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Reviewed Work: *Images of Women in Antiquity* by Averil Cameron, Amélie Kuhrt

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Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

Comments

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REVIEWS

Fred C. Mench

Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (edd.). *Images of Women in Antiquity*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983. Pp. xi, 323, incl. 6 b/w figures and 11 b/w plates. \$14.95 (pb.).

This collection of essays, primarily by British scholars, differs from those of Foley and the editors of *Arethusa* in its greater emphasis on social and cultural history than on literary criticism, and in its unusually broad definition of antiquity: it includes discussions of women not only in classical Greece and Rome but also in the ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, Hittite, Hurrian, and Egyptian kingdoms, as well as the Byzantine empire, the Celtic middle ages, the *Old Testament* tradition, the Jewish communities of Graeco-Roman Palestine, and early Syrian Christianity. The essays are arranged in categories such as "Women and Power" or "Women in Religion and Cult" to promote comparisons between the different cultures. While the essays vary considerably in approach, they generally share the scrupulous methodological self-consciousness, large debt to structural anthropology, and caution in drawing conclusions concerning the experiences of women from evidence that is fragmentary, often fictional, and produced largely by men, that are hallmarks of recent work in this field.

Somewhat against the spirit of the collection I will concentrate on those essays that are most directly useful to classicists. In the opening essay Ruth Padel skillfully delineates the tendency of Greek men to locate exclusively in women the human susceptibility to unruly impulses that the culture defined as daemonic and attempted to control. Mary Lefkowitz surveys examples from Greek and Roman literature and myth to show that women who acted prominently in public life did so within well-defined limits and won approval only if they were acting on behalf of a male relative. Susan Walker presents the archaeological evidence—unfortunately rather inconclusive—for the view of women's relations to space within the house suggested by literary sources. Dyfri Williams outlines some of the difficulties of using vase paintings as a source for the lives of classical Athenian women, concluding that vase paintings, like the literary sources, present a male perspective on a male-dominated world. Helen King explores the responses of Greek medical writers to symptoms perceived as a threat to the smooth conversion of the untamed *parthenos* into a fully socialized *gynê*, and uncovers a set of associations between *parthenoi*, the goddess Artemis, and death by strangulation. Sarah Pomeroy uses the inscriptions listing immigrant mercenaries on the Delphinion at Miletus as evidence that this Hellenistic community preferred male to female children and exposed or neglected their female offspring. Riet van Bremen documents the newly prominent public role of female members of the wealthy elite in Greek cities of the 2nd century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D., and concludes that this was due neither to greater legal rights for women nor to economic decline in the Greek cities but to an increasingly domestic conception of the nature of public action.

Of the essays devoted to other ancient cultures, several represent the first systematic survey of the evidence for women in a particular society and should be particularly valuable to specialists. But because they are not written from a comparative perspective, their usefulness for comparative purposes is limited. A student of women in classical Greece or Rome often stands to learn more from a

designedly cross-cultural study of some aspect of women's behavior or conceptions of women than from a study focussing on another ancient culture which had little or no direct historical connection with classical Greece or Rome, and for which the evidence is even more scanty and difficult to interpret than for those societies.

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