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“Leading Women” or “Wives/Daughters of the Leading Men”

The Ambiguity of the Expression γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων in Acts 17:4

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Abstract

The wording γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων in Acts 17:4 is ambiguous. It has been either glossed as “the leading women” or “wives/women of the leading men.” Relevance Theory (RT) uses encoded text, co-text, and context to understand how a hearer attempts to disambiguate meaning. When the RT approach is applied, it appears that “wives/daughters of leading men” may have been to an ancient reader the more relevant and salient reference and therefore the intended reference of the author.

Keywords

Acts 17:4 – leading women – devout Greeks – civic authority – first of the city

1 Introduction

The author of Acts uses a similar turn of phrase on three occasions to describe Paul’s reception by both gentile women and men. On the first missionary journey in Pisidian Antioch, it is said that the Judaeans incited “the devout women

of high standing and the leading men of the city” (τὰς σεβομένας γυναῖκας τὰς εὐσχήμονας καὶ τοὺς πρώτους τῆς πόλεως) and drove him and Barnabas from their region (Acts 13:50). On the second journey, the reception is more accepting. In Thessalonica some of the Judeans were persuaded as well as “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” (τῶν τε σεβομένων Ἑλλήνων πλῆθος πολὺ γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι, Acts 17:4). But then, the Judeans, with help, turned the people against Paul and Silas, dragging Jason, their host, and some of the believers (τινας ἀδελφούς) before the city authorities (τοὺς πολιτάρχας, Acts 17:6, 8). Paul and Silas were dispatched to Beroea, where the Judeans are said to have been more receptive and where “many of them believed as well as not a few Greek women and men of high standing” (τῶν Ἑλληνίδων γυναικῶν τῶν εὐσχημόνων καὶ ἀνδρῶν οὐκ ὀλίγοι, Acts 17:12). It will be necessary to bear in mind all three expressions, though the primary focus here is on the ambiguity found in Acts 17:4. While most English translations make reference to “not a few of the leading women” (NRSV; ESV) or “quite a few prominent women” (NET; NIV) in this verse, the Greek is more ambiguous than one might first expect.

Several scholars have not only adopted the reading “leading women” but have also drawn conclusions from it regarding the nature of women’s roles in the early church. For example, Witherington points to the variant in Codex Bezae (καὶ γυναῖκες τῶν πρώτων) to argue for a deliberate suppression of Luke’s emphasis on female leadership or prominence.¹ Likewise, Wenkel argues that the Western text represents “a programmatic effort” to suppress Luke’s affirming portrayal of prominent women.² Similarly, Holmes accepts the reading “leading women,” treating it as evidence of women’s active civic and religious prominence in Paul’s mission.³ What these readings share is, first, the translation “leading women” in Acts 17:4 and, second, an assumption that “leading,” if applied to these women, carries similar civic force as it does when applied to men elsewhere in Acts. It is precisely this assumption that the present article calls into question.

- 1 B. Witherington, “The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the ‘Western’ Text in Acts,” *JBL* 103 (1984) 82–84, esp. 82. He argues that Luke’s presentation of women “rubbed people the wrong way” (84) and was toned down in the “Western” text—a point readdressed in a later part of this article.
- 2 D.H. Wenkel, “Paul and Dangerous Devout Women of High-standing in Acts,” *Biblica* 102.3 (2021) 386–400, 392.
- 3 M.W. Holmes, “Women and the ‘Western’ Text of Acts,” in *The Book of Acts as Church History/Apostelgeschichte als Kirchengeschichte* (ed. T. Nicklas and M. Tilly; Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2003) 202–203, 190–191. These positions will be discussed in more detail in §3 “The Problem.”

First, it will be argued, on grammatical and contextual grounds, that the reading “wives/women of leading men” (γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων) is a more probable interpretation than “leading women.” The syntax of the phrase, its semantics in relation to the usage of *πρώτος* elsewhere in Acts and in contemporaneous texts, and the co-textual evidence all favour this interpretation. Second, it will be shown that even if one retains the translation “leading women,” the expression must not be taken to imply civic authority comparable to that which it carries when applied to male *πρώτοι*. The contextual evidence shows that when the title was extended to women in the Hellenistic-Roman period, it signified wealth and social influence embedded within family structures rather than independent administrative power. To import the male civic meaning of *πρώτος* into the reading of Acts 17:4 would be to misread both the expression and its social setting. The aim of this article, in short, is to clarify how γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων should be translated and make clear what *πρώται* meant when applied to women at this time.

2 Reading *πρώτος* as “Leading”

Before addressing the question as to how best to understand γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων in Acts 17:4, a word should be said about the translation of *πρώτος* as “leading.”

Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ) lists one of its applications as referring to rank or dignity and notes its use in relation to civic authority.⁴ Bauer’s *Lexicon* (BDAG) notes its use in relation to persons and offers the translations “most prominent” and “leading.”⁵ If one assumes its primary referent is time or ordered sequence, the use for persons must entail a figurative (i.e., metaphorical) extension in meaning. As much metaphor is embodied (i.e., based in the human experience of the world), its use in particular instances can extend beyond any one language; thus, in English, a person who leads the way goes “first”; and the “first secretary” is often a title given to a high-ranking and thus prominent administrative official. It is in this sense that *πρώτος* is understood here.

One further point to note is the adjective’s nominalization, as in τοὺς πρώτους τῆς πόλεως (Acts 13:50) cited above, to indicate a leader or leadership group. In that sense, the extended meaning of the adjective has become or is becoming lexicalized, i.e., the hearer does not have to work out the meaning

⁴ LSJ, s.v. *πρότερος* B.4.

⁵ BDAG, s.v. *πρώτος* β.2.

of the metaphor but has direct access to that meaning given its context of utterance. What is entailed by leadership in its civic context will be discussed in due course. However, to pre-empt that discussion, when applied to males, “first/leading” references, for the most part, their capacity to make decisions for the body-politic. However, we find that over time the term’s application broadens to include females, who cannot, by virtue of their gender within the ancient context, exercise that same capacity. Nonetheless, as civic needs evolved, the wealth and influence of prominent families (including women) had a bearing on how the term *πρώτος* was used (see discussion under “Context” below). The question that is posed here, then, is on which side of this transition (from *male only* to *female also*) does the text of Acts sit. When reading Acts 17:4, would the author’s contemporaries hear “leading women” or “women of leading men,” and, relatedly, what might they have understood by this expression?

3 The Problem

At Acts 17:4 the expression *γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων* is ambiguous. Grammatically, *πρώτων* can be construed as an attributive adjective that qualifies *γυναικῶν*, or *τῶν πρώτων* can be construed as a substantive in the genitive case and governed by *γυναικῶν*. In the former, one might gloss the reading as “leading women” and in the latter as “women (i.e. wives/daughters) of the leading men.” Most modern translations prefer to gloss the expression as “leading women.”⁶

6 English translations, with the exception of Phillips, refer to “leading/chief/influential women”; German to “vornehmste/einflussreiche Frauen der Stadt, Frauen aus der oberen Gesellschaftsschicht”; French, like the Vulgate (*mulieres nobiles*), to “femmes de la haute société/de qualité/importantes”; and Italian, with the exception of NR1994 and NR2006, to “donne in vista della città/della nobiltà/ragguardevoli.” Looking at German commentaries, one finds several examples where *τῶν πρώτων* is read unambiguously as a reference to men; for example, A.A. Steinmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Berlin: Hermann Walther, 1913) 144, notes the ambiguity but translates “die Frauen der ersten Männer”; T. Zahn, *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lucas* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Deichert, 1921) 2:588 interprets “Frauen der ‘ersten’ (Männer) der Stadt” and points to *οἱ πρώτοι τῆς πόλεως* at Acts 13:50; see also E. Preuschen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1912) 105; E. Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 486; W. de Boor, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1986) 307; H.H. Wendt, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1899) 286; A. Schlatter, *Die Apostelgeschichte: ausgelegt für Bibel-leser* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1962) 208; H. Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1963) 94; J. Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) 250; and G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 220, who leaves the

The question might be asked: To what extent does a reader's ideology impinge on his/her understanding of the text?⁷ Codex Bezae, whose text is often viewed with suspicion, reads: πολλοὶ τῶν σεβομένων καὶ Ἑλλήνων πλῆθος πολὺ καὶ γυναῖκες τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι.⁸ Clearly, with the change in case from a genitive (γυναϊκῶν) to a nominative (γυναῖκες) in agreement ὀλίγαι, the scribe understood the text to mean “women of the leading men.”⁹ According to Ropes, καὶ γυναῖκες τῶν πρώτων “seems a better reading” which could easily have been altered for “grammatical uniformity.”¹⁰ Metzger prefers γυναικῶν τε to Bezae's καὶ γυναῖκες due to its better textual support and the assumption that “copyists would replace the less usual connective by the more common

interpretation open and translates “Frauen aus den vornehmen Kreisen,” and comments “In ihr haben wieder Frauen aus der Prominenz einen beachtlichen Platz.”

