

Grace Harriet Macurdy on the Seleucid Queens

In her study of woman-power in the Seleucid dynasty, Grace Harriet Macurdy focused on the queens who self-actualized the most and ruled with the same kind of strong-arm ruthlessness as men. Energy and unscrupulous self-interest put these women on the same plane as their male relations, and GHM absolutely refused to sentimentalize (as she put it), like most of her male colleagues, with dismayed reactions to unfeminine behaviour or backhanded flattery of women who exceeded their sex. Of the Seleucid queens, she thus comments most upon Laodice I and Cleopatra Thea, both famous for killing people and starting wars, habits which would barely register if the perpetrators were kings but which had, to date, earned these women almost universal abhorrence. GHM quite casually sets down the historiographic notoriety of these queens as being the sign of their success, and opines that “history record[ing] no good of Laodice” testifies to her strength of character and actual pre-eminence.

GHM’s treatment of the aggressive as well as the gentler Seleucid queens was so thorough that new research on these women has only begun again in recent years, due in part to accumulation of new epigraphic evidence and to the revived interest in Seleucid history since the landmark *From Samarkhand to Sardis* by Amelie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White (two other discipline-making women). No present study of Seleucid queens goes without a reference to GHM’s work, and a few of her ideas have had a particularly important legacy for the field.

First is her argument that woman-power be assessed on the same grounds as the political power of men. One question we might ask of her, and which we do ask in current Seleucid research, is whether GHM is simply describing power, held sometimes by women, sometimes by men, or whether she and we understand woman-power to be a specific category of leadership, either in our own minds or in the Seleucid conceptualization of a reign. Following GHM’s

example, ought we view woman-behind-the-man forms of soft power as indulgently dismissive of women? Is the negative stereotype about female manipulation of male leaders too strong for us to parse out new examples of GHM's woman-power in action from the accusatory or disinterested ancient accounts? Recent work is moving into examination of the more fondly-remembered Seleucid queens and the wider range of queenly roles than GHM's "tigerish" woman-power, but her celebration of this strong leadership remains an exhortation to continue naming powerful women for who they were.

Second is the observation GHM makes at several points (of Apame on p. 78, of Laodice on p. 83, of Laodice wife of Antiochos III on p. 93) that certain queens were "put aside" by their husbands in favour of new wives, with the result that they lost their queenly status. This has been an extremely persistent idea, cropping up in almost every subsequent study, especially for Laodice I. I do not think that GHM intended this, nor is she entirely to blame, but her description combined with her feminist viewpoint has legitimized a set of assumptions around Seleucid queenship and royal marriage which undermine the strong woman-power position.

Third is the phenomenon that Seleucid queens were outsiders who married into the dynasty, leaving no Seleucid queens by birth and a strongly male characterization of the dynasty. This is common enough for patrilineal dynasties, but it contrasts with GHM's much more extensive treatment of the Ptolemaic queens, who were daughters of their own dynasty, and the Macedonians, about half of them daughters. A resulting struggle in present-day thinking concerns the question of loyalties, and what forces for cohesion or division queens who were married in, and indeed later put aside, brought to the Seleucids. Assumptions about the masculinity of the Seleucids have also made it important to question whether queens brought a

feminine role-construction, a kind of “woman-power”, to bear on the dynasty’s politics, through which we might re-evaluate the character and strategies of the Seleucid regime.

Bibliography

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