

GENDER, CULT AND CULTURE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD FROM MYCENAE TO BYZANTIUM: PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND NORDIC SYMPOSIUM ON GENDER AND WOMEN'S HISTORY IN ANTIQUITY, HELSINKI 20–22 OCTOBER 2000

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This volume is the second set of proceedings from symposia initiated by ARACHNE, the Nordic Network for Gender and Women's Studies in Antiquity. The first symposium (held in June 1997 in Göteborg) was published as *Aspects of Women in Antiquity* (Jonsered 1998), also by Strömberg and Larsson Lovén. The contributors to this volume, and presumably those participating in the original seminar, are all women. Each of the contributors, with the exception of Ahlqvist (“What you had to remember”: Aspects on Early Christian Catacomb-painting”), focuses on women's lives (“gender” is at no point linked to “sexuality”). The collection ranges from the Bronze Age (Nosch, “The Women at Work in Linear B Tablets”) to Byzantium (Lindblom, “Women and Religion in the Eastern Roman Empire during the 4th to 7th Centuries—Some Aspects”). The main emphases, however, are on the Greek classical world (Strömberg, “Private in Life—Public in Death: The Presence of Women on Attic Classical Funerary Monuments”; Nielsen, “Fit for Fight, Fit for Marriage: Fighting Couples in Nuptial and Funerary Iconography in Late Classical and Hellenistic times”); the Roman classical world (Jensen, “Terence's *Hecyra*—a Feminist Reading”; Mustakallio, “Women and Mourning in Ancient Rome”; Larsson Lovén, “Funerary Art, Gender and Social Status: Some Aspects from Roman Gaul”); and the Early Christian world

(Whittaker, “Women and Fasting in Early Christianity”; Burman, “Death and Gender in Late Antiquity: A Case Study of the Death of Saint Macrina”; and Ahlqvist above). This mix offers an intriguing sampler of the directions being taken by Nordic gender studies.

Of the articles in *Gender, Cult and Culture*, the most striking show that women's lives and roles were not all characterized by gendered oppression. The apparent indifference to ideology might be contrasted with the North American approach. So Nosch concludes that “the major issue in Mycenaean society is not whether to be woman or man, or to be free or slave, but to be privileged or not privileged” (22), while Nielsen argues that “the images on the objects urge the girls to develop their bodies and to tame their characters—and remind the male parties of the ideal parity between the spouses” (48). Strömberg maintains that although the iconography of women on Attic funeral monuments does act as a means “for the male citizens to justify and retain their public citizenship,” the representation of women on these monuments, nonetheless, “gives them a status in death that they did not openly have in life” (35). Mustakallio looks at “the role and function of female mourners in Roman historiography” (86) and reaches a conclusion that points to the unreliability of Roman historians on this matter. She suggests that “the literary topos of crying women in public is a feature

of the stories relating to Early and Republican times . . . [but that] in historical narratives of the Imperial times the role of female mourners is emphasized only in unusual situations or in foreign cases" (95). A comparable line of argument, but this time focusing on the Byzantine period, is provided by Lindblom, who concludes that from the fourth to the seventh centuries, women's religious roles became more positive: "the female roles for sanctity [in this period] shifted . . . from sexless and neutral ascetics to married women and nuns, living a saintly life as women" (158).

The remaining articles in *Gender, Cult and Culture* look to the apparently oppressed position of women in ancient society. Ideology could but does not necessarily make their propositions any less convincing. So Jensen believes that the *Hecyra* "shows us a world seen from a feminine angle, in which men are generally ignorant and the relations with women hampered by prejudice" (84). Larsson Lovén argues that status representations on Gallic memorials present an engendered view of work (66). Men are represented as tradesmen, soldiers, and artisans, while women are presented as "traditional housewives." Ahlqvist's "Early Christian Catacomb-Painting" might be compared. Her conclusions are gender neutral: "the tomb was provided with grave portraits to hand the identity of the deceased down to posterity, confirm the social status of the deceased and of his family, and secure the place of the deceased in the afterlife hierarchy" (133). Whittaker contends that the ascetic food practices of women in the first Christian centuries came to characterize female piety for many centuries to come, and that "extreme forms of

fasting continue to be associated with female piety in the Middle Ages, while, in Western Christianity at least, it gradually ceases to be a prominent feature of male religious practices" (111–12). Burman suggests that graveyards as much as gender were socially constructed, and that funeral rites became a source of power for men and degradation for women (cf. Mustakallio). She concludes: "women could take care of the corpse and of the clothing of the dead. In that domain their opinion was appreciated . . . But on the whole, male priests dominated the celebration of death" (148).

Unabashedly philological, oriented to material culture, strongly interested in early Christianity, and less concerned with the ideology of gender (or sexuality), this volume is more typical of Nordic scholarship than of Anglo-Saxon. Not only does its catholicity make for a more interesting volume, but it also produces, in its modest manner, a broader rendering of what constitutes the domain of ancient women's studies. The same might also be said for its tendency to focus more on the *Realien* than on the "ideology" of women's lives in antiquity.

Were I to make one complaint of this refreshing volume, it would relate to length: the authors deserve more expository space.

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