

## NOBLE WOMEN IN CHINA, ROME, AND IN-BETWEEN – A PROLOGUE

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In Republican Rome noble women were not supposed to drink alcohol. Romulus himself, so the story went, had issued a piece of legislation that prohibited the consumption of alcohol by women. If a husband found his wife acting in violation of the law, he had the right to kill her. There was of course also a widely acknowledged *exemplum* that lent authenticity to this tradition. A certain Egnatius Maetennus had beaten his wife to death because she was drunk, but due to Romulus' intervention all charges against him were dropped. In the later-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, when more reliable information on the earliest pieces of Roman sumptuary legislation is available, women were denied access to the wine cellar. Around the same time, Cato the Elder recorded that male relatives would check on their female family members and see if they had an alcoholic breath. This was the primary reason why men and women exchanged a kiss when greeting each other – or so Cato said.

At around the same time as Rome's sumptuary legislation, some 8,000 km further East, Chinese noble women were not meant to indulge in the pleasures of alcohol either. From the Qin to the early Han period – that is from the late-3<sup>rd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC – many legendary tales of the 'good wife' survive. What derives from these tales is again the axiomatic observation that women were greatly confined by men in their actions. In the *Nü Jie*, or *Lessons for Women*, Ban Zhao writes in c. 100 CE:

Decidedly nothing is better (to gain the heart of a husband) than whole-hearted devotion and correct manners. In accordance with the rites and proper modes of conduct, (let a woman) live a pure life. Let her have ears that hear not licentiousness; and eyes that see not depravity. When she goes outside her own home, let her not be conspicuous in dress and manners. When at home let her not neglect her dress. Women should not assemble in groups, nor gather together (for gossip and silly laughter). They should not stand watching in the gateways. (If a woman follows) these rules, she may be said to have whole-hearted devotion and correct manners.

There is no need here to dwell on how the male desire to wield control over female behavior translates into societal norms in these stories. It is easy to strip these traditions of their gender assumptions and expose their inherently male mindset. By extension, such suspicion about the chauvinistic encodings of our sources applies to the vast majority of what is called the ancient tradition. What is more challenging, and maybe also more interesting from the social historian's perspective today, is the societal discourse that revolved around such traditions. The questions of how the gendered mindset related to societal practice and how it corresponded to what

Michel Foucault has labelled its “regime of truth” leads to the very core of those political cultures of the ancient world.

In Rome’s culture of public display, the gender discourse extended to regulations of the appearance of women in the public sphere. The issue was precarious because it was tied to the volatile equilibrium between the ruling elite and the common people. Just as the male members of the senatorial elite were anxious to follow an implicit protocol in their everyday interactions with ordinary citizens, so the women of this elite were subject to expectations regarding their public behavior. But while male behaviour was governed by good practice, female action was confined by law. The sumptuary laws are a good example. The need for such laws was felt in the late-3<sup>rd</sup> and then in the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC, when Rome had begun to conquer the Hellenistic monarchies of the East one by one. According to many contemporary observers in the senate, this conquest caused a rush towards decadence. Women were perceived as particularly prone to showing off with their luxury items; hence the stipulation of a series of laws that limited the ostentatious display of wealth in the public sphere.

Modern scholarship on women in antiquity has had its difficulties with looking behind the façade of stereotyped accounts of the sources. Textbooks on ancient Rome, for instance, usually highlight the image of the role model *matrona* and her confinement to the domestic space. Consequently, it has become axiomatic to think of late-Republican aristocratic women as masters, or mistresses, of the confined household. When they crossed into the public sphere, where the eye of the masculine tradition captured them, they are often portrayed in the sources as opportunistic, if not ruthless, individuals who navigate around the affairs of men, outsmarting the restrictions that were imposed on them. Subsequent wrongdoing – anything from sexual transgression to the evil plotting of their husband’s murder – implicitly justifies the original confinement. Tacitus bears witness to many literary *topoi* of this pattern.

In light of the restricted body of sources at hand, it is challenging to project a picture that is immune to the shortcomings of stereotyping. One of the few breakthrough moments in scholarship was the publication of Ann-Cathrin’s Harders’ book *Suavissima Soror* (2008). Based on anthropological family models, Harders argues that Roman aristocratic families were not just vertically layered units that were governed by the authority of age. Instead, in her analysis she fleshes out the horizontal intersection among families, and she demonstrates how the idea of horizontal interconnectivity became a defining moment in the constitution of a noble family. It has often been argued that the families of the Roman nobility entertained all sorts of marriage alliances to maintain their social status and enhance their prestige. But in Harders’ account, the utilitarian advantage a marriage strategy secures in any given moment is complemented by a much more permanent force of familial relations. The horizontal bond between families is established, however, not by men, but women, who were true agents in shaping families – i. e., and not just passive tokens or trophies in the exchange between men.