- 7 Despite the hermeneutic of suspicion, feminist scholars appear to accept the gloss “leading women” without question. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1963) 52, accepts the reading “not a few of the noble women” (“prominent Greek women” at 167). I.R. Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 244–246, contends concerning Acts 13:50: “There is no reason to suppose that these women of high standing were the wives or mothers of the ‘leading men of the city’” and for 17:4 accepts the translation “leading women.” L. Schottroff, “Towards a Feminist Reconstruction of the History of Early Christianity,” in *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective* (ed. L. Schottroff, S. Schroer and M. Wacker; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 186, offers no comment on the women's standing in their communities but rather only observes their communal activity. S. Matthews, “More than a few Greek women of high standing,” “God-fearing” noblewomen in Acts,” in *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in early Judaism and Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 51–71, accepts the reading “leading women” (54–55, 60) and views the portrayal of them as a *topos* shared with Josephus (62) and facilitated by their role of in civic and religious benefaction (65). T.K. Seim, *The Double Message. Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (London: T&T Clark, 2004) 22, in commenting on D accepts the reading “noble women” against “wives of many (sic) noble men.”
- 8 For a full list of variants in Acts see the *Editio Critica Maior* (<https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/ecm>). We note also the reading γυναικῶν τε καὶ ἀνδρῶν τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγοι (MSS 915f and 1642), which supports our contention.
- 9 On the so-called anti-feminist tendency of the “Western” text, see also, with regard to the portrayal of Prisca/Priscilla in Acts 18, A. von Harnack, “Über die beiden Recensionen der Geschichte der Prisca und des Aquila in Act. Apost. 18,1–27,” in *Studien zur Geschichte des Neuen Testaments und der alten Kirche* (ed. A. von Harnack; Berlin/Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1931) 48–61; F. Blass, “Priscilla und Aquila,” *TSK* 74 (1901) 124–126, on Acts 18:26; D.A. Kurek-Chomycz, “Is There an ‘Anti-Priscan’ Tendency in the Manuscripts? Some Textual Problems with Prisca and Aquila,” *JBL* 125.1 (2006) 107–128.
- 10 J.H. Ropes, “The Text of Acts,” in *The Acts of the Apostles* (5 vols.; ed. F.J.F. Jackson and K. Lake; London: MacMillan, 1926) 3:162.

καί.”¹¹ As mentioned in the introduction, Witherington considers 17:4 as one of the verses where “the Western text attempts to tone down or eliminate” the prominence of women.¹² Wenkel argues that the change is “a ‘programmatic effort’ to mould the text of Acts in a certain theological direction” and betrays the Western text’s anti-feminist¹³ stance.¹⁴ Holmes offers a considered and careful review of the alleged instances of anti-feminist readings in the “Western” text and finds ten instances that have the apparent effect of diminishing the “emphasis on women of leadership or prominence in Acts.”¹⁵ Of these, he notes: “only one is clearly intentional, clearly negative in its portrayal of women, and clearly ‘Western’ ... in its textual affiliation: 17,4.” His characterization of 17:4 unfortunately rests on the assumption that the intended referent of γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων was “leading women” and that καὶ γυναῖκες τῶν πρώτων was at best an attempt to accommodate its implication to a less inclusive ideology. This article seeks to untangle the ambiguity in the phrasing of γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων. Using Relevance Theory, the following section will analyse the encoded text of Acts 17:4, its co-text, and the context of the expression, in order to determine which reading is more grammatically and contextually probable and what “leading women” or “women of leading men” would have implied to a first-century audience.

4 Approach

Ambiguity of meaning and the ways in which it is resolved are important elements in the employment of natural language, as they facilitate its efficiency. If it were not so, the encoded text (i.e., the words themselves with the various meanings that can be inferred in terms of semantics and syntax) would become cumbersome and difficult to understand, much like the language of

11 B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: UBS, 1981) 453. On the alternate use of conjunctions in Bezae, see B. Weiss, “Der Codex D in der Apostelgeschichte: textkritische Untersuchung,” in *Zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* (ed. O. von Gebhardt and A. Harnack; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899) 29–30.

12 Witherington, “The anti-feminist tendencies of the ‘Western’ text in Acts,” 82–84.

13 The use of the term “anti-feminist” like “feminist” is anachronistic as it applies a modern worldview to the ancient copyist/scribe. See C.S. Keener, *Acts. An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015) 1:605: “It is anachronistic to evaluate Luke’s approach to gender without reference to the views of his milieu.” On the basis of “repetition and emphasis” in the text, however, Keener places Luke “among more progressive, rather than less progressive, voices of his era” (1:638).

14 Wenkel, “Paul and Dangerous Devout Women of High-standing in Acts,” 386–400, 392.

15 Holmes, “Women and the ‘Western’ Text of Acts,” 202–203, 190–191.

a legal document. According to Relevance Theory¹⁶ (RT), individual words (the encoded text) do not fully determine the meaning of an utterance; rather, speakers and hearers draw on context to form meaning. To be technical, both co-text (i.e., the discourse that surrounds and informs the spoken or written text) and context (i.e., the non-discursive factors that situate the written or spoken expression and include social, cultural and embodied settings, participants, past events, as well as the general or shared knowledge and its conceptual systems that both enable and constrain what can be expressed in a community)¹⁷ are used to constrain and guide the implicatures or invited meanings (i.e. ambiguities) of the encoded text. In other words, meanings are ruled in or out based on an unconscious assessment of their relevance given the co-text and context of the encoded text. RT also postulates a sort of procedural economy at work, (i.e., a maximisation of relevance with a minimisation of effort). The hearer accepts the most easily derived meaning that is relevant to an utterance’s situation. In what follows, we organise our argument in terms of the three elements of RT, namely, encoded text, co-text and context.

4.1 *Encoded Text*

4.1.1 Syntax

To gloss γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων by “leading women,” one might have expected to read either τῶν τε πρώτων γυναικῶν or τῶν τε γυναικῶν τῶν πρώτων.¹⁸ In Acts,

16 D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); D. Wilson and R. Carston, “Metaphor, Relevance and the ‘Emergent Property,’” *Mind & Language* 21.3 (2006) 404–433; D. Sperber and D. Wilson, “A Deflationary Account of Metaphors,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (ed. R.W. Gibbs, Jr.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 84–105; and N. Allott, “Relevance Theory,” in *Perspectives on Linguistic Pragmatics* (ed. A. Capone, F.L. Piparo and M. Carapezza; Heidelberg: Springer, 2013) 61–84.

17 See Z. Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 176–200, for the relevance of context in understanding metaphor. More generally, cf. Markus Tendahl, *A Hybrid Theory of Metaphor: Relevance Theory and Cognitive Linguistics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

18 *DBF* §270. Instances of a post-positioned arthrous adjective with anarthrous noun is more frequent in participial phrases that function as relative clauses, e.g., Acts 20:19: πειρασμῶν τῶν συμβάντων μοι ἐν ταῖς ἐπιβουλαῖς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, and Luke 23:49: γυναῖκες αἱ συνακολουθοῦσαι αὐτῷ ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας; see also Acts 7:35. The τε ... τε construction here links the two phrases: τῶν τε σεβομένων Ἑλλήνων πλῆθος πολὺ and γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι. According to J.D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954) 503–504, prose writers tend to use this construction to link two clauses (cf. Isococrates., *Paneg.*, 137; Thucydides, 1.84.3) as opposed to single words. This is what we observe in Acts 17:4. A helpful translation of Acts 17:4 might be “and some of them were

