

Femmes grecques de l'Orient romain

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Review by

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Besides some better known cases of queens like Cleopatra, Semiramis or Zenobia, ordinary women in the Roman East are often invisible in studies of the ancient world. Despite the abundant textual (mostly epigraphic) and iconographical evidence, they have been neglected for a long time in the different areas of research. Even when this social group occasionally appeared in scientific works, the women were presented only as wives or mothers of some important personalities, but never acquired a place of their own within the domain of ancient history. Since the early 2000s, the popularity of topics focusing on the role of women and the history of gender in many ancient societies has been rising. To mention just some of the most recent studies: the project Eurykleia on Greek women directed by Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet at the research center ANHIMA (Paris), the PhD thesis (University of Aarhus) of Signe Krag[1] on women in Palmyra, and the research on women, families and gender in Ancient Mesopotamia of Saana Svärd from the University of Helsinki.[2]

This book is the result of three different conferences held in Paris in 2012, 2013, and 2014 and contains two contributions in English and eleven in French. However, the volume does not include all conference papers for various reasons as stated by the editor Sophie Lalanne in the introduction (pp. 9-18). Rather, the publication presents just a fraction of the vast material on women in the Greek-speaking societies of the Roman East from the reign of Augustus to the end of the Severan dynasty. The purpose of the volume is to portray the history of women in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. The choice of such a theme is shaped by the necessity of “donner aux femmes une visibilité” in the scholarly discussion.

The essays are organized in three sections. The first part “The Place of Women in Religious Life”, concentrates on the textual evidence from Asia Minor for the role of women in the different cults. It is opened by an extensive and important contribution by François Kirbihler on the priestesses of Artemis in Ephesus in the period of the 1st century BCE – 3rd century CE (pp. 21-79, illustrated with 5 color photographs, pp. 67-71). The paper highlights that the power of the women in the cultic personnel of the Ephesian sanctuary also extended to the civic life, which is noteworthy in the context of a place and status of women in the public sphere in a Roman city. The author summarized in a clear-structured table an impressive number of 68 names of priestesses linked with the temple of Artemis and five female cultic agents of the goddess in the Ephesian countryside, which makes it a great tool for having an overview on the organization of the cult within these sanctuaries. The second paper (pp. 81-

90) by Gabrielle Frija focuses on the function of the great priestess (*archiereia*) in the imperial cult in the provinces of Asia and Lycia, well represented in the epigraphic evidence. The paper demonstrates the unevenness of the role of women as agents in this particular worship. From the argumentation of the author, however, it is not clear, maybe because of the lack of details, why Cyprus would imitate the role of women as sacerdotal agents in the emperors' cult in the province of Asia. Finally, Sylvain Destephen (pp. 91-113) examines the Late Antique and Byzantine hagiographies of the female martyrs in the provinces of Asia Minor in the time of the large-scale persecutions in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. The geographical distribution (map, p. 110) shows a strong concentration in Bithynia and almost none in Armenia. It would merit a bigger commentary why there are such regional disproportions for those who are not familiar with this fragment of the history. The author comes to a significant conclusion : the information about sexual and social identity of martyrs was secondary versus “sa piété, sa résistance aux tourments, sa connaissance de la Bible et surtout sa foi (...)”.

The second part, “Survey of Greek Speaking Provinces in the Roman Empire”, consists of five papers, thus making it the largest of the volume. It concentrates on the place of women within and beyond the religious life. Here the geographical distribution is more varied, with two papers related to women in Asia Minor, two to women in Greece and one to women in Palmyra (Syria). Olivier Ventroux (pp. 117-137) explores two groups of women from the high social class: the priestesses of Athena and the magistrates (pp. 128-135). He also points out some female benefactors, who are rare in the epigraphic sources (only 30 women out of 4'000 inscriptions!). It is regrettable that he does not extend this interesting conclusion with a comparison to the other epigraphic sources from other parts of the Roman Near East, where women were much more often attested as benefactors. Elias Koulakiotis (pp. 139-153) focuses on the freedwomen in a case-study of Leukopetra in Roman Macedonia. Based on the numerous inscriptions from the sanctuary of the Great Mother, he establishes quite a detailed profile of this group from the available sources. The third paper in this section by Éric Perrin-Saminadayar (pp. 155-168) takes as a central point the female circle of Herodes Atticus. Perrin-Saminadayar demonstrates through analysis of the epigraphic evidence that the women were full-time participants in the public life. Jesper Majbom Madsen (pp. 169-181) portrays the local women in Pontus and Bithynia through their onomastics and their admission to the Roman citizenship. The last paper by Jean-Baptiste Yon (pp. 183-203) is focused on the place of women in Roman Palmyra (10 figures of Palmyrene reliefs, pp. 196-201). They are known, among other things, through the honorific texts where they appear as benefactors and the dedications with a praise formula “Blessed be his name forever”, which Yon calls by the conventional term “*dieu anonyme*”.[3] He claims that these texts attest to a new form of cult developing in Palmyra towards individualism. He repeats a common theory, which does not take into consideration the votive character of dedications resulting from individual decisions and giving an overview in the private religiosity in general. He nevertheless reserves a place for the most prominent and renowned woman of Palmyra, the queen Zenobia (p. 186-188). What is remarkable in this essay is the discussion of the representation of keys among the female attributes and the Greek inscriptions placed on some of them. Yon interprets these keys as a cultic symbol. However he does not provide a further discussion about this interesting feature. Another interesting question touched upon in this paper is that of the priestesses of Palmyra, about whom we do not have any material or textual evidence. It contributes to a debate on this issue, simply pointing out the image of the veiled women attending the processions and the *porteuses d'offrandes*.