In one of his recent books, *The Early Chinese Empires. Qin and Han* (2007), Mark Edward Lewis characterizes the role of women as inferiors and outsiders,

“necessary for reproduction but otherwise aliens within the husband’s family” (156). Lewis refers to the *Record on Ritual*, or *Li ji*, published with commentaries and annotations between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC. The *Li ji* advocated three forms of obedience for a woman, that is: a woman first had to obey her father, then her husband, and, when widowed, her son. So just like at Rome, the male discourse in imperial China placed women under the control of multiple layers of patriarchy, with reserved spheres of action and governed forms of behavior. But unlike their Roman counterparts, Chinese women actually commanded their sons, as the authority of age trumped the authority of gender; filial piety to both parents was a son’s highest obligation. In this sense, then, we find a similar tension between male moralizing tales and normative traditions on the one hand, and the actual role of women in society on the other. It is difficult to disentangle these strands because so little survives, and whatever is available falls in the category of gender normativity as construed by men. But interestingly enough, Lewis acknowledges this gap between a woman’s place in text and everyday life, and, in passing, he entertains the role of women in the process of securing political alliances and accumulating family fortunes. The look behind the brick wall of masculine source narratives and their stereotyped extension into scholarship promises to offer an all-new understanding of women in ancient China.

Chinese and Roman women had no knowledge of each other, just as their civilizations were worlds apart from one another. Their mutual awareness was fuzzy at all times. While the Han Chinese sources refer to Rome as the realm of the Da Qin – some sort of ‘Counter China’ at the other end of the world – Roman sources speak of trade relations with the *Seres* people who, according to Pliny the Elder, were “famous for the woolen substance obtained from their forests”. The exciting thing about this substance was that it allowed the *matrona*, according to Pliny, “to flaunt transparent clothing in public”. The cultural advancement of silk production is measured here against the excitement this sparked in the eyes of the male observer. At the same time, the moralistic tenor of the passage is unmistakable. As so often, then, the assessment in the source is inspired by the idea of male authority over the female body in the public sphere.

The political cultures of the two Eurasian flanks were unrelated, but at different times different intermediate empires fed into the realms of both Rome and China. The largest power to do so was the Seleukid Empire, spanning at its peak from the coast of Asia Minor into Baktria or, in the words of Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis* (1993). The Seleukids clawed the greatest part of the Persian Royal Road System, which would become the future Silk Road. This alone made them cultural intermediaries of an unprecedented magnitude. At the same time, their realm was a huge cultural tapestry in itself, embracing a very high volume of diverse local political and social organizations, regional ethnicities, economic circumstances, and religious traditions.

The study of this patchwork empire has regained significant momentum in recent years, thanks also to the inspiring work carried out by the Seleukid Study Days (SSD) and their associated group of researchers. The present volume adds to this inspiration. It offers a unique attempt to delve into the political culture of the

Seleukids. Maybe more than the women of any other royal era in antiquity, the noble women of the Seleukid Empire are almost entirely subject to the drawback of masculine source narratives and their thoughtless repetition in scholarship. As the editors discuss in their introduction, for the longest time the best that researchers could say about Seleukid women would be summarized in one way or another under the labels of romance, affectionate love, or sexual ecstasy, spiced up with scenes of cruelty and, to be sure, a heavy dose of 'orientalism'. The subsequent contributions to this book refer to these gendered stereotypes throughout, yet more importantly, they disclose the multiple ways and means in which they can be overcome. By making women the lead actors of the script, the authors unearth a layer of the historical narrative that has been buried underneath male perspectives and understandings. In this vein of inquiry, the advanced approach in gender studies allows them not only to research the noble women of the Seleukids in their own right, but also present exciting new discoveries in the fields of, for instance, alliance building, cultural transfer, and the integration of ethnic groups from a perceived periphery. The gap between Rome and China is closing once again.

## THE STUDY OF SELEUKID ROYAL WOMEN: AN INTRODUCTION

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Over the past two and a half decades, the study of royal women has been one of the most dynamic fields of inquiry into the Hellenistic era, and one that has profoundly shifted our perceptions of gender, status, influence, and ability within the broader ancient world. Royal women in general were once dismissed as powerless pawns in a political game that was an exclusively masculine domain,<sup>1</sup> but thanks to the efforts of S. Pomeroy, E. D. Carney, and a great many others the trend has turned towards recognising that such women also had their own roles to play, both active and passive. This body of research has tended to focus primarily on Macedonian and Ptolemaic women, giving rise to an analytical construct in which the fiery involvement of Adea-Eurydike and Olympias set an enduring precedent for the later influence of the Ptolemaic Kleopatras on their dynasty and beyond.<sup>2</sup> But in the eyes of contemporary commentators Ptolemaic women were equally empowered by their kingdom's unique Pharaonic ideology mixed with their own clever resourcefulness.