one finds an arthrous noun with a post-positioned arthrous adjective in the following instances:¹⁹ 1:25: εἰς τὸν τόπον τὸν ἴδιον; 2:40: ἀπὸ τῆς γενεᾶς τῆς σκολιᾶς ταύτης; 3:1: ἐπὶ τὴν ὥραν τῆς προσευχῆς τὴν ἐνάτην; 6:13: κατὰ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἁγίου; 7:8: τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ὀγδόῃ; 12:10: ἐπὶ τὴν πύλην τὴν σιδηρᾶν τὴν φέρουσαν εἰς τὴν πόλιν; 13:10: τὰς ὁδοὺς κυρίου τὰς εὐθείας; 13:33: ἐν τῷ ψαλμῷ γέγραπται τῷ δευτέρῳ; 13:34: τὰ ὅσια Δαυὶδ τὰ πιστά; 13:50: τὰς σεβομένας γυναῖκας τὰς εὐσχήμονας; 16:17: δοῦλοι τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου; 17:12: τῶν Ἑλληνίδων γυναικῶν τῶν εὐσχημόνων; 19:12, 13, 15, 16: τὰ τε πνεύματα τὰ πονηρὰ; 20:28: διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ ἰδίου. This list does not include the 15 instances of τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον. There is only one instance of a post-positioned arthrous adjective with an anarthrous noun, i.e., 2:20: ἡμέραν κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανή.²⁰ If the analysis is extended to the Gospel of Luke, one finds 21 instances of an arthrous noun with a post-positioned arthrous adjective²¹ but one example of an anarthrous noun with an arthrous adjective (ταχὺ ἐξενέγκατε στολὴν τὴν πρώτην καὶ ἐνδύσατε αὐτόν, Luke 15:22). We will return to this one instance shortly. Allowing the one exception in Acts to stand, the disproportionate distribution (32 to 1) indicates that the latter form is emphasised in some way or other. For example, one might choose to read the emphasis in γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι as falling on τῶν πρώτων. Support for this is found in Acts 2:20, where emphasis appears to fall on τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανή and certainly in Luke 15:22, where the narrated events lead one to infer that the father wants his prodigal son not to have just any στολή, but rather the best. However, one might also cite Heb 9:2 (σκηνὴ γὰρ κατεσκευάσθη ἡ πρώτη ἐν ᾗ ἦ τε λυχνία καὶ ἡ τράπεζα καὶ ἡ πρόθεσις τῶν ἁρτων, ἣτις λέγεται Ἄγια); Josephus, *A.J.* 17.301 (Καίσαρός τε συνέδριον φίλων τε τῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ Ῥωμαίων τῶν πρώτων συνάγοντος ἐν ἱερῷ Ἀπόλλωνος, “Caesar convening in the temple of Apollo a council of his friends and leading Romans”); and Josephus, *A.J.* 18.7 and 121 (ἀνδρῶν τῶν πρώτων), where constructions parallel to that in Acts 17:4 are met but where there is no clear emphasis on the

persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, both (τε) a great multitude of devout Greeks and (τε) not a few women/wives of the first ones/men.”

19 Omitted are the instances of post-positioned prepositional (e.g., Acts 26:4: Τὴν μὲν οὖν βίωσίν μου τὴν ἐκ νεότητος τὴν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς γενομένην), participial (e.g., 13:27: τὰς φωνὰς τῶν προφητῶν τὰς κατὰ πᾶν σάββατον ἀναγιγνωσκομένας) and genitival phrases (e.g., 11:23: τὴν χάριν τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ).

20 The exception at Acts 2:20 occurs with textual variants that have the article (see MSS B, N and D) and is found in Luke’s citation of Joel 2:31 (LXX 3:4: πρὶν ἔλθεῖν τὴν ἡμέραν Κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανή, par. Mal 4:4) where the article also occurs. The more difficult reading appears to have been accepted.

21 Luke 1:59; 2:7, 26; 3:22 twice; 5:37; 6:6; 9:42; 7:47; 8:8, 29; 10:21; 11:3, 44; 12:42; 15:23, 25, 27; 18:33; 20:13; 22:50.

post-positioned adjective. In view of these contrary examples, it appears that in each of the above instances an indefinite noun, on utterance, is felt to need further clarification and thus an arthrous adjective is added afterwards. If so, its presence speaks to the manner of articulation. To read Acts 17:4 as referring to “leading women” or “women, the leading ones” must be judged to be a possible interpretation. But given Luke’s tendency to use an arthrous noun with a post-positioned arthrous adjective, the syntax here (post-positioned arthrous adjective with an *anarthrous* noun) strongly suggests the translation “women of the leading men.”

4.1.2 Semantics

Meaning is processed recurrently as the text is heard or read. This implies that the relationship between γυναικῶν and τῶν πρώτων is constructed in part by the semantic ranges of each term. It is here that one particular semantic referent of the expression οἱ πρόωτοι must be considered.²² In the works of Josephus, a contemporary author, one finds the expression some 55 times used of leading men and not once of women.²³ Though this result is not unexpected given the subject matter of his books, the fact that the plural masculine (οἱ) πρόωτοι is so widely attested suggests that “(the) leading men” would be a salient referent for τῶν πρώτων at Acts 17:4. Of further relevance is the prevalence of the phrase (ὁ) πρόωτος τῆς πόλεως in other, both earlier and later, literary sources.²⁴

22 In the examples that follow some inscriptions that evidence the expression “the leading men (of the city)” are later than the putative date of Acts. They are cited as instances of the expression’s continued usage for a particular class of men. As such, they show the entrenched nature of civic structures (and this despite changes in financial resourcing [n. 38] and the constraints of Roman administration) and the use of a linguistic referent that persisted from earlier times. See Thucydides, Polybius, Chariton of Aphrodisias (1st cent. CE), and Josephus (see n. 24 and n. 23 respectively). See also the co-textual evidence of Acts 13:50. The range in dated evidence further allows a comparison with the later development in the expression’s reference to women of wealth and influence.

23 Josephus. *B.J.* 1.515; 4.416; *A.J.* 2.310; 4.21; 4.140; 4.174; 7.230; 10.213; 11.142; 11.203; 12.174 and 196; 12.183; 12.210; 13.17; 13.146; 14.9; 14.165; 14.379; 15.6; 15.253; 16.288 with exaggeration; 17.81; 17.301; 17.342; 18.7; 18.64; 18.99; 18.121; 18.273; 18.376; 19.304; 20.2; 20.4; 20.6; 20.53; 20.119; 20.125; 20.134; 20.180; 20.183; 20.194; *Vita* 9; 21; 21; 28; 56; 64; 66; 67; 108; 131; 163; 381; 410.

24 See, for example, Thucydides, 1.55: πρόωτοι ὄντες τῆς πόλεως; Dio Cassius, *Rom. Hist.* 55.12: διὰ τε τῶν χιλιάρχων καὶ διὰ τῶν ἐφ’ ἐκάστης πόλεως πρώτων; Polybius, *Hist.* 2.39.2: τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν ἐξ ἐκάστης πόλεως; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 679c; Chariton, *Chaer.* 6.7.10 (of Chaereas): πόλεως πρόωτος; Josephus, *B.J.* 4.416: οὗτος γὰρ ἦν οὐ μόνον ἀξιώματι καὶ γένει τῆς πόλεως πρόωτος; *Vita* 9: τῶν τῆς πόλεως πρώτων; and 410: οἱ πρόωτοι τῶν τῆς Συρίας δέκα πόλεων. To these references one can add numerous references to the leading men of either a region, people, *boule*, sect or family/tribe, e.g., *A.J.* 12.210: πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα μετὰ

Again, and as expected, we find no reference to women. Two texts, however, are of particular interest in that they juxtapose women and “leading men”: (a) In Josephus, *A.J.* 14.379, Herod speaks of Antigonos’ bribe that gained him the throne. He promises the Parthians 1,000 talents and five hundred women who would be from leading families (lit. of leading [men]) and of their race: γυναικάς πεντακοσίας, αἱ τῶν πρώτων καὶ τοῦ γένους τοῦ αὐτῶν ἔμελλον ἔσεσθαι. (b) Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 10.444f (63), cites a passage from Theopompus where Hegesilochus and his fellow Rhodian oligarchs are said to shamelessly disgrace many women who were noble-born and (wives/women) of the leading men (of Rhodes): καὶ πολλὰς μὲν γυναικάς εὐγενεῖς καὶ τῶν πρώτων ἀνδρῶν ἥσχυναν. In both instances, the women are described as being women of leading men.²⁵

Turning to the documentary evidence (as demonstrated in Table 1), the expression (ὁ) πρῶτος τῆς πόλεως is variously attested for leading men in the city, who appear to be predominantly of the bouleutic order.²⁶

Table 1 demonstrates that the expression (ὁ) πρῶτος τῆς πόλεως is consistently used of men who belong to the bouleutic order or who held formal civic magistracies. The expression connotes active participation in the city’s administrative structures. Particularly significant are the three inscriptions that reference both εὐσχήμων and πρῶτος (τῆς πόλεως/τάξεως) (*IG* VII 2712; *SEG* 65.1468; *CIG* 4412a cited n. 26), since both descriptors appear in the Acts passages under discussion (13:50; 17:4; 17:12). These inscriptions will now be discussed in more detail.

