



CRITICAL REVIEW

Marc Mendoza & Borja Antela-Bernárdez (eds.), *Elite Women in Hellenistic History, Historiography, and Reception*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2024. Pp. 170. ISBN 9782503611068.

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This book, based on a panel held in 2019 at the Celtic Classics Conference in Coimbra University, aims to fill a gap in scholarship; namely, the scarcity of truly comprehensive works dealing with the role of women in history and the historiographical tradition of the Hellenistic period. As its editors prudently acknowledge in their introduction, it does so partially. Although its chronological and geographical scope is wide (studying cases from the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD, and from Epirus to India), the volume remains indebted to the traditional approach of focusing solely on elite women belonging to the major Hellenistic royal families. It is to be regretted that the two panel contributions focusing on non-royal women could not be included in this volume, as they could have provided an interesting counterpoint to the views which are presented here. The interdisciplinary approach of the contributions which are included, however, remains a strong asset, as it allows the reader to compare perspectives based on historical, archaeological and even iconographic studies.

The first chapter, written by Elisabeth Carney, deals with naming conventions in the Aeacid dynasty of Epirus (fifth century to 232 BC), with a special focus on the names of women. The study shows that this dynasty developed a specific naming system which allowed for less repetition than other royal families (the Ptolemies specifically come to mind), and yet showed a great consistency with the mythical origins they claimed for themselves: the house of Aeacus and the legendary rulers of Troy. In the specific case of women, their names, too, follow these patterns, proving that females played a similar role to males, serving as modern embodiments of their heroic ancestors. A study of the ancient historiographical sources seems to corroborate the existence of such conscious imitations in their lives, as well as in the propaganda around them.

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The second chapter is the work of Marco Ferrario, and takes us to Central Asia and Achaemenid strategies of administration and control of rural areas (“paradise politics”) from an archaeological perspective. The comprehensive data presented, and the author’s interpretation of it, serve, in turn, to illuminate and contextualize ancient notices of women from the local aristocracy marrying Achaemenid and later Macedonian rulers and becoming key actors in their respective courts. The most famous instance is undoubtedly the union between Alexander the Great and Roxana, daughter of a Sogdian aristocrat, which has traditionally been interpreted as an extraordinary event, but should be better understood as a power move by the Macedonian king to secure political alliances and access the economic resources of the area, in the wake of similar policies adopted by his Achaemenid predecessors.

Branko van Oppen de Ruiten is the author of a third chapter that examines the controversial goings-on at the court of Lysimachus, one of the most powerful of the *diadochoi* after the death of Alexander. Throughout his research, van Oppen de Ruiten has firmly defended the existence of open polygamy in the king’s household, against other scholars who interpret his different marriages as successive events, involving wives who died or were divorced to leave room to the next one. Central to this reconstruction is the spin he gives to the complex issue of the coexistence of Lysimachus’ third wife, the Persian Amastris, and his fourth one, Ptolemy I’s daughter Arsinoe (the future (in)famous Arsinoe II Philadelphos of Egypt). He proposes that Amastris, far from having been divorced prior to her husband’s marriage to Arsinoe, remained in Bithynia as her husband’s representative and close collaborator, even striking coinage in her own name where she presents herself as queen. With this, he not only challenges the belief in Lysimachus’ monogamy, but also the bias which leads historians to study the marital relations of Hellenistic rulers by looking at them through the distorted prism of personal and amorous motives.

The fourth chapter, by Altay Coşkun, continues this theme, though the focus shifts to the court of the Seleucid king Antiochus II Theos, and the even more complex conflict between his wives Laodice I and Berenice Phernophoros, daughter of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, as reflected by ancient historiography and epigraphy. The author reviews the hostile tradition that depicts Laodice I as a prototype of the power hungry ‘evil queen’, responsible for the murders of her husband and her rival, which he considers to be an exaggeration fuelled by the misogynistic attitude of ancient historians, and also based on fundamental misunderstandings about the balance of power in the Seleucid court which can be traced back to Ptolemaic propaganda during the Third Syrian War. He also concludes that Laodice not being given the title of *basilissa* should not be understood as proof of her lack of influence compared to Berenice, who wasn’t given the title either and whose offspring was firmly behind Laodice’s in the order of dynastic succession. Aside from a comprehensive review of the literature, Coşkun also addresses the responses to his



previous publications, defending his interpretations or adjusting them as needed, which gives the scholarly reader the satisfaction of witnessing a debate in progress.

The fifth chapter focuses on the youngest Hellenistic dynasty, the Attalids of Pergamon. Its author, María Dolores Mirón, again addresses issues of dynastic self-representation through women, as reflected in historiographical sources and epigraphy. Though with the *caveat* that this subject of research provides a limited number of examples for study (we only know of two Pergamene *basilissai*, Apollonis and Stratonice), she argues convincingly in favour of the existence of a well-defined model, a template on how to be an Attalid queen that is clearly distinguishable from the models followed by other ruling families of the Hellenistic era. This model privileges the importance of the *basilissa* as a mother, who educates her children and ensures the cohesion of the royal family. Her public duties are not political or military in nature, but instead focus on evergetism and religious piety, echoing traditional Greek views about the role of the woman in the *polis* and, perhaps more importantly given the nature of the kingdom's main political alliances, the ideal of the Roman matron.

Finally, in the last chapter, Ashwini Lakshminarayanan takes us to the farthest reach of Hellenistic influence, the kingdom of Gandhara (located between north-west Pakistan and north-east Afghanistan), for the study of visual representations of a well-known episode of the Buddha's life: the dream of his mother Maya, by which he was divinely conceived and his birth was announced. This iconographic study, which follows the refreshing recent trend of providing an analysis of the images based on their visual narrative structure instead of considering them as mere illustrations of texts, serves to exemplify some of the various and complex ways in which Greek and Roman influences travelled eastwards, and were adopted by local artists who transformed them and used them for their own purposes.

This volume of interdisciplinary studies on elite women, despite its geographical, chronological and interdisciplinary scope, manages the feat of coming across as cohesive, with thematic similarities discernible between Chapters 1 and 5, and between 3 and 4, as well as numerous, dynamic echoes that attest to the fact that this is not a random compilation, but the ultimate product of a conference panel where fruitful scholarly exchanges were held and became the basis for a carefully curated volume. It is also worthy of mention that it comes with an index of names and places, as well as a map and iconographic reproductions that help navigate the respective theoretical complexities of Chapters 2 and 6. It is our opinion, however, that the other chapters, dealing with dynasty politics, might have similarly benefitted from the inclusion of accompanying material, such as genealogical trees and chronological lists of kings, to make it easier to follow by non-experts on specific dynasties and periods. Bibliographical sections are divided by chapters, and notes are footnotes rather than endnotes, which is always a good decision. The layout is elegant and the editing professional (the only problem we found with it is the regrettably low quality of the images in the electronic version), and we believe it to be a worthy addition to any library specialized in ancient historical studies.