

PORTRAIT OF A PRIESTESS: WOMEN AND RITUAL IN ANCIENT GREECE

BY JOAN BRETON CONNELLY. PP. XV + 415, FIGS. 109, COLOR PLS. 27. PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, PRINCETON AND OXFORD 2007. \$39.50. ISBN 0-691-12746-8 (CLOTH).

As scholars of women in antiquity have long recognized, religious rituals provided women with a critical public role in ancient Greece, challenging the popular notion that “proper” women in Greek society were to be neither seen nor heard. Connelly’s book provides significant new evidence for the importance of women’s leadership in Greek cult. Her work follows the approach of Lewis’ *The Athenian Woman* (London and New York 2002) in emphasizing the value of the visual record to supplement and correct ideas regarding women in antiquity derived primarily from literary and epigraphic sources. This book represents an important addition to other recent studies of the role of women in Greek religion that rely largely on written evidence, such as Goff’s *Citizen Bacchae* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 2004), Dillon’s *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion* (London and New York 2002), and Kraemer’s *Her Share of the Blessings* (New York and Oxford 1992).

After an introduction outlining theoretical and methodological issues, Connelly takes the reader along women’s path through priesthood, covering the preparation for the office, its requirements, and the manner of its acquisition; the performance of priestly duties, including costuming, the use of ritual implements, and the execution of ritual; the exercise of priestly privilege and authority; and the commemoration of priestesses after death. One chapter focuses on the female priesthoods for which we have the most evidence: Athena Polias at Athens, Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, Hera at Argos, and Apollo at Delphi. A fascinating coda to the book looks at the evidence for the leadership roles of women in the early Chris-

tian church and suggests comparisons with the role of the Greek priestess.

Connelly offers a number of interesting interpretations of the evidence. For example, she demonstrates the importance of the temple key for the visual identification of the priestess. This attribute, found in both vase painting and sculpture, illustrates the authority of the priestess to control access to the divine in certain cults and is one of the links connecting the priestess in her civic role with the Greek wife in her domestic one, for the latter had control of the house keys. Another provocative conclusion arising from Connelly’s work is that Greek priestesses played an active role in blood sacrifice, contradicting the position held by many scholars of religious studies, sociology, and anthropology (not just Detienne, contra Connelly, 180–82) that cross-culturally only men can perform this major ritual act. Connelly cites literary, epigraphical, and visual evidence that women performed blood sacrifice in ancient Greece. As Connelly notes, however, women were not usually the actual butchers of sacrificial animals in Greek cult, for this role was commonly served by the men who also performed it in nonsacred contexts. The fact that the primary attribute of the priest was the knife, as the temple key was that of the priestess, also suggests that the killing act was more commonly associated with male cultic agency.

Connelly’s primary contribution lies in her use of the visual record to fill the chronological and geographical gaps in the written sources to create a more detailed portrait of the priestess. The literary evidence in particular is highly Athenocentric and focused largely on the

Classical period, while the visual material Connelly surveys dates from the Archaic through the Roman periods and comes from not only the Greek mainland but also the Peloponnese and Asia Minor, although unfortunately little from the western Greek colonies. A problem is introduced with the breadth of this approach, however. Connelly treats the material from different regions and periods of the Greek world as a continuum, neglecting to consider in detail whether other cultural conceptions, such as local religious traditions, may have influenced the portrayal of the priestesses she studies. She also neglects the possibility that by the time of the Roman Empire, religious practices in the Greek East may have been influenced by Roman ones. This assumption of the hegemony of Hellenic practices and conceptions goes counter to recent work suggesting the importance of ethnicity for the construction of identity in classical antiquity.

Another problem is that Connelly is extraordinarily broad in defining her subject matter. As she notes in her introduction (6), she includes “examples of girls, maidens, and women who are not, strictly speaking, priestesses, but whose engagement in cult activity sheds light on the broader system within which priestesses functioned.” I am concerned, however, that the inclusion of a wide variety of female “cult agents” obscures significant differences in their respective levels of authority, power, and responsibility. Connelly considers such widely disparate women as the *kanephoroi*, who carried baskets in religious processions, and the Pythia, who gave prophecies at Delphi to representatives from city-states throughout the Greek world. The respective positions of these women in the hierarchy of Greek cult were considerably different, and neither of them are what one would traditionally term a

“priestess.” The *kanephoros* is a cult attendant and the Pythia a prophetess. To treat them both in a study of the Greek priestess may be broadening the category to such an extent that it no longer has meaning. The problem with the breadth of Connelly’s approach is particularly apparent in her treatment of the visual evidence. A significant number of the representations that Connelly discusses could be understood as either priestesses or female worshippers performing ritual actions. Because Greek religion permitted anyone to perform cultic actions such as libation or sacrifice on his or her own behalf, in the absence of further context it is often difficult to determine whether a particular representation shows a priestess acting for others, such as the state, or a female worshipper acting for herself or family members, a distinction highly significant for determining the level of women’s cultic agency in ancient Greece.

These issues aside, Connelly’s work remains highly significant. The wealth of illustrations and her insightful interpretation of them provide a valuable resource for those interested in the study of women in the ancient world, as well as for students of Greek religion and art history. Moreover, by incorporating vivid stories regarding specific women who served as priestesses with the statistical data and art historical description in her account, she succeeds in making the Greek priestess truly come alive for both the general educated reader and the specialist.

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