII 284), gerusiarch (gerousiarchēs: CII 301, 368), archon (iarlchōn: CII 338), (archon?)-for-life (zabiou = dia biou?: CII 416¹⁹).

The synagogue could have been named for the emperor Augustus (27 B.C.E. to 14 C.E.), who was in fact friendly toward the Jews. He may have been a patron of the community.²⁰ If the synagogue was founded during the reign of Augustus, it would be one of the oldest in Rome.

As in CII 523, no husband is mentioned in our inscription, so we should not assume that Marcella received her title because of her husband. Unfortunately, the brief inscription does not yield any further information about Marcella's life, age at death or title.

CII 166.²¹ Marble fragment; more fragmentary today than when first discovered. Found in the Appia catacomb (1st - 3rd C. C.E.).²²

Menorah 2 Ἐνθάδε κεῖτε Σιμπ[λικια μήτηρ? συ-]
 2 ναγωγῆς, φίλανδρος [.....]
 συναγωγῆς τῆ ἰδίᾳ σ[υμβίῳ ἐποίησεν].

L. 1: read κεῖται.

Here lies Simplicia, mother (?) of the synagogue, who loved her husband. [Husband's name and office] of the synagogue set up (this stone) to his own wife.

The form of the letters would indicate a second- or possibly third-century C.E. dating. The [mētēr sy]nagōgēs is admittedly conjectural, but the gender of the deceased is established by the philandros and by the tē idiā s[ymbiō]. Further, the title mother of the synagogue, known from elsewhere, is a plausible reconstruction for the lacuna preceding -nagōgē, especially since synagōgēs occurs in the following line.

In contrast to the two inscriptions just discussed, the name of the synagogue is lacking here, so that one cannot discuss comparative materials from the same synagogue. A further contrast is that a husband is mentioned here, and he seems to have been an office-holder. He may have borne the title patēr synagōgēs or perhaps another title. As the titles of both wife and husband are missing, it is impossible to say whether they bore the same title, but since it seems quite possible that she was a mother of the synagogue and he a father of the synagogue, then the question of how she attained her title gains added relevancy.

Venetia, Brescia

CII 639; CIL V 4411.²³ First quoted by Feliciani in 1463.²⁴
 Date unknown.

Coeliae²⁵ Paternae
 matri synagogae
 Brixianorum.

To Coelia Paterna, mother of the synagogue of the Brescians.

Unfortunately, the only other Jewish inscription from Brescia (CII 638) reads [. . .] χιουνα/γωγο[.], certainly archisynagōgos, but hardly enough to give us significant information about the Jewish community in Brescia.

Venosa, Apulia

In 1853, a Jewish catacomb in Venosa (the ancient Venusia) was discovered.²⁶ The inscriptions (CII 569-619; 619a-619e) are of two types: dipinti, painted in red on the stucco covering of the walls, and graffiti, scratched onto the walls, whereby most of the latter have disappeared. Two of the Venosan inscriptions are of interest for the question at hand.

CII 606; CIL IX 6231.²⁷ Letters traced by finger into the wet stucco, later painted in red (3rd - 6th C.).²⁸

Hic requesc-
2 et Alexsanra
pateressa qui v-
4 it anoro plus m[. . .].

שלום

Ll. 1-2: read requiescit (l. 1 Lenormant:²⁹ requiesc-);
De Rossi:³⁰AlexsanFa. (Ligature on the r
possibly indicates dr.)
Ll. 3-4: read quae vixit annorum plus minus.

Here lies Alexsanra, "fatheress" (pateressa), who lived approximately [. . .]. Peace!

The title pateressa is simply the feminine of pater. The name could be Alexsandra (as the reported ligature may indicate), but then the present spelling may simply be a variation thereof. Since a husband is not mentioned, there is no reason to make assumptions about his possible titles or office; perhaps she was not married or perhaps she was a widow. Therefore, it would be rather incautious to agree with Harry Leon when he writes:

There is one example (606) of a pateressa Alexandra (spelled Alexsanra). It seems more likely that this title was given to the wife of a pater than that it was an independent title like that of mater synagogae at Rome and elsewhere.³¹

While there is certainly a linguistic difference between pater-essa and mater synagogae, there is nothing in this difference to indicate that the one is an independent title while the other is derived from the husband's title. Indeed, one could as easily have argued the opposite, namely that the pateressa was a genuine office-holder, for her title indicates that she was a female pater, while the matres synagogae were just that, mothers and not fathers. Such an argument would be as arbitrary as that given by Leon. There is in fact no reason to consider pateressa as either more or less official than mater synagogae, whereby the question

of whether pateressa implied a synagogue function or a civic one, must remain open.