Seleukid women, much like their dynasty itself, have all too often been marginalised as a result of the scarcity of our sources or the vagaries of scholarly preference. In fact, they have an unhappy or sinister place in contemporary historiography. To the earliest modern historians of the Hellenistic world, Seleukid women fell into one of two camps: they were either consigned to humble obscurity and existed as passive scions of their family's prestige, or, when they took matters into their own hands, they preyed on the interest and affection of their male counterparts in the ruthless pursuit of their own agenda.<sup>3</sup> To E. R. Bevan in particular, as the dynasty's path brought it into ever closer relation with the Ptolemies and women from both dynasties crossed into either, "destiny was introducing the Erinyes of the house of Seleucus".<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, he sums up the old *opinio communis* with almost priestly conviction as he writes of late Seleukid women that "it was in the political sphere,

1 See, e.g., Bevan 1902; Bouché-Leclercq 1913/14; Bikerman 1938.

2 Carney 1991; 1995; 2006; 2011; cf. also Pomeroy 1990; Whitehorne 2001; Ogden 1999; Lightman 2000; Bielman Sánchez 2000; 2003; Nourse 2002; O'Neil 2002; Savalli-Lestrade 2003b; Müller 2011; 2013a; 2013b; Ramsey 2011; Harders 2013; 2014. For an important study on Laodike I, see Martínez-Sève 2002/3.

3 Bevan 1902, 2.16–53 for examples of such analysis, as well as 2.555–70. Bikerman 1938, 27 is particularly dismissive of Seleukid women when he writes 'la reine séleucide n'apparaît jamais sur la scène politique comme les épouses des Lagides'.

4 Bevan 1902, 2.212.

rather than just that of sensual indulgence, that their passions lay and their crimes found a motive".<sup>5</sup>

The tide turned somewhat, but not entirely with G. H. Macurdy's 1932 study of Hellenistic Queens. Ahead of her time she certainly was, and an invaluable precursor to more recent treatments to be sure, but as she approached Seleukid women with an eye to their empowerment and influence she oddly agrees with some of her predecessor's more dismissive conclusions. Even in this period which she describes as "the era of super women", she nevertheless concludes that in Macedon and in the Seleukid realm royal women seldom exercised any real power.<sup>6</sup> Such a minimalist view proceeds naturally from her criteria, as she was neither the first nor the last to gauge the power of royal women by comparing them exclusively to their male counterparts. In such a construct, female influence will always pale. But on the moral plane, Macurdy – perhaps rightly – put forward the apology that we need not expect royal women to have been of higher moral standards than their kings.<sup>7</sup>

In the near century of scholarship that has followed, when compared to their contemporaries in Macedon and Egypt, Seleukid queens and princesses had hardly begun to fall under the gaze of scholarly scrutiny. This was generally the case, at least, prior to the workshop *Seleukid Royal Women*. This scholarly neglect should not be taken as indicative of their import. From the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the early 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, these women were born or married into the family at the head of an empire that spanned dozens of cultures, languages, and traditions encompassing territory that spanned from western Asia Minor to the Indus River. Imbued with an ideological prominence, they became scions of their family's legitimacy and prestige. But under certain circumstances, they could become bearers of political power in their own right: as advisers to their royal husbands, as representatives of their birth houses, or as mediators between subjects and king. Effective monarchical rule was nevertheless limited: for the most part, this had to wait to the times after their husband's death and lasted only as long as they managed to control a co-ruling son. They seldom ruled in precisely the same manner as their husbands or sons, but this does not mean that they were never in power.

Yet at the same time the symbolic meaning represented by Seleukid royal women or the political power wielded by some of them cannot be studied in isolation. To garner a deeper understanding, among other things, a systematic investigation into ancient narratives of powerful royal women is required. Those about whom we learn in the literary tradition were spectacular characters, starting, in fact, not with Apama (who only received passing remarks in historiography), but with the – at least in the Graeco-Macedonian perspective – much more prominent daughter of King Demetrios Poliorketes, Stratonike. However, her renown was mainly based on the extraordinary fact that her first husband Seleukos I decided to pass her on to his son Antiochos in 294 BC. At any rate, for the most part, Seleukid queens figuring prominently in Classical literature were 'evil queens', anti-models for a

5 Bevan 1902, 2.280.

6 Macurdy 1932, i for the minimalist view of female influence. The derivative, contingent power of women is best captured in her account the reign of Laodike III at pp. 91–2.