τῶν πρώτων τῆς χώρας; 20.6: τοὺς ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ τοὺς πρώτους τῶν Ἱεροσολυμιτῶν; *Vita* 64: πρὸς τὴν Τιβεριέων βουλὴν καὶ τοὺς πρώτους τοῦ δήμου; and 381: τῶν ἐκ τῆς βουλῆς οἱ πρώτοι. See also Chariton, *Chaer.* 2.4.4 (of Dionysius): ἀνὴρ ὁ πρῶτος τῆς Ἰωνίας; 2.5.4: Διονύσιός εἰμι, Μιλησίῳ πρῶτος; 2.11.2: τὸν μὲν Σικελίας, τὸν δὲ Ἰωνίας πρῶτον; and 3.6.5 (of Dionysius): τοῦ πρώτου τῶν Ἰώνων. See n. 26 below for epigraphical evidence related to this feature.

25 Of further consideration, it appears that the arthrous adjective is in the process of becoming a substantive (see *BDF* §263) and thus taking an independent referent, i.e., not one dependent on any other proximate noun.

26 Unsurprisingly in view of the administrative structure in Egypt, the expression πρῶτος τῆς πόλεως vel sim. was not found in a search of Papyri.info. However, in the case of inscriptions, similar constructions are found in which τῆς πόλεως is replaced by a larger administrative unit. See *SEG* 27.262 (Beroia, late 1st cent.): πρῶτον τῆς ἐπαρχείας; *SEG* 34.678 col. 3 (Stoboi, Macedonia, 3rd cent.): ὁ πρῶτος τῆς ἐ[π]αρχείας; *AArchSyr* 23 (1973) 41,2 (Apamea, undated): ὁ πρῶτος τῆς ἐπαρ[χ]είας; *TAM* V,2 976 (Lydia, Thyateira, undated): ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις τῆς Ἀσίας. Other relevant usages are: *CIG* 4412a (Iotape, western Cilicia, undated): ἀνδρὸς εὐσχημονεστάτου καὶ τῆς πρώτης τάξεως; *ISebastopolis* 5 (Caria, 2nd/3rd cent.): ἀνδρα [ε]ὐγενῆ καὶ τῆς πρώτης [τ]άξεως; *LPhrosias* 12 (Caria, Roman period): ἀνὴρ τῆς πρώτης [τ]άξεως; *IGR* III 115 (Sebastopolis, Pontus, mid 2nd cent.): ἀνδρὸς πρωτεύοντος ἐν τῇ μητροπόλει Ἀμασειᾶ.

TABLE 1 Inscriptional evidence for (ὁ) πρόωτος τῆς πόλεως—male referents

Category	Reference	Location	Date	Key expression	Notes
Votes of honour by the city related to magistracies or embassies	IG VII 2712	Akraiphia, Boeotia	After 37 CE	εὐσχημόνων καὶ πρόω των ἐκ τῶν πόλεων (lines 40–41)	Decree honouring Epaminondas; collocates εὐσχημῶν and πρόωτος; those of high standing and first in their cities declined embassy to the new Caesar.
	SEG 46.1524	Sardis	Late 1st/early 2nd cent	πρόωτον τῆς [πόλεως] (line 10)	The city of Sardinia refers to Julius Lepidus, a friend of Caesar, as the first of the city.
	SEG 65.1468 (= SEG 68.1302)	Kotenna, E. Pamphylia	Mid-2nd cent. CE	ἄνδρα εὐσχημόνα καὶ πρόωτον τῆς πόλεως (lines 3–4)	Vote of honour by the <i>boule</i> and <i>demos</i> to Stanamoas who is described as a man of good-stand- ing and first of the city.
	<i>Perinthos- Herakleia</i> 29	Thrace	2nd/3rd cent. CE	τὸν πρόωτον τῆς πόλεως καὶ τῶν Ἑλλήνων Μ(άρκον) Αὐρ(ήλιον) Θεμιστοκλέα (lines 2–4)	Vote of honour from the city.
	TAM II 189 col. 2a	W. Lycia	Imperial period	πρόω τον τῆς πόλεως γεγονότα Μ(άρκον) Αὐρ(ήλιον) Εὐχαρπτον Ἱεροκλέους ἄνδρα μεγαλόφρονα σώφρον[α] (lines 1–4)	<i>Boule</i> and <i>demos</i> honour M. Aurelius Eucarpus, first of the city, benefactor, kin of the Lycian archiphylax, priest and prophet of Artemis and Apollo. Note: the mother/wife commemorated in the

TABLE 1 Inscriptional evidence for (ὁ) πρόωτος τῆς πόλεως—male referents (*cont.*)

Category	Reference	Location	Date	Key expression	Notes
Related to Benefaction	<i>IGerusa</i> 188	Syria	200–250 CE	Μάρκον Αὐρήλιον Μ άρωνα Ἀμύντου Δημ η τ ρίου πρ<ὦ>τον τῆς πόλ εως (lines 1–3)	same inscription for her benefactions and roles as priestess and gymnasiarch is <i>not</i> named ‘first of the city.’ Possible example.
	<i>IK Sestos</i> 14	Kallipolis	Undated	ὁ δῆμος Λούκιον Φλάουιον Βαλίωνιον Πολιόνια τὸν πρόωτον τῆς πόλεως, εὐεργέτην πατριδος διὰ βίον καὶ πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων ἀγαθῶν α<ῖ>τι>ο<ν> γεγονότα (lines 1–4)	Vote of honour by city/ <i>demos</i> with no listing of magistracies.
	<i>ISardBR</i> 22	Lydia	ca. 100 BCE	Σωκράτην Πολεμαίου Παρθαλαν, τὸν πρόωτον τῆς πόλεως, διακεί μενον ἐκ προ όνων πρὸς τὸ θείον εὐσεβῶς (lines 4–7)	An example of an association (the sacred therapeutists of Zeus) crowning Sokrates Pardalas son of Polemaios (from among those who enter the shrine) as “the first/foremost man of the city.”
Religious assoc.	<i>IG</i> XII Suppl. 447	Thasos	150–200 CE	τὸν κρατ στον δοικηνά ριον καὶ πρόωτον τῆς πόλεως καὶ δις ἀρχ- ιερέα δι’ ὁ πλων (lines 3–8)	Honorary inscription for Titus Aelius Magnus, <i>hierophantes</i> (twice high priest of the imperial cult).

TABLE 1 Inscriptional evidence for (ὁ) πρόωτος τῆς πόλεως—male referents (*cont.*)

Category	Reference	Location	Date	Key expression	Notes
Personal dedications	<i>IStratonikeia</i> 75	Caria	Undated	τὸν διὰ πάντων ἐνάρτεον καὶ πρῶ - τον τῆς πόλεως Μ(άρκον) Οὐλ(πιον) (lines 1–4)	Honorary inscription dedicated by wife and children.
	<i>IG</i> IX,1 8	Phokis	Late 2nd/ early 3rd cent. CE	[τὸν φ]χιερέα καὶ πρῶ [τον τ]ῆς πόλεως (lines 2–3)	Honorary inscription for Marcus Ulpus, possibly dedicated by his brother.
	<i>Bargylia</i> 16	Caria	Imperial period	Μάρ(χος) Αὐρ(ήλιος) ΟΠΕΦΙΤΑ[-] [Σ]άμιος, ὁ πρόωτος [τῆς] πόλεως (lines 1–3)	Self-described.
	<i>TAM</i> V,3 1835	Philadelphia, Lydia	Imperial period	[- - - -]ΦΩΙ[- -] [(?) - φ]όρος πρόωτος [τῆς] πόλεως vac. (lines 1–3)	Fragmented epitaph.
Other	<i>IGR</i> IV 882	Phrygia	Undated	πρόωτον τῆς πό[λεως] τε καὶ τῆς ἐπαρ- χ[ε] []ας	Dedication to M. Ulpus by his granddaughter.
	<i>IG</i> XII,7 392	Amorgos	1st cent. BCE	οὐκ ἄν ἀγαθὸν καὶ πρώτων τῆς πόλεως ἀνδράν	The <i>boule</i> grants citizenship and property rights to Serapion who is described as being of a family of good and first men of the city.

