

**Budin S. 2011: Images of woman and child from the Bronze Age; reconsidering fertility, maternity, and gender in the Ancient World.**

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Review by Charlotte Booth

This book is essentially the study of what Budin refers to as the kouroutrophus figure, which is that of an adult female nursing a child, which is more common in the ancient world than images of pregnant women or childbirth. She emphasises that this is the only study of this image type providing a total overview, and she outlines the region-specific studies that have been carried out previously.

There is a detailed discussion on the biological sex and cultural gender argument which is essential to the examination of these figurines, if one intends to understand their importance and function. The un-gendering of archaeology has been popular since the 1990s when gender and sex divisions are examined within the context of the culture studied rather than a modern male/female division. She emphasises that figures of ambiguous gender may represent un-gendered stages of life such as pre-pubescence. She uses numerous examples to prove her case.

Although there is little doubt that many of these images represent women she discusses whether these females are mothers or caregivers. Whilst only women can be mothers, she makes it clear that both men and women can be the primary caregivers of children; presenting females in this role is generally a cultural one and often modern historians project modern cultural norms onto the past.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the theory of fertility became a popular one and many figures and rituals were now associated with fertility even if there is no other supporting evidence. She uses ancient mythology to show that fertility was often considered to be in the male rather than the female sphere citing Mesopotamian and Egyptian culture as case studies, indicating that the male holds the fertility and the woman is a receptacle for the child. Bearing this in mind, it suggests these figurines, whilst female are possibly not fertility personified.

The book is separated into regions although Budin makes it clear that these figurines were in fact rare in every country other than Egypt, which may go some way to explain why there have not been any general studies of this type in the past. There are sections on Egypt, Levant and Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Iran, Cyprus, and the Aegean. Many of the representations outside of Egypt are only in existence due to their relationship with Egypt. As one would therefore expect, the section on Egypt dominates the volume, and the author almost does a king-by-king analysis of the images of a woman and child. She does however focus a little too much on the eighteenth dynasty and the images of Akhenaten with his children, considering this as the social norm for the male role in childcare, even though the imagery of this time period is thought to be as propagandistic as any other period and therefore is portraying a message rather than the norm. However this section provides a wonderful overview of the different woman/child motif as well as discussing man/child imagery. However the other regional sections are not as full in detail as they do not have the same quantity of, or hold the same importance for, these image types. The reader should also be wary of

ascribing Egyptian ideas and beliefs to the rest of the Bronze Age Near East, as certain social aspects such as fertility were more important in Egypt than elsewhere.

Each regional section examines the kourotrophus imagery as well as the role of women and children within the society itself, in an attempt to discover the importance and function of these figurines. It was discovered that other than Egypt, being a mother itself held very little status in any part of the ancient world. Status was generally only gained from the paternal role, so in many regions there seemed little point in the kourotrophus imagery as outside of the private sphere there was no status to be gained. It was also shown that in Crete for example where women held quite high social status, they were less likely to be shown in the role of mother and caregiver, than in an area where women had a lower social status.

In many of the regions under discussion, the kourotrophus imagery is rare, and in Crete for example there are only two of these images which are of the Egyptian style, and were there due to the trade relationship between these two countries, rather than the Cretan adoption of the imagery. Despite this lack of material to discuss Budin describes why this imagery was not popular, and in Crete it seems to be because the representation of infants was not considered important in Cretan artwork and therefore the woman and child image equally was considered unimportant. Bearing this in mind, some of the chapters seem a little long, focussing on detailed discussions on different types of imagery, unrelated to the kourotrophus under scrutiny.

However the book and the discussion of the example of the woman/child motif, reiterate the importance of Egypt and trade throughout the Bronze Age in the Near East, as many of the pockets of kourotrophic figures were in trade centres and show influence from Egypt. For example Mycenaean Greece have about 80 kourotrophus figures, from about 20 sites, with the majority coming from cities with a large foreign population. The earliest dates to 1450 BCE and have been interpreted as servants, wet-nurses for the dead, or mother goddesses. She discusses the arguments supporting and refuting these suggestions. Although Budin does not believe in the mother-goddess theory she does believe some of the images are divine and some are mortal. The divine may be made from prestige materials and mortals from non-prestige materials such as clay.

She concludes that they also have different functions and therefore different meanings. She offers a discussion on who the goddess could be, and demonstrates the Mesopotamian figures may represent a named goddess, either Ninhursag or Nintu, and the arguments for which this is, are outlined. In general she believes one should be wary of ascribing the goddess label unless there is other evidence, such as iconography or text to suggest this to be the case. Without it, she believes they are mortal.

However, in general Budin outlines the figurines' various important roles. As many of the religious texts from the areas in question refer to the activities of women in an attempt to stimulate men in a battle against impotence. She therefore ascribes the role of "stimulators" to these figures; for both men and women. Men needed a woman as a receptacle for the foetus that ejaculates from his loins, a receptacle that will nurture the child and help it grow. Women, as the receptacle, would need to find a substitute should their bodies not be suitable for the task. Some texts suggest they would literally bring another woman into the house for the "master" to impregnate, or they would need a symbolic alternative body; one that is healthy and fertile and these were represented by the kourotrophus figures.

In general the book is an interesting one, and for someone with an interest in comparative studies this is a great volume for comparing this artistic type across different areas. However, for an academic work some of the footnotes and asides are inappropriately informal. For example in reference to male Egyptian gods who, in the mythology, are able to become impregnated, her footnote states "serves them right" (fn 36 p.13). A further example was in regard to all mothers being adult women she claims "I have now met enough girls from age 12 to 14 who have had at least one full term pregnancy, that this line makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time." (fn 1 p326) I am uncertain what she was hoping to achieve by these comments.

The illustrations are on the whole useful, with a combination of photographs and line drawings which help to illustrate the text, although I always think for a study of this type there can never be enough images, as many readers may only be familiar with a particular region or time period and therefore are "reading blind" for the other sections, and the descriptions, whilst detailed would be greatly enhanced by further illustrations. There is an extensive reference section (30 pages) which is a useful list of further reading material.

This book would be useful reference material for students and researchers looking at feminine roles within these societies from a comparative point of view as well as providing an almost-catalogue of the extant material over a wide area. A useful and interesting volume.