Women in the Greco-Roman World

In a previous Newsletter (no. 41.4) Robert Bates summarized two Horn Museum lectures by Randall Younker on the excavations at San Miceli, Sicily, and archaeological clues on women’s ministerial participation in the Early Christian church found at the site. These finds were presented as part of a larger group of archaeological material, which when looked at in their contexts, suggest that women were active leaders in the Early Christian Church.

Since I have just finished writing a dissertation on this extensive topic, under Dr. Younker’s guidance, I have been asked by the Newsletter editor to elaborate on the Greco-Roman background and some additional archaeological evidence on gender as a foundation for the interpretation of the Early Christian material remains.

There are some commonly accepted assumptions regarding women in the first century, including: 1) that they were excluded from religious leadership, 2) served as sacred prostitutes in Greek temples, 3) were unconditionally subordinate to male figures throughout their entire lifetime, and 4) were looked upon as inferior to men. However, as I investigated the archaeological remains, a different picture started to emerge. These common beliefs about women in the Roman society seemed to differ from the reality found in the archaeological remains, suggesting that these assumptions are at least questionable.

A major problem with these historical assumptions about women in the ancient world is that they are commonly used to interpret some of the disputed passages of Paul (in 1 Cor and 1 Tim) on the participation of women in the early church. These interpretations are then used to formulate rules about the participation of women in Christian communities today.

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The archaeological remains indicate that many of these assumptions were based on ideals prescribed by aristocratic male authors, but which were inconsistently practiced in wider society. The role of women in ancient societies varied considerably. While there were some periods when women were quite restricted, there were others when they assumed prominent roles in society.

It is of interest that during the first centuries BC and AD; when the events of the New Testament took place, that reputable women in society began to take on prominent roles. It was at that time when powerful women such as Cleopatra (1st cent. BC) and Empress Livia, the mother of Tiberius (1st cent. BC–AD) occupied prominent roles of leadership in Roman society. Their example would seem to have been the stimulus that allowed other women to follow in their footsteps and assume various roles in society. An example of this ripple effect of women’s participation in society can be seen in their public portrayals in art during the first century. By contrast, in the centuries prior to the appearance of Cleopatra in Rome, only one woman had been illustrated. Nevertheless, after Cleopatra, Livia was soon represented in various public spheres in Rome, after which numerous depictions of women followed.

The first century was also a period of constant military campaigns. Roman territorial expansion allowed for a change in the dynamics between gender in society. The men went for training and then battle, while women stayed at home and took on positions previously occupied only by men to keep society functioning properly. Food had to be provided, shops opened, businesses run, and religious rites performed. Men were gone for long periods with the Roman army; and many did not ever return. Numerous women became widows and had to manage the inherited wealth on their own.

One of the most extensive sources of information about the first century AD Roman world comes from the well-preserved remains of the cities Pompeii and Herculaneum, Italy. These cities were buried by an explosion of molten rock and ashfall deposits from the Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The excavations at these sites reveal some interesting facts about Roman women. The remains of these cities show that women were commonly patronesses; a public and prominent societal role that imbued the person with honor and authority. At Herculaneum, 40% of the dedicatory statues were of women. This statistic reflects gender ratios in the broader Roman society during the first century, which was 40% women and 60% men. Women were also customarily priestesses in the first century. At Pompeii, excavators found seven inscriptions that mentioned women as priestesses. Of these, five were also patronesses. Priesthood and patronage usually went together. Priests were expected to offer benefaction and patronage towards the cult, with its temple and attendants.

Of significance along these lines, was the priestess Eumachia of Pompeii, who paid for the construction of a porch and covered passage in the city forum. Her benefaction is known from two inscriptions found nearby. These inscriptions not only highlight that she used her own resources to fund these building projects, but that she did so in her own name and that of her son, not her husband, which indicates her capacity to manage her own wealth. The dynamic of offering a benefaction in exchange for honor can be interpreted as patronage and is evidenced here by the fact that she received inscriptions and a statue in her honor for her benefactions, and that they were prominently located in the forum, one of the busiest places of the city.