- *IG VII 2712* is a decree of the *boule* (archons and synod) and *demos* to honour Epaminondas. In listing his benefactions, it speaks of the difficulty faced by the Achaean and Panhellenic synods in finding persons for the embassy to the new Caesar. Those who were of “high-standing” and “first in their cities” declined and called on others to volunteer instead (πο[λλ]ῶν τε συνεληλυθότων εὐσχημόνων καὶ πρώτων ἐκ τῶν πόλεων καὶ πάντων ἀρνούμενων καὶ ἐπι[κ]αλουμένων, lines 40–41).
- *SEG 65.1468* (*SEG 68.1302*) is a vote of honour by the *boule* and *demos* to Stanamoas, son of Setos, grandson of Stanamoas, who is described as a man of “good-standing” and “first of the city,” son of leading councillors (ἄνδρα εὐσχήμονα καὶ πρώτον τῆς πόλεως, ἐκ προγόνων προβουλικῶν). He himself had held several magistracies in the city, i.e., high-priesthood twice, archonship twice, eirenarchship twice, as well as his always being of service to the city. His brother pays for the accompanying statue in his memory.
- *CIG 4412a* (Iotape, western Cilicia, undated) is a statue base on which the *demos* honours: (a) Nana, daughter of Tetes and wife of Konon, for her virtue and wifely affection; and (b) her young son, Nineis, son of Konon, for his virtue and goodwill to the *demos*. In the former, Nana’s husband is recorded as “most high-standing and of the first rank” (γυναῖκα δὲ Κόνωνος δις τοῦ Νινει, ἀνδρὸς εὐσχημονεστάτου καὶ τῆς πρώτης τάξεως). Both the Konon and his son Nineis (Νινειν Κόνωνος, νεανίαν φιλόλογον, τάγματος βουλευτικοῦ) are of the bouleutic order.

As noted, these three inscriptions are of interest in that they collocate the same descriptors, namely, εὐσχήμων and πρῶτος (τῆς πόλεως), as used in Acts 13:50, 17:4, and 17:12. When read intertextually, as indeed they must be, all three expressions manifest the stylistic convention used by Luke to designate the reception of the gospel by prominent or devout women and leading men. When describing the women in Acts 13:50, Luke writes τὰς σεβομένας γυναῖκας τὰς εὐσχήμονας, “the devout women of high standing,” using an arthrous noun with a post-positioned arthrous adjective. When describing men in this same verse, he refers to them as τοὺς πρώτους τῆς πόλεως. Here we have a clear example of a substantive adjective in reference to a group of men (τοὺς πρώτους). In Acts 17:12, both men and women are being referred to with the one descriptor τῶν Ἑλληνίδων γυναικῶν τῶν εὐσχημόνων καὶ ἀνδρῶν οὐκ ὀλίγοι, “not a few Greek women and men of high standing.” In Acts 17:4, when speaking of “a great many of the devout Greeks” (τῶν τε σεβομένων Ἑλλήνων πλῆθος πολὺ), Luke references γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι. Given that (a) Luke speaks of “the first of the city” τοὺς πρώτους τῆς πόλεως in Acts 13:50 (a clear reference to leading men) using an arthrous substantive; (b) when describing women, they are

mentioned using an arthrous noun with a post-positioned arthrous adjective on two occasions (τάς σεβομένας γυναῖκας τάς εὐσχήμονας; τῶν Ἑλληνίδων γυναικῶν τῶν εὐσχημόνων); and (c) (ὁ) πρῶτος τῆς πόλεως was a common descriptor for prominent men at this time, it seems probable that when Luke speaks of γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρῶτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι, it would more naturally be read as “women of the leading men.”

It should be noted, however, that there are a small number of instances where women are referred to using the descriptor πρώτη (“first”). As demonstrated in Table 2, the earliest female uses of πρώτη, *IGR* IV 257 (Augustan period), *IG* XII 2 260 (1st cent. CE), and *MAMA* IV 151 (Augustan period), employ πρώτη in a sense that explicitly highlights the novelty of the woman’s achievement, a point that is clearly demonstrated by the use of “women” (and not a city or region) to modify “first” (πρῶτη τῶν γυναικῶν). This is consistent with the observation of Siekierka, Stebnicka, and Wolicki who comment that “the ‘first/first and only one’ was not a mere honorific title but rather highlighted the novelty of civic benefactions or offices ... she [i.e. the woman celebrated by inscription] was the first (and often at the time of the honouring, the only one) to hold a given office or undertake a certain type of action for the benefit of the citizen body.”²⁷

The expressions *first woman of the province* (*IGR* III 191, an honorific inscription for Claudia Balbina voted by the *phyle*) and *first of women* (*IG* XII,2 260),²⁸ however, are cited by Siekierka, Stebnicka, and Wolicki as possible “formal honorific titles.”²⁹ The first of these two inscriptions reads:

27 Siekierka et al., *Women and the Polis*, 119–121. In support of the reading “leading women,” J.M. Arlandson, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Christian Women, Wealth and Social Freedom,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. A. Levine; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004) 155–170, 156, cites *K.Aphrod.* 328 (late 1st cent.?), a vote of honour to Tata by the city’s *demoi* and *boule*, to conclude that “πρῶτος and πρώτη are used of men and women of wealth, prestige, and political power.” The inscription, however, supports only the contention that “first/leading” refers to men. In the first instance only the highest honours (ταῖς πρώταις τιμαῖς) were voted to her. She herself is not designated πρώτη. Moreover, it is her family that is called “first/leading” (αὐτὴν γένους πρώτου καὶ λαμπροῦ) with her father, grandfathers (both adoptive and natural) and husband named.

28 *IG* XII,2 260 is an honorific inscription for Philo. It is to be noted that γυναικῶν (at least in its reconstruction) is a genitive which depends on πρώτη; this is hardly the case at Acts 17:4 where in the translation “leading women” assumed that πρώτων is an attributive adjective which modifies γυναικῶν. The phrases may appear similar but are structurally different.

29 P. Siekierka, K. Stebnicka, and A. Wolicki, *Women and the Polis: Public Honorific Inscriptions for Women in the Greek Cities from the Late Classical to the Roman Period* (vol. 1;

TABLE 2 Inscriptional and literary evidence for πρόωτη—female referents

Reference	Location	Date	Key expression	Type	Issued by	Notes
<i>IGR</i> IV 257 ^[a]	Assos, Troas	Augustan period	πρόωτη γυναικῶν (lines 3–4)	Public benefaction	Herself	Lollia Antiochis; first among women to hold office of sacral queen according to ancestral custom; wife of Q. Lollius Philetairos.
<i>MAMA</i> IV 151 col. 1 ^[b]	Unknown	Augustan period	Πρωτεύσασαν (line 4)	Civic honorific	<i>Boule</i> and <i>demos</i>	Inscription too fragmentary to build an argument.
<i>IG</i> XII.2 260 ^[c]	Mitylene	1st cent. CE	πρόωταν γυναι[κῶν] (line 2)	Civic honorific	<i>Demos</i>	Philo; priestess of Isis; ending partly restored; honoured for virtue.
<i>IMagnMai</i> 158 ^[d]	Magnesia	1st cent. CE	ἀρχ[ιέ]ρειαν γε[νομένην] τῆς Ἀσίας π[ρ]ώτην τῶ[ν] γυναικῶν, (lines 5–6)	Civic honorific	<i>Boule</i> and <i>demos</i>	Juliane; first of women to hold office of archiereia of Asia; also gymnasiarch and priestess.
<i>IPriene</i> 147 ^[e] (<i>IK Priene</i> 305)	Priene, Ionia	1st/2nd cent. CE	[στ]εφανηφορήσα[σα] [πρ]ώτη γυναικῶν (lines 4–5)	Personal dedication	Self-dedicated	Phile; first woman to hold the office of stephanephoros.

[a] *IGR* IV 257: [Α]ολλ[ι]α Ἀντιο[χίς] ἡ γυ[νὴ] ἢ Κοῦντου [Α]ολλ[ι]ου Φιλεταίου, βασιλεύσα[σα] κατὰ τὰ πάτρια, πρόωτη γυναικῶν, τὸ βαλάνθιον καὶ τὰ ἐπόμενα τῶι βαλάνθῳ ἀνέθηκεν Ἀφοδείτῃ Ἰουλίᾳ καὶ τῶι δήμῳ. See also *SEG* 46.1560.

[b] *MAMA* IV 151 col. 1: [ἡ] βουλὴ καὶ ὁ δήμος ἐ[τε]λ[ε]ι[μ]ησεν [τὴν] δεῖνα τοῦ δεῖνος] τοῦ Παίονος [γυναῖκα δὲ ...] λου τοῦ [... ἐν τῇ πόλει(?)] πρωτεύσασαν.

[c] *IG* XII.2 260: Φῶλον Διαφέ[λ]νῃ, γύναικα δὲ {τοῦ δ.}, -- -- -- πρώταν γυναι[κῶν] -- -- -- ἀρέτας] καὶ φιλαγαθίας [ἔνεκα τὰς πρὸς -- --].