The last part, “Images of Women in Literature and the Visual Arts” contains four papers. The paper of Ewen L. Bowie (pp. 207-219) shows the negative image of women among philosophers as perceived by Philostratus and constitutes a great counterpart for the paper by Éric Perrin-Saminadayar. Can the negative image be a just rhetorical figure in Philostratus? Two papers are devoted to the Greek novels: Sophie Lalanne (pp. 221-251) and Romain Brethes (pp. 253-273) each refer more or less to the same pieces of the Greek novels and the representation of women. There is a question which is not explicitly answered in the paper of S. Lalanne: how much do the novels reflect the role, place and status of the women in the Greek society? The last article by Alix Barbet and Sophie Lalanne (pp. 275-296) concerns the paintings found in three houses discovered by the French archaeological mission in Seleucia-Zeugma, representing women from Greek mythology, some identified by inscriptions, some anonymous. The color pictures together with a map (fig. 1) and reconstruction of the fountain (fig. 2) are given at the end of the paper (pp. 287-295). The authors of the paper interpret the function of the painted pieces as *gynaikon*. However, I am skeptical if these rooms were dedicated only to women have ideological and pedagogical function, as postulated by Barbet and Lalanne. However, the motives of decorations do not necessarily imply the Greek origins of the inhabitants. We cannot neglect the fact that the inhabitants could have been of local, non-Greek origins. The houses are very rich and elaborate, so they surely belonged to someone of the city elite, who wanted evidently to have such iconographic representations. It was prestige, as well as knowledge of trends and cultures.[\[4\]](#)

Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet, a leading scholar in the history of women and gender, recapitulates in the epilogue (pp. 297-307) the different perspectives in the field of the history of women. This volume contributes to the debate about the role and place of women in ancient civilizations, reflecting on the public functions achieved by this group. It goes beyond the usual approach interpreting women as silent and invisible agents and restores their image as detectible in the sources.

Regrettably, the volume leaves out other regions of the Roman East. The number of papers (11!) focused on Greece/Macedonia and on the provinces of Asia Minor as opposed to other places situated in the East like Palmyra and Zeugma (2!) is striking. The *Orient romain* is a vast territory full of different approaches and perception of the Greek culture. It would have been very enriching for the study to add the social history of women in the Levant and from other parts of Roman Syria outside of Palmyra. The geographical demarcation of the Roman Orient, which was used here, should be clearly redefined in the beginning so as to not exclude other parts of this area.

All essays offer valuable insights for scholars interested in social history. There are noble women acting as benefactors and as priestesses; they give their lives as Christian martyrs. We also see ordinary women in the context of Palmyra. However, in my opinion, it is important not to impose our modern views of stereotypes and contemporary roles, especially regarding the societies of the post-colonial Near East. In cases like Palmyra, where we deal with incomprehensible symbols like keys or circles depicted in the funerary reliefs, we need to be careful not to go too far in our interpretation.

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Notes

[1] S. Krag, *Funerary Representations of Palmyrene Women. From the First Century BC to the third Century AD* (Turnhout 2018).

[2] S. Svärd, *Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces*, State Archives of Assyria Studies 23 (Helsinki 2015).

[3] The term “dieu anonyme” is now obsolete concerning the quoted formula. The change of this confusing title was approved in the studies on the religious life of Palmyra. See T. Kaizer, *Patterns of Worship at Palmyra: Reflections on Methods and Approaches*, in: R. Raja (ed.), *Revisiting the Religious Life of Palmyra*, Turnhout, 2019, p.14. See also A. Kubiak, “Les dieux bons à Palmyre,” *Studia Palmyreńskie* 13 (2013), p. 228 and A. Kubiak-Schneider, “Celui dont le nom est béni pour l'éternité. Une étude des dédicaces sans théonyme de Palmyre”, unpublished PhD thesis, defended in 2016 at the University of Warsaw (publication in preparation).

[4] See the case of the mosaics from Palmyrene houses, which represent the myths of Achilles and Cassiopeia and belonged to the locals of Semitic origins. H. Stern, *Les mosaïques des maisons d'Achille et de Cassiopée à Palmyre*, Paris, 1977 and J.-B. Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre*, Beyrouth, 2002, pp. 254-255.