CII 619d. Found in the hypogeum (3rd - 6th C.).³²

Ἦδε κεῖτε
2 Φαυστεινα
μήτηρ, γυ-
4 νή Αύξα-
νίου πα-
6 τρός καὶ
πάτρονος
8 τῆς πόλεως.

L. 1: read κεῖται.

Ll. 4-5: Frenkel, Lifshitz: Αύξανίου; Bognetti: Αύσανίου;
J. and L. Robert: Λυσανίου.

Here lies Faustina, mother, wife of Auxanios, father and patron of the city.

CII 619c. The epitaph of the husband, Auxanios:

Ἦδε κεῖτε Αύξάνειος πατήρ
2 καὶ πατρῶν τῆς πόλεως.

Here lies Auxaneios, father and patron of the city.

This inscription again raises the question whether women bearing the title mother received it through their husbands. Unlike CII 166 (Simplicia) discussed above, this inscription is not fragmentary. It is thus clear that both wife and husband had the same title, which could indicate that the offices of both Faustina and Auxanios implied active leadership or it could mean that Auxanios alone was a leader, while his wife Faustina simply bore an honorific title. It is possible that Faustina received her title because of her family connections, but this does not necessarily imply that it was honorific.

A further question raised by this inscription is the nature of the title mētēr/patēr when it stands alone, without the additional "of the synagogue." For example, was Auxanios father of the synagogue and patron of the city or was he also a father of the city? The question raised by the term pateressa, which also stands alone, takes on new interest in light of the "of the city" in connection with "patron." A definitive solution is impossible, but the patrōn tēs poleōs makes a civic function for the title patēr/mētēr seem more likely than a synagogue function. It is probable that in the Diaspora the line separating synagogue leadership from civic leadership was rather fluid. The parallel use of patēr and patrōn in this inscription, as well as in 619b³³

and 619c, should caution us from making too quick an identification between father/mother and patron.

Father/mother is one of the more common titles among the Jewish Venosan inscriptions. Patēr/pater occurs nine times outside of our inscription,³⁴ while mētēr and pateressa occur one time each. Of the ten patres mentioned among the Venosan inscriptions, seven are named Faustinus, and the mother in CII 619d is named Faustina. This may indicate that they were all from the same family (see especially CII 611 and 613 for the passing down of names) and that the name Faustinus/a was as important a factor in attaining this title as any individual leadership skills a person might possess. In fact, Faustina may even have been named mother on the basis of the family into which she was born, most likely the same basis for success as that of the men named Faustinus in arriving at their office, rather than the family into which she married.

The twelve occurrences of the title pater/patēr/mētēr/pateressa indicate that it played a central role in the Jewish community at Venosa. Unfortunately, the inscriptions do not give us any indication of the actual function involved. Leon posits, "It is not improbable, therefore [because the title was common at Venosa], that the Venusian pater was a board member."³⁵ This seems plausible. One would only want to add that it is also not improbable that Alexsanra, pateressa (CII 606), and Faustina, mother (CII 619d) were also members of the board.

2. The Literary Evidence

There is one literary reference to Jewish mothers of the synagogue. It occurs in a Christian anti-Jewish polemic entitled De Altercatione Ecclesiae et Synagogae.³⁶ The work is a dialogue between two matrons, Synagoga and Ecclesia, in which a number of controversial points are discussed. In the context of a discussion of circumcision in which Church argues that circumcision cannot be the sign of salvation, because if this were the case, women, who do not receive circumcision, could not be saved, we read: ". . . what will your virgins do, what your widows, what even your mothers of the synagogue, if you bear witness that the sign of circumcision has helped the people to eternal life?" (quid facient virgines tuae, quid facient viduae, quid matres etiam synagogae).³⁷ The argument is that not only will normal Jewish women be excluded from eternal life if circumcision is the sign of eternal life, but that even the most outstanding women of the Jewish community, the mothers of the synagogue, will be