[d] *IMagnMai* 158: Ἡ βουλὴ [καὶ ὁ δήμος ἐτείμησαν] Ἰουλιανῇ[ν] Εὐδο[τ]ρα[ν] τοῦ Φα[ρ]?, [νοστήρατ[ου], γυναι[κ]α δὲ Ἀλ[κ]ίφρονο[ς] τ[οῦ] τῆς Ἀσ[ίας] ἀρχι[ε]ρέως, ἀρχ[ιέ]ρειαν γε[νομένην] τῆς Ἀσίας π[ρ]ώτην τῶ[ν] γυναικῶν] στεφαν[ι]φόρ[ον], γυμν[ασιάρχον,] ι(έ)ρειαν Ἀφ[ροδ]εῖτης καὶ ι(έ) θεᾶς Ἀγριπ[π]είνης [μητ]ρὸς διὰ (β) [ιου?], ι(έ)ρειαν δὲ καὶ ι(έ) φέσω Δι[α]μήτρ[ος] Δι[α]μήτρ[ος] βίου πάσι[ς] ἀρετ[αῖς] ἐν[εκεν].

[e] *IPriene* 147: [Φιλ]ῃ Ἀπολλωνίου, [γυ]νὴ δὲ Θεσσαλῶ [τ]οῦ Πολυδεύου, [στ]εφανηφορήσα[σα] πρ[ώ]τη γυναικῶν ἀν[ι]έ[θηκεν] παρ' ἑαυτῆς τ[ὸ] ἐργόχον τοῦ [ὑ]δατ[ος] καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ πόλει ι(έ) ὑδραγῶγια (= *IK Priene* 305).

TABLE 2 Inscriptional and literary evidence for πρότη—female referents (*cont.*)

Reference	Location	Date	Key expression	Type	Issued by	Notes
<i>IGR</i> III 191 ^[f]	Ankyra	First half 2nd cent. CE	πρώτην τῆς ἐπαρχίας γυναῖκα (lines 4–6)	Civic honorific	Phyle (civic tribe)	Claudia Balbina; held ancestral office of sacral queen; wife of Claudius Arrianus of senatorial status; ‘mother of the metropolis.’
<i>TAM</i> II 1204 ^[g]	Phaselis, E. Lycia	Post 212 CE	πρώτην τῆς πόλεως (line 6)	Personal dedication	Mother	Aurelia Bettia; ‘modest and husband-loving woman and first of the city’; priestess of the divine Augusti; husband holder of all magistracies. Notably a personal, not civic, dedication.
<i>Acts of Paul and Thecla</i> (ATH 26)	Iconium	Late 2nd cent. CE	Ἰκονιέων εἰμι πρότη	Literary/ hagiographic	Self- described	Thecla claims status as ‘first of the Iconians’ in response to Alexander, <i>σπιράρχης</i> ... Ἀντιοχέων πρότος; cannot exercise civic leadership comparable to her fiancé or Alexander.
<i>Martyrium Pistecos et Elpidos</i>	Rome	7th–9th cent. CE	αἱ πρόται τῆς πόλεως γυναῖκες	Literary/ hagiographic		Article precedes πρόται; late literary set phrase.
<i>Martyrium Sophiae</i> 14	Rome	7th–9th cent. CE	αἱ πρόται τῆς πόλεως Ῥώμης	Literary/ hagiographic		Article precedes πρόται; late literary set phrase.
<i>Vita Gregorii Agrigenti</i> 57	Agrigentum	8th–9th cent. CE	πρώτην τῆς πόλεως	Literary/ hagiographic		No article; prospective title offered as an incentive.

[f] *IGR* III 191: ἀφ[χιέ]ρειαν γε[νομένην] τῆς Ἀσίας [ς περ]ώτην τῶ[ν] γυναίκων,] Κ(Λ) <(αυδίαν) βαλβεΐναν, τὴν ἐκ προγόνων βασιλίσσαν καὶ πρώτην τῆς ἐπαρχίας γυναῖκα
ΚΛ(αυδίου) Ἀρριανοῦ συνκλητικῶς μητέρα τῆς μητροπόλεως, ὡ(π) <ερ[β] > αλολομένην <π>άν[τα] <ς τοὺς καθ’ ἐ[α] <[υ] <[τ] > ἡν ταῖς εἰς τ[ῆ] <[π] > <[α] <[ρ]ιδὰ φιλοτιμαίς, φυλὴ ε’
Δ[ὺς τ] <[ρα] <[π] > ε[ζών φ] <[ολαρχ] <[ούτος] > Μ. Φλ(αυδίου) Ἀ[— — —].

[g] See main text for translation.

Claudia Balbina, having held the ancestral office of sacral queen and first (woman) of the province, wife of Claudius Arrianus of senatorial status, mother of the metropolis, exceeding all her contemporaries by virtue of her love of honour to the fatherland, the 5th *phyle* of Zeus Trapezon (honours), Marcus Flavius A[...] being *phylarch*.

The text of *IGR* III 191 lines 2–5 (τὴν ἐκ προγόνων βασιλίσσαν καὶ πρώτην τῆς ἐπαρχίας) might be usefully compared to another inscription (*IGR* IV 257, Troas, Augustan period) where Lollia Antiochis, after being described as “having held the office of sacral queen according to ancestral custom first among women” (βασιλεύ[σασα] κατὰ τὰ πάτρια πρώτη γυναικῶν). In *IGR* III 191, one is tempted to question the reading of κέ (καί) and to understand “first woman of the province” as a reference to her being the first woman to hold the provincial priesthood, but this is not necessarily the case.

As regards the second inscription *IG* XII,2 260, a female, named Philo, only appears as pre-eminent among women³⁰ (i.e., it does not concern her status in relation to the city or province), though she is honoured by the *demos* as a priestess of Isis. One also notes the lacunae in the inscription which must leave any precise interpretation open.

One late inscription, that should give pause to any speculation that the expression was only used of leading men, is *TAM* II 1204. It reads:

To Aurelia Bettia, daughter of Eukratidos son of Apellas, citizen of Phaselis, having been a modest and husband-loving woman and first of the city (γυναῖκα σώφρονα καὶ φίλανδρον καὶ πρώτην τῆς πόλεως γενομένην), having acted piously, with pride and honoured as priestess of the divine Augusti, having been wife of the most noteworthy Aurelius Zeniketos, son, grandson and great grandson of Zeniketos, a citizen of Phaselis, holder of all magistracies and loving of homeland. Aurelia Bettia, daughter and granddaughter of Kolalemis, also known as Myrtilis, citizen of Phaselis, in memory and goodwill for her sweetest daughter.

Here, a mother memorialises her deceased daughter. There is clear evidence of pride within the family; one notes the extended genealogies, the compounding of modifiers for the manner of her daughter’s priesthood, the continued repetition of the family’s deep connection to Phaselis, and the all-encompassing nature of her husband’s magistracies. That said, one further notes that the

Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2021) 120, citing §914 (977–978) and §352.1 (513). Omitted from consideration is §930 at 992 as the critical “in the city” is restored before πρωτεύσασαν.

30 Cf. for example, *IPriene* 147 and *IMagnMai* 158 (1st cent.).

inscription is not a civic but personal dedication, unlike those for males listed above. “First of the city” is a title afforded to her sweetest daughter by a loving and proud mother. It is risky, of course, to suggest on the basis of a single inscription that this title has been adapted from the civic domain for use in the personal domain and that thereby the title’s application broadened to include females as well. However, the developing fluidity of terminology and statuary practice between the private and the civic spheres is well documented and occurred at the same time as women were assuming a range of offices in the cities.³¹ We will return to the expression “first woman of the city” momentarily, when we discuss its uses in Christian hagiography. However, in view of *TAM* II 1204 it is best to retain the reading *κέ* (*καί*) in *IGR* III 191.

Returning to *IGR* III 191, Claudia Balbina was honoured by her *phyle* or civic tribe/division in view of her holding the ancestral office of priestess, the status of her husband, her title as mother of the metropolis, and her benefactions which exceeded those of both male and female contemporaries (note masc. *πάν[τα]ς τοὺς καθ’ ἑ[α]υτήν*). However, unlike *TAM* II 1204, the honour is civic and offers confirmation of the broadened application of the title to a woman who was not, however, a member of the decision-making authorities (i.e., of either the *boule* or *demos*). Indeed, the honour itself appears to have been moved by and voted on by men. Even so, it would appear that the expression’s application was not altogether fixed to a specific gendered class; rather its application has been broadened to include women of wealth and influence.