It is commonly believed that women were excluded from politics in first-century Roman society. However, the excavations at Pompeii revealed at least fifty electoral notices of women supporting a political candidate. These electoral notices suggest that women were involved in politics and that they were influential despite their formal exclusion from political offices. Thus, looking at the remains from Pompeii and Herculaneum, one can see that women were quite prominent in the first-century society. They functioned as religious leaders (priestesses), honored patronesses and benefactresses, and were even involved in political affairs.

Such public engagement of women in society was not unique to Pompeii and Herculaneum. In other areas of the Greco-Roman world, there is considerable evidence of women’s public role in society. For example, in Asia Minor there are....
archaeological remains testifying to more than 160 benefactresses. In regions with a strong Hellenistic influence, such as Syria, Asia Minor, and the southern Italic Peninsula, including Sicily; all places where Christianity was later introduced and flourished in the first century, women had earlier already been quite prominent in society, having commonly served as priestesses. These priestesses were honored and influential members of society just as their male counterparts. Priestesses were common figures, serving at the house of a domestic god, which was usually located in a public place. In addition, their names were often inscribed on public monuments such as the bases of statues, and gravestones, and found on dedications of marketplaces, streets and temples.

Regarding sacred prostitution, no archaeological evidence, has so far been found, that points to the prostitution of Greek priestesses. This idea comes from a misinterpretation of the ancient author Strabo, who said that: “the temple of Aphrodite owned 1000 slave prostitutes—men and women.” However, while excavators in major cities such as Corinth and Ephesus, have found evidence of prostitution, it was disconnected in any way from the Greek temples and their religious rites. In Corinth, for instance, the prostitution quarters and the temple were separated by some distance. The prostitution quarters were close to the sea, serving sailors and passing travelers, whereas the temple of Aphrodite was located on the summit of the Acro Corinth in Corinth.

From our study, archaeological remains have opened a window to a reality not usually entertained by modern readers of the New Testament, especially when dealing with the Pauline passages on women. The archaeological remains from the first century not only suggest that women did not serve as sacred prostitutes but indicate that women were influential leaders in society and in religious communities as well. Such broad participation of women in the leadership of society and religion may have contributed to their participation as leaders in the first century of the Christian church. (Carina O. Prestes)
Ancient Manuscript Found:

A 6th century velum manuscript containing text from the Codex Sinaiticus has recently been found by monks during restorations at the library of St. Catherine’s Monastery, in the Sinai. However, researchers at the Early Manuscripts Electronic Library (EMEL), using spectral imaging, revealed that this MS is a palimpsest, upon which there is a fifth century document written by an anonymous scribe containing three medical texts, one of which is by the famous physician Hippocrates (ca. 460-370 BC), along with diagrams of medicinal herbs.

Ancient God Identified?

At Palmyra, many Aramaic inscriptions refer to a god as “lord of the universe,” “he whose name is blessed forever,” and “merciful.” It has recently been suggested that since Mesopotamian gods were referred to with similar epithets instead of a single anonymous god, multiple deities were being addressed here in the hope that at least one would answer their petitions.

Ancient Curse Found:

A curse written in proto-Canaanite script has been found on a 26.7 x 20.8 cm stone slab located above the Gihon Spring, in Jerusalem. The curse was apparently to the governor of the city (sar ha-ir), and is the oldest inscription found so far in Jerusalem.

Ancient Toys Found:

Several toys, including a miniature four-wheeled chariot and a rattle with a bird motif, have recently been found during the excavation of one of the tombs of the necropolis of the ancient mound of Soğmatar, about 80 km (50 mi) from Sanliufa, Turkey. The finds date to the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3500-1950 BC), when the city was a major center dedicated to the Mesopotamian moon god Sin.

New Sun Temple Remains:

Recent excavations in the el-Matariya area of Cairo, ancient Heliopolis, have discovered granite blocks bearing cartouches of Pharaoh Khufu (Dynasty 4, ca. 2613-2494 BC). Investment at the Temple of the sun, evidenced by altars, naos and stele fragments, was longstanding, with the earliest layers dating to Naqada III (Dynasty 0). The building fragments of Khufu either belong to unknown temple precinct of Ra, the oldest solar deity in the ancient capital, or brought as building material from Giza during the Ramesside Period.