

BOOK REVIEW

Images of Woman and Child From the Bronze Age: Reconsidering Fertility, Maternity, and Gender in the Ancient World. By Stephanie Lynn BUDIN. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 384. Hardcover, \$95.00/£60.00. ISBN 978-0-521-19304-7.

In this ambitious re-assessment of adult-child pairings (kourotrophic or “child-nurturing” images) in Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean artwork, Budin provides a compelling and refreshing argument away from the traditional interpretations of such images as representations of mothers with children or fertility goddesses. Instead, she offers explanations of the varied and culturally specific meanings such images might have had in the diverse cultures of the Mediterranean basin. She organizes her work moving from Egypt counter-clockwise to the Aegean. The prose is well written and on occasion pleasantly wry; it mostly succeeds at accessibility towards an audience outside Bronze Age archeology and art history.

The first section is a methodological overview. Specifically, it discusses how modern gender norms have led to regular misinterpretations of images in which a woman’s body interacts with a child’s. For instance, in cultures employing wet nurses, lactation did not necessarily equal fertility or maternity, and fertility was not necessarily identified in all cultures as a feminine force, and the nude female body is not always meant to attract the erotic attention of the male gaze. So, a naked woman breastfeeding a child is not necessarily fertile, the child’s mother, or meant to arouse a male viewer. For these reasons (and many others), all art must be assessed within its cultural context with an awareness of that culture’s specific attitude toward gender, and sexuality, as well as the object’s iconography, use, social analysis, and the time and place that produced it. It is this holistic approach that Budin uses to re-assess images from the ground up (rather than from image to context), producing a kaleidoscopic range of varied meanings for the seemingly “simple” depiction of an adult with a child.

The second section is by far the strongest due in large part to the subject matter, covering as it does Egyptian iconography. Here the author has at her disposal the greatest range of literary and graphic evidence, and she makes the most

of it. She arranges her Egyptian material by sub-categories (Egyptian Decorum, Divine Wet Nurse, Parents and Nurses and Tutors, Potency Figurines, Ostraca and Wall paintings, Flasks, Male Kourotrophi), and sub-categories by chronology. This works quite well to trace the development of these at times wildly different categories of kourotrophic images, though it does perhaps have the drawback of obscuring parallel movements in similar categories. However, this is by far the strongest section.

The third section covers the Levant and Anatolia and it is here where the source material discrepancies between Egypt and the other sections begins to become an issue. Organization here is, of necessity, by site rather than by category due to the scarcity of material, but Budin still manages to argue convincingly for the diverse interpretations needed for the various kourotrophic images discussed. Mesopotamia and Iran prove more fertile sources of images in the fourth section, organized by period and category. Increased literary sources and seal stone images provide interesting context. Most interesting are the intersections between medical-magical texts and the Ninhursag plaques.

The book's greatest weakness becomes an issue in the fifth and sixth sections of the book (Cyprus and the Aegean); many of the artifacts discussed lack images to accompany the text. This makes the argument difficult to follow, particularly to those unfamiliar with Bronze Age art in the Aegean and Cyprus. As soon as images are provided, the difficulty resolves itself, but there are entire sections left without anything to go on save the author's description of items that might not be accessible to the reader. It is a jarring contrast to the readability of what came before and can be very frustrating. Given Budin's comments on the difficulties of getting image permissions in the introductory section, one suspects that the author too was frustrated by this.

With that being said, the fifth and sixth sections do cover very interesting ground. The discussion of Cypriot pottery is organized by chronology and includes a particularly nuanced discussion of the various possible interpretations of the plank figurines. The sixth section is divided into two sections: Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece. Minoan Crete, a region otherwise fond of Egyptian influences and representations of non-breastfeeding children, largely rejected kourotrophic imagery. Budin suggests that this was due to differing attitudes toward the relationship of individuals to the family unit. Conversely, there is a relative prevalence of kourotrophi in Mycenaean art (but few children). This leads to a fascinating discussion of the impact that the large numbers of working moth-

ers represented in linear B tablets might have had on the relative prevalence of kourotrophic imagery.

Taken as a whole, Budin offers up the kourotrophos in the Bronze Age as an example of how we might rethink the way we view the representation of gendered images as a whole, from a Virgin Mary nightlight to Michelangelo's *Pietà*. No one image of a woman (or man) can be read outside of its context; it is a lesson we all know but often forget to remember when looking at the deceptively simple image of a female holding an infant. Budin shows us just how rewarding a culturally sensitive approach to gendered imagery can be.

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