To conclude this section, then, both the syntax and semantics of Acts 17:4 make “women of leading men” the more salient interpretation, but “leading women” remains a possible translation. As observed in the introduction, the evidence indicates a broadening of usage over time and its application to women of elite families who exercised wealth and influence in their respective communities. Further evidence for this broadened meaning is found in Christian hagiography. For example, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (late 2nd cent.) Thecla’s fiancé, Thamyris, in conformity with customary usage, declares *εἰμι γὰρ πρῶτος τῆς πόλεως* (Ath 11). Later, however, in protest at the unwanted advance of Alexander, *συριάρχης ... Ἀντιοχέων πρῶτος*, Thecla declares her present position as a *ξένη* in Antioch but then goes on to affirm her status as “first of the Iconians” (*Ἰκονιέων εἰμι πρώτη*, Ath 26).³² Though she

31 R. van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation. Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1996) 55–81 for civic offices, and 165–190 for the intrusion of terminology from the private to public sphere.

32 Thecla’s status might also be inferred from her intended marriage to Thamyris as well as the later patronage of queen Tryphaena. In its paraphrase of Ath, the *Life and Miracles of Thecla* (ca. 470 CE) changes the first-person declaration by Thecla (*Ἰκονιέων εἰμι πρώτη*, Ath 26) to a second-person address to her (*πρώτῃ δὲ πόλεις LM 4.22*) and places it in

could not exercise civic leadership comparable to that of either her fiancé or Alexander, Thecla makes a claim to her civic status in a possible attempt to avoid *damnatio ad bestias*.³³ Further examples might be cited for the expression's continued use for Christian women of high-standing.³⁴

4.2 Co-text

Elsewhere in Acts "the first" refers to men. Thus, at Acts 13:50 we read of the leading men of the city: τὰς σεβομένας γυναῖκας τὰς εὐσχήμονας καὶ τοὺς πρῶτους τῆς πόλεως. The phrase τοὺς πρῶτους τῆς πόλεως occurs here in a verse that clearly parallels the form and content of 17:4 and 12. Acts 25:2 speaks of the chief-priests and leading men laying charges against Paul before Festus: ἐνεφάνισάν τε αὐτῷ οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι τῶν Ἰουδαίων³⁵ κατὰ τοῦ Παύλου. Acts 28:7 narrates that Publius owned land within a part of Malta and that he was a leading man of that island: Ἐν δὲ τοῖς περὶ τὸν τόπον ἐκεῖνον ὑπῆρχεν χωρία τῷ πρῶτῳ τῆς νήσου ὀνόματι Ποπλίῳ. After Paul had arrived in Rome, the leaders of the Judaeans assembled to hear him speak, Acts 28:17: Ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ ἡμέρας τρεῖς συγκαλέσασθαι αὐτὸν τοὺς ὄντας τῶν Ἰουδαίων πρῶτους. Equally, we note that Acts 25:23 (ἀνδράσιν τοῖς κατ' ἐξοχὴν τῆς πόλεως) recognises that males play the leading roles in civic life. More remote co-texts are Luke 19:47: Καὶ ἦν διδάσκων τὸ καθ' ἡμέραν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ· οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν

Thamyris' address as he tries to dissuade Thecla from an action that would cause shame (Ath 10). As Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Life and Miracle of Thecla. A Literary Study* (Hellenic Studies 13; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006) 28, observes, Thamyras attempts here "to play on her aristocratic sensibilities."

33 See J.W. Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (WUNT 270; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 141, n. 12.

34 Cf. *Martyrium sancti Procopii* 2 lines 9–10 and 19–20 (post 4th cent.): Θεοδοσία δὲ τις, συγκλητικὴ πρώτη τῆς πόλεως Αἰλίων; *Passio mulierum quadraginta et Ammonis* 2 lines 15–16 (post 4th cent.): ὅθεν Κελσίνα ἡ λαμπροτάτη καὶ πρώτη τῆς πόλεως καὶ αὐτὴ ἀποστήσασα ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν καὶ σέβεται Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν; Georgius Alexandrinus, *Vita Joannis Chrysostomi* 16 lines 147–154 (7th cent.): Αἱ δὲ πρῶται τῆς πόλεως γυναῖκες, αἰσχυρόμεναι τῷ ὀχλῷ συνεξελεῖν; *Martyrium sanctorum martyrum atque virginum Pisteos et Elpidos et Agapae et matris earum Sophiae* 14 lines 9–16 (7–9th cent.): Συνήλθον οὖν αἱ πρῶται τῆς πόλεως Ῥώμης ἅμα τῇ μητρὶ; Leontius Monachus, *Vita et miracula sancti Gregorii Agrigenti* 57 lines 2–4 (8–9th cent.): καὶ παρέχωμέν σοι χρήματα πολλὰ καὶ ποιοῦμεν σε πρῶτην τῆς πόλεως.

35 At Acts 25:15 οἱ πρῶτοι τῶν Ἰουδαίων are designated as οἱ πρεσβύτεροι τῶν Ἰουδαίων. The high priest(s) variously act in concert with: (1) οἱ πρεσβύτεροι (Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52; Acts 4:2; 23:4; 24:1); (2) τὸ πρεσβυτέριον (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5); and (3) τὸ συνέδριον (Luke 22:66; Acts 5:27). See Acts 5:21 for an apparent distinction between τὸ συνέδριον and ἡ γερουσία τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ. On the designations of the Jerusalem council as *gerousia*, *sanhedrin* or *presbiterion* see E. Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (5 vols.; ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Black; London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 2:200–209, esp. 206.

ἀπολέσαι καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι τοῦ λαοῦ; and Mark 6:21: Καὶ γενομένης ἡμέρας εὐκαιροῦ ὅτε Ἡρώδης τοῖς γενεσίοις αὐτοῦ δεῖπνον ἐποίησεν τοῖς μεγιστάσιν αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῖς χιλιάρχοις καὶ τοῖς πρῶτοις τῆς Γαλιλαίας.

One might object that it is not surprising that the number of instances where males are designated “first” should outnumber that for females. After all, men more often played leading roles and were celebrated for it by their communities. However, the argument cuts both ways. Why would Luke leave the expression ambiguous and likely to be construed as “women of the leading men” if that were not his intention? A more significant objection, however, is that when πρῶτος is nominalized to indicate a leader, it is used in the above instances with qualification by either city, region or ethnos where that leadership is exercised. Clearly, such a qualification is missing at Acts 17:4, and one must ask why this is the case. Perhaps an answer lies in its narrative setting where the reader was to infer from 17:1 that they were “leaders” of Thessalonica. However, this is not quite the same as τῶν πρῶτων τῆς πόλεως.

4.3 Context

What exactly does it mean to say that the women in 17:4 were “leading”? In the Graeco-Roman world of the 1st to 3rd cent. CE women could hold both magistracies and liturgies; however, as Riet van Bremen points out, a number of magistracies were not open to them and they were never members of the deliberative bodies of the Greek city, i.e. the *boule* and *ekklesia*.³⁶ Indeed, she argues that it is wrong to speak of “female magistrates” if, by that, one understands that “women had formal access to political power and had administrative and deliberative duties to carry out.”³⁷ Instead, the offices they held were “largely nominal or eponymous” which carried a “significant liturgical component” (i.e. they entailed personal expenditure)³⁸ and required “public activity

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- 36 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 55–56: “[women] never had direct and formal access to any of the civic bodies or magistracies which entailed (at least in theory) voting, deliberating, decision-making, the supervision of the marketplace, of buildings, of food-provision or the keeping of public order; nor did they serve their cities as ambassadors.” Men, because of their membership in *boule* and *ekklesia*, were likely to be continuously engaged in civic affairs; they had a political career, as it were. Women, however, held magistracies (*archai*) and liturgies (*leitourgiai*) that were usually only for a year, and were often voted to the positions by the male members of the *boule* or *ekklesia*. See van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 85–86. See further Siekierka et al., *Women and the Polis*, 128–131, and Sviatoslav Dmitriev, *City Government in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 178–188, for a brief survey of female offices.
- 37 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 4. For offices and liturgies held in the Roman period, see 55–81.

- 38 From 2nd century BCE the *financial* component started to become an increasing element in priesthoods and magistracies. In some cities, this was caused by a lack of public funds

only in a ritual and ceremonial sense.” That said, social status did accrue to the women who filled such magistracies and/or liturgies, and it was through these that women and their families could exert influence in the city.

On the question of female wealth and euergetism, additional qualification is needed. There is in the epigraphical evidence an association between the woman honoured and “the civic activities of her relatives and ancestors.”³⁹ As Siekierka et al. note concerning 1st to 3rd century inscriptions: “Private inscriptions issued with a public body’s sanction usually contained more information on the honoured women’s familial connections or offices held by her family members.”⁴⁰ Moreover, van Bremen argues that a search for female “independence from” (sc. father, husband, brothers etc.) is anachronistic and, in light of the role played by elite families in civic life, she prefers to call female participation “belonging to” (sc. the family).⁴¹ In other words, their role was essentially embedded in and circumscribed by the family. As such, the pressure for a woman to assume an office and/or expend her wealth was transmitted through her male relatives and “internalized” within the family,⁴² with this

to cover the costs of civic and religious offices. And it was this civic need that prompted them to turn to wealthy families which included their women.