7 Macurdy 1932, esp. 1–12.

‘good’ royal wife, if not for any ‘decent’ woman who lived up to the moral expectations of their contemporaries. Prominence and ‘bad press’ mostly went hand-in-hand in a society that valued invisibility of women in the public sphere. Within the Greek historiographical tradition at least, the ‘good queen’ tends to remain a shady figure, only to be mentioned in the context of her royal wedding or as the mother of legitimate offspring to the king.

The papers assembled in this volume try to balance the various factors that have yielded the diverse images of Seleukid royal women which we can glimpse in our literary, epigraphic and numismatic evidence. They do so in full awareness of the construed nature of such representations, and try to bring to light the structures under which those royal personae were educated, represented, honoured and remembered. The four papers on Apama and Stratonike, especially the one by A.-C. Harders, draw the readers’ attention to the sheer novelty of the *basilissa* as a figure. Not only had her symbolic value and particular agency yet to be defined, but the same is likewise true for the creation of the Hellenistic *basileus*. These new types of monarchs, in turn, were Macedonian warriors of non-royal descent who ended up as rulers of vast territories most of which extended far beyond the Graeco-Macedonian world. Readers should be alerted to the fact that not every wife of a king bore the title of *basilissa*, hence the predilection for terms such as ‘royal wives’, ‘consorts’, ‘mothers’ or ‘daughters’ throughout this volume. We have, however, abstained from imposing strict terminological consistency and do occasionally allow royal women to be called ‘queens’ even without positive evidence for the title, when there is still reason to assume that they may have been *basilissai* at least at some point of their lives, or that they managed to establish effective monarchical rule.<sup>8</sup>

At any rate, Harder’s chapter neatly serves as an introduction to Hellenistic queenship as such, and thus allows this introduction to be short. While her focus is particularly on the communication between the king and his new subjects, G. Ramsey concentrates on the queen’s diplomatic functions, which are also addressed by D. Engels & K. Erickson (as well as further down by A. McAuley for Apama of Kyrene). How multi-layered the representations of Apama and Stratonike are has further been demonstrated by E. Almagor: he screened the romantic story of Stratonike’s remarriage to Antiochos I against the background of Achaimenid succession rituals, near-Eastern folklore and Greek philosophical teachings. Engels & Erickson complemented this endeavour by explaining elements of the narratives within the broad context of Persian legends surrounding the royal court. These literary studies teach us a lot about the ancients’ imaginations of court life, and still something about possible patterns of interactions between the king, his wife and other members of the royal family or the court. At the same time, they caution us to take even the very few biographical details about the first two Seleukid queens that have come down to us as historically reliable facts.

8 On this problem, see also the chapter by Coşkun, in this volume, with n. 44 for further discussion.



The notion of literary constructs also underlies subsequent chapters. A. Coşkun tries to disentangle the traditions that blackened the reputation of Laodike I, wife of Antiochos II: the unique survival of documentary evidence has allowed him to check the literary tradition against contemporary voices. While the importance of polygamy at Hellenistic royal courts had been noted also in the preceding chapters on the first Seleukid queens, its potentially pernicious results at the political and military levels has never seemed so manifest as after Antiochos II's second marriage with Berenike, the daughter of Ptolemy Philadelphos. This said, Coşkun argues that the polygamous situation was less dramatic for the affected wives, who had grown up in polygamous environments; this condition rather impressed Greek and Roman historiographers, for whom monogamy was the norm. Given their general disdain for the mixing of females and politics, they were thus twice at unease, as Carney pointed out long before.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Ptolemaic court propaganda and pro-Ptolemaic sentiments especially in the work of Phylarchos caused further harm to the recollection of Seleukid rule in general and to the reputation of Laodike in particular.<sup>10</sup>

A much better idea of how the Seleukid court wanted its female members to be viewed by the subjects could be gained from their visual representations – unless this path of research were impaired by the scarceness of the remaining evidence: only few queens, starting with Laodike IV, ever appeared depicted on coins, and no surviving sculpture can safely be attributed to any Seleukid *basilissa*. That such did exist though is sufficiently implied by the references to divine cults for Seleukid royal women. Based on a complete collection of the evidence for the first one-and-a-half centuries of Seleukid rule, S. Ager and C. Hardiman systematically explore the implications of our evidence, or the lack thereof. They cautiously ponder personal predilections of the royal husbands, effective influence displayed by certain queens, and a growing influence of Ptolemaic traditions since the days of Antiochos III.

