

Grace Harriet Macurdy and “Woman Power” in Argead Macedonia:

Eurydice, Mother of Philip II

This paper will consider the impact of Grace Harriet Macurdy’s work on royal Macedonian women, focusing on her analysis of the career of Eurydice, mother of Philip II and grandmother of Alexander the Great. Macurdy began to address this topic with an article on Eurydice (Macurdy 1927) and went on to write a monograph on the royal women of all the Macedonian and Macedonian-derived dynasties (Macurdy 1932), as well as on an assortment of articles on topics related to royal women.

The paper will begin by examining Macurdy’s scholarly context and the possible motivation for her sudden turn from literary scholarship to royal women, making some use of Barbara McManus’ wonderful new biography (McManus 2017). Macurdy’s was the first serious work on royal women. In many ways she was reacting against both the then common notion of a matriarchal period or the belief that inheritance in northern monarchies was matrilinear, as well as to numerous lurid and sexist comments like Bevan’s study of the Seleucid dynasty (Bevan 1902) references to “tigress princesses.”

The main purpose of the paper, however, is to assess what stands up today about her work and what seems outmoded, whether because of Macurdy’s analysis or simply because of the appearance of new evidence. Her treatment of Eurydice is particularly interesting because of the existence of two absolutely contradictory ancient traditions about Eurydice: in one she is a murderous mother and murderous and adulterous wife and in the other she is a doting and somewhat heroic defender of her children and of her husband’s legacy. Macurdy, after a careful consideration of all the ancient evidence, somewhat tentatively weighed in on a moderately heroic version of Eurydice.

Often Macurdy rejected many ideas and attitudes that were standard in her day (views that now seem sexist and racist), but could not do so entirely. She didn't want to obsess about the sexual virtue of individual women, but sometimes did so. Like her contemporaries, there is a tendency for her to speak about "blood" (as in ethnicity) as a motivator. We hear about "warlike people" and that Illyrian women who had a "strain of greater daring and wilder blood." On the one hand she will note how much female royal behavior resembled male, but on the other characterize these women as "masculine."

But I want to focus on her strengths and the continuing impact of her work, particularly in terms of the Argead dynasty. First, she writes very well. Her prose may be more fully-fashioned and old-fashioned than would be the case for something written today, but there is a very good reason why four of her books have been reprinted. I find that students like her work and rarely note how long ago it was composed. Her prose is both clear and vivid. Macurdy's style is often more lively than is common in academic work today, but it is this very style that enables her to reach a wider audience.

Macurdy initiated discourse about the role of women in monarchy, even though she herself was comparatively little interested in monarchy or dynasties and much more in the lives of individual women. Her focus on individual lives and her scrupulous examination of available evidence about each woman she discussed created the foundation on which many modern discussions rest. Macurdy concluded that Argead women had no "woman power" because she recognized that they had no institutionalized role in monarchy in Argead Macedonia. Macurdy was certainly right that their power was not institutionalized, but wrong, I believe, in understanding political power as solely defined by the possession of an institutionalized role; she limits "real" power ("woman power" or otherwise) to the holding of office. To Macurdy,

influence was not power. I fundamentally disagree, as do many political historians of the last generation or two. In keeping with McManus' discussion of Macurdy's sudden interest in women and monarchy, I would suggest that the birth of women's suffrage helps to explain why she tied political power to the holding of office. Her focus on individual lives and her scrupulous discussion of available evidence about each not only created the foundation on which many modern discussions rest, but also, despite her doubts about "women power," generated a sense for the possibility of the agency of these women, one that had long term consequences. Moreover, she detected how much circumstance dictated what these women were able to do and so noted—at least for Macedonia itself—that the change in circumstance at the end of the Argead dynasty led to the decline, if not exactly disappearance, of royal women from center stage in Macedonian monarchy.

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