39 It was not just the woman who attained prestige by her office-holding. The family as a unit also gained in prestige by it, as van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 296, concludes: “Family ideology, rather than an increase in female independence and power, explains the presentation of joint civic generosity, and the harmoniously united couple symbolized much beyond their domestic felicity.” The prestige of office-holding is also made manifest, for example, in the claim to be the first woman to hold that office. See van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 42–4, 57–58. On joint office-holding at 114–141, and the joint expending of assets at 283–295. She further suggests that it was the practice of joint office-holding in the imperial cult which provided “the model for the development in civic office-holding” (133).

40 Siekierka et al., *Women and the Polis*, 108. Siekierka et al. also note a growing practice of making what was formerly implicit in the honouring of women now explicit in naming the male relatives (92–97). They observe: “women started being publicly praised for their relations with their relatives, especially husbands and children” (13) and they further speak of “the entwining of the two spheres: the public and the private” (94). For example, see *IG XII* 5, 29. The decree was issued by the *demos* in honour of Ariston’s wife erected “at his own cost.”

41 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 45 and 121. Also see 46: “many, if not most, of women’s civic titles and activities were directly generated by such a system of obligations, which itself was based largely on an assessment of wealth. They were further determined by family traditions and privileges”; and 113: “In putting too much emphasis on self-reliance and independence we are distorting the very values of the society to which these women belonged.”

42 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 54. In terms of the Roman period, the process of Romanization extended Roman citizenship to the local elite and aristocracy. Those

pressure persisting after the death of male relatives, be they father, husband or son.⁴³ Even a woman's appointment to an office or liturgy was a decision of an all-male process.⁴⁴

And as to the source of a woman's wealth and power to administer it, van Bremen⁴⁵ argues for the persistence of the legal requirement that a Greek woman have a *kyrios* or guardian to safeguard the interests of her family. It appears that women “acted always under the authority of a guardian” but equally a guardian could not act alone on behalf of the woman whom he represented.⁴⁶ Guardianship, however, was just one element in male control, with inheritance always favouring the male offspring or with endogamous marriage (daughter to uncle or cousin to cousin marriage) safeguarding a family's wealth. Social norms also restricted women. Independent female wealth is found to be limited to a number of instances: (1) where there were only female offspring⁴⁷ and where there was no adoption of a male heir; (2) when a wife inherited from her husband or, on his death, her dowry was returned to her; or (3) when the woman belonged to one of the wealthiest families that were able to fund her beyond her dowry.⁴⁸ Points (1) and (2) indicate the high

who attained either a senatorial or equestrian rank might hold posts around the empire and, as unaccompanied officials, relied on their wives to uphold the family's prestige at home (108).

43 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 78 and 111–112. In terms of younger women holding offices, she finds that the associated costs were often paid by their relatives and that these relatives were mentioned in the commemorative inscription: “It is clear from a great many inscriptions that most women acted as members of families rather than individuals (as did men)” (96; see also 247–250). All the same, many women who were commemorated often appear to have possessed their own wealth but the number of commemorations for them is less than that for males. This arises from the limited range of civic offices and liturgies they could hold and the legal and social impediments to their acquisition of wealth (195). See also Siekierka et al., *Women and the Polis*, 74–75.

44 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 301, concludes: “The overall structures that shaped civic euergetism were dominated by men, and it was the decisions of all-male civic bodies (council, magistrates, assembly) that determined who would take on an office or liturgy. These decisions were political, social and familial all at once, for families that dominated the council and the decision-making process were the fathers, and husbands, and brothers of our women.”

45 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 208–236, esp. 225 and 230.

46 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 278.

47 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 256, estimates that there was a 1 in 5 chance of only female offspring.

48 van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 270–271 and 283–296.

correlation between a woman's age and the wealth that she might independently possess.⁴⁹

5 Conclusion

The present study has surveyed the use of *πρωτος* in reference to male and female leadership. According to RT, a hearer will accept the most easily derived meaning that is relevant to an utterance's situation. In terms of our survey the reading "women/wives of leading men" appears to be the most easily derived meaning. In sum:

(1a) In terms of syntax, "women/wives of leading men" is the more straightforward reading of *γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων* in Acts 17:4. The post-positioned arthrous *τῶν πρώτων* is more naturally read as a substantive governed by the genitive *γυναικῶν* than as an attributive adjective modifying it. It is possible that the author felt that the indefinite noun, *γυναικῶν*, was in need of further clarification with the arthrous adjective *τῶν πρώτων* added either as an after-thought or by way of emphasis. But to read "women, the leading ones" would be unusual and requires the interposition of an unnecessary assumption.

(1b) In terms of semantics, if the author intended the reader to infer from Acts 17:1 that these were "leading women" of Thessalonica, then such a reading would represent the earliest extant evidence for the usage. The inscriptional and literary evidence surveyed above shows that the adjective *πρωτη*, when applied to women as possible "formal honorific titles," does not occur prior to the first half of the 2nd century CE (*IGR* III 191), and even then with significant qualifications. The semantic evidence makes clear that even if "leading women" is retained as the translation, the expression cannot be taken to imply that the women exercised a role analogous to the male *πρωτοι* of a city. Rather, the expression would refer to women belonging to prominent families with significant wealth and social influence. As such, its sense would more closely align with the descriptor *εὐσχήμονες* used of women elsewhere in Acts (13:50; 17:12).⁵⁰

49 See further van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation*, 239–261 and 236: "Freedom to act appears more connected with the woman's age and familial circumstances."

50 1 and 2 Thessalonians offer little help in resolving the ambiguity of Acts 17:4. Reliance on wealthy patrons might be read into Paul's warning that believers avoid idleness and work to support themselves (1 Thess 4:11–12; 5:14; and 2 Thess 3:6–13). Equally, it might be read as a response to their eschatological expectations which Paul seeks to dampen.

(2) In terms of co-text, the employment of *πρώτος* in Acts, and more particularly at Acts 13:50, favours the translation “women/wives of leading men.”⁵¹ The absence of any analogous use of *πρώτη* for women elsewhere in Luke-Acts and the consistent employment of *πρώτος* in Acts for men who exercise formal civic authority, i.e., leading men of the city (13:50), chief priests and leaders of the Judaeans (25:2), the leading man of Malta (28:7), and the leaders of the Judaeans in Rome (28:17), strengthens the reading “leading men.”

And lastly, (3) the contextual evidence requires scholars to reconsider the *inference* that has been drawn from the translation “leading women.” It is evident that, over time, the expression’s meaning was broadened by application to women; however, when applied to women, its meaning differed from when applied to men. When women in the first to third centuries CE are described as “leading” or “first,” that designation reflects their wealth, their family connections to the male political class, and at most the holding of largely nominal or liturgical positions. Therefore, if the translation “leading women” is retained, then one needs to delineate carefully the nature of that leadership/authority/influence. Authority to make decisions for the community, to represent it officially, to interpret its constitution, etc., was in the hands of men. One cannot properly translate *τοὺς πρώτους τῆς πόλεως* (Acts 13:50) by “leading men of the city” and *γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων* (Acts 17:4) by “leading women” and mean the same thing. However, when both Rome and wealthy local families were increasingly exerting power and influence in the cities, the models of traditional civic and communal institutions were often reconfigured in a *de facto* (though not necessarily *de jure*) manner. In such circumstances, terminology might be fluid, and the ambiguity in Acts 17:4 an expression of that fluidity and transition in civic structure. Even so, “women/wives of leading men” appears to be the more contextually sound translation, with the term *πρώτοι* referring to the leading men through whose families women exercised social influence.

51 Under such circumstances, the reading in the “Western” text can be excused as an attempt to make more explicit what was for the scribe implicit in the text. Cf. also Acts 1:14 where the absence of the article before *γυναῖξιν* in the “Alexandrian” text leaves the women’s identity ambiguous and thus open to interpretation. Kurek-Chomycz, “Is There an ‘Anti-Priscan’ Tendency,” 122 n. 39: “The addition of *καὶ τέκνοις* in Codex Bezae does not necessarily indicate that the copyists wanted to marginalize the role of women as witnesses by identifying them as ‘wives’ of the apostles. It could just as well suggest that they made more explicit what according to them was already implicit in the text.”