

***Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece.* Joan Breton Connelly. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. 415 pp.\***

Reviewed by Tyler Jo Smith

Ancient religion is an attractive, if difficult subject. Scholarly interest in this area of the Mediterranean world shows no sign of waning with recent studies devoted to Greeks, Romans, Jews, and even Etruscans. But several of these books are general surveys written by specialists well-versed in the textual tradition. The book under review here, however, is the work of a classical archaeologist. It is confined to a single category of religious personnel in ancient Greece: the priestess. That being said, the author makes sincere attempts at incorporating evidence from many time periods (Archaic Greece-Roman/Christian), from a variety of places, and of several available kinds (archaeological, textual, epigraphical). This is a refreshing change from yet another look at Classical Athens or Imperial Rome, dealing with major objects of art or monumental remains. The author reveals an engagement with theoretical writings, some more appropriate to her study than others. In that vein, her prose is labored in places and seems overtly jargon-heavy. The introduction offers, under the larger subheading of “Methodological Framework,” brief summaries of past and present assumptions, “reading the language of images,” as well as gender, agency, and identity. We are also warned about problematic terminology (e.g. sacred vs. secular, public vs. private). This is rather a lot for readers to swallow by way of introduction, but Joan Breton Connelly should not be faulted for desiring to distance the field from its persistent academic isolationism. At the same time, her handling of the evidence might have benefited from reading Dell Upton on sacred and profane space or Jules Prown on material culture. Readers less familiar with the religion or art of the ancient world are recommended to have a copy of the multi-authored *ThesCRA* on hand for additional references and illustrations.<sup>1</sup>

*Portrait of a Priestess* is an impressively long book. It is beautifully produced, including 27 color plates before the introduction, and a generous number of black and white illustrations spaced throughout the text. It is also affordable and easy to use, but the book anticipates a specialist, scholarly readership. Following the lengthy introductory chapter are seven more dealing with evidence for Greek and Roman priestesses directly. The chapters have somewhat thematic divisions, some more historical in content, others more art-historical: “Paths to Priesthood” (chapter 2); “Priesthoods of Prominence” (chapter 3); “Dressing the Part” (chapter 4); “The Priestess in the Sanctuary” (chapter 5); “The Priestess in Action” (chapter 6); “Priestly Privilege” (chapter 7); “Death of the Priestess” (chapter 8). The final two chapters, concerned with “The Coming of Christianity” (it also includes Judaism) and a general conclusion, might well have been combined into one. Chapters 2, 3, and 7 provide a certain amount of background information about women's roles in Greek religion, and much information is based on literary sources and inscriptions.

Connelly gains momentum in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 8 where much of her evidence is material and visual: sculpture, vase-painting, and “decorative arts.” Not surprisingly, she is on more confident

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footing with these issues (than say with inscriptions, where she is more cautious), and thus pushes the evidence in some interesting new directions. Her comparison of a major art form (Erechtheion Caryatids) with minor ones (ivories and bronzes) can be taken seriously. Though her summary of Acropolis *korai* and their range of interpretations is helpful and necessary to her discussion, the (far-fetched?) suggestion that some held metal baskets on their heads merits a venture in experimental archaeology. The inclusion of the often overlooked evidence of the cult of Artemis Ortheia at Messene (much better known from nearby Sparta) will be welcomed by many readers, but scholars of Greek dance might be hard pressed to accept motionless sculptures situated in a semicircle as a ring of dancers. It is a pity that much significant bibliography on the Boeotian *lekanis* in the British Museum (fig. 6.1) was overlooked, as a variety of interpretations might have been relevant to the author's discussion.<sup>2</sup> A further point of clarification concerns Connelly's comment on an Athenian black-figure *lekythos* in Basel (fig. 6.17), where the author claims that on this vase and on related ones: "it is the world of Dionysos that we see, complete with vines and ivy leaves" (p. 191). The relevant Dionysian element of this scene is the shape of a wine-cup, the *kantharos*, jointly held by the two women in the scene; the cup is an attribute of the god of wine himself. The vines and ivy are found in Athenian black-figure painting from the last quarter of the 6th century onward, and need not always indicate a Dionysian setting.

Despite her theoretical overtures, Connelly's discussion is highly evidence-driven. She is constantly asking the question: What can we learn about priestesses, their appearance and function, based on visual, material, and written sources? With that in mind, we may detect two broad themes in her magnum opus. The first is women. While there is no clear feminist agenda here, there is a tremendous amount to be learned about ancient women and their societal roles, both within and without the sacred realm. Festivals and funerals, both of which occupy the author, are two areas of Greek life where women played a primary part. The second theme is the often ambiguous and confusing relationship between myth and ritual or, as it is also put here, between myth and reality. Connelly's detailed analysis makes clear that we still have a certain amount to learn about the origins and spread of Greek religion. As well, readers should be advised that all varieties of evidence, despite current thinking, cannot justifiably be given equal weight. A one-off inscription discovered during the course of archaeological survey or rescue excavation in Hellenistic Asia Minor lends a different type and amount of information from a 5th century red-figure amphora discovered in an Etruscan tomb.

These points aside, the author does a superb job of juggling such a massive amount of data. It is very likely that her publication will become a standard study of women and religion, serving as both monograph and reference work. As is apparent throughout her text and in her bibliography, she is much indebted to her own teacher, Brunilde Ridgway, as well as to the recently-deceased Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood. Connelly's demonstrated comfort and competency with sculpture, combined with her interdisciplinary ideal, results in an homage to two of Classical scholarship's greatest women of the past generation.

## Notes

1. J. Paul Getty Museum, *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004-2006).

2. See Tyler Jo Smith, "Festival? What Festival? Reading Dance Imagery as Evidence" in *Games and Festivals in Classical Antiquity: Proceedings of the Conference Held in Edinburgh 10-12 July 2000*, Sinclair Bell and Glenys Davies, eds, (Oxford, England: Archaeopress, 2004), p. 18, and fn. 62-67.

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