Not included in this volume are the workshop contributions by M. D'Agostini and R. Walsh, both of which dealt with highly positive depictions of royal wives, and this in somewhat surprising contexts. The former discussed Polybios' representation of Laodike, the wife of the usurper Achaios the Younger, the latter three virtuous wives of Galatian kings, Chiomara, Kamma and Stratonike. At a first glance, one might think of 'inversions of the inversion' in all of these cases: while the good queen at a Graeco-Macedonian court was expected to keep a low profile to avoid her hostile representation as transgressor of gender roles, the wife of a usurper or barbarian king might in turn appear in a more positive light, if only as a contrast foil to her negative male counterpart. But upon closer inspection, all four royal consorts have in common that their bold actions were inspired by loyalty to their husbands: when those had failed to protect their rules, lives or wives, the latter were apparently permitted to take action either to defend or avenge their consorts

9 Carney 1992, 188–9, quoted by Coşkun, in this volume, n. 110.

10 See also Primo 2009.



and thus display the virtue of *philandria*.<sup>11</sup> After all, these are exceptions that ultimately confirm the paradigm.

B. Bartlett has dedicated a case study to Kleopatra Tryphaina, wife of Antiochos Grypos, while A. McAuley has scrutinized the biography of Apama, daughter of Antiochos I and wife of Magas of Kyrene. Our knowledge of these two royal wives has so far entirely depended on the highly distorting accounts of the moralizing Roman epitomizer Justin. Bartlett carefully deconstructs the composition by a subtle literary analysis, McAuley questions the dramatic plot by recontextualizing the family scandal of the Kyrenean rulers within its political environment: this was defined by social pressure groups in the Pentapolis and diplomatic loyalties or tensions among the dynastic houses of the time.

McAuley's is the first paper to focus on Seleukid women married into outside dynasties. It is followed by an investigation of genealogical links first with the Diodotids of Baktria and Sandrokottos of India, and second with the Orontids of Kommagene (also including probably fictitious links with the Achaimenids). Beyond detecting hitherto overlooked intermarriage connections (or at least the claims thereof), R. Wenghofer & D. J. Houle and R. Strootman respectively scrutinize the political contexts of those marriages as well as their symbolic meaning among future generations. J. Wilker's study on the Hasmoneans has been included partly for comparative purposes, partly also with a view to the influence that Seleukid court propaganda wielded on the emerging dynasties on the margins of its empire, even if religious conditions forbade the Jewish family to establish marital links with the former superpower. However, ancient sources tell us very little about Hasmonaean royal women, which demonstrates that the court of Judaea was much more effective in keeping their females 'invisible' than the later Seleukids. At the same time, Wilker is able to specify incidents which allowed the consorts of the Hasmoneans to become kingmakers or once even a ruling queen.

The last chapter by A. Dumitru rehearses the crucial stages in the life of the latest Seleukid queen we know of, Kleopatra Selene. Married to no less than two kings of Egypt and three of Syria, she left all her competitors from the Houses of the Ptolemies and Seleukids behind, at least in numerical terms. When it comes to active political choices, she has so far stood in the long shadow of her infamous predecessor Kleopatra Thea, but Dumitru has been able to point to several instances where we should reconsider the impact of her queenly agency.

On balance, the studies assembled in this volume make clear cases that the investigation of queenly role models and biographies need to be studied on the basis of all kinds of available primary sources as well as against a broad social, political and cultural context. Actions attested for individual royal wives, widows and daughters cannot simply be taken at face value, but need to be reviewed behind the background of the experimental design of the new roles of the Hellenistic *basileus* and *basilissa* in the age of the Diadochs, understood within the dynamic interplay of inter-dynastic loyalties or tensions, as well as contextualized before the ethic

11 See Coşkun and McAuley 2013 for abstracts and D'Agostini 2014 (on Polyb. 8.15.1–21.11) and Walsh ca. 2017 (on Plut. *Mor.* 257e–258a) for the papers.

horizon of Greek moralizing historiography and Near Eastern folkloric narrative traditions. Both of the latter were as much catering a sensationalist audience as they were trying to convey moral role- and anti-role-models, not only for royal wives, but for all 'decent' women in Near Eastern, Hellenistic and finally Roman societies. Drastic illustrations of the pernicious outcomes of transgressing established gender norms formed part of the historiographic and anecdotal repertoire of our ancient authors.

Last but not least, many of the studies presented here sufficiently document that modern audiences – 'critical' as they consider themselves to be – have too often been inclined to accept accounts that have heavily been distorted by gender-stereotypes, and occasionally even added to the ill reputation of Hellenistic 'queens'.