

ONE

Introduction – Kourotrophic Iconography in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean

Origins and Meanings

“Mother and child.” The combination seems so natural, even inevitable, that it is hardly surprising that depictions of it should have a universal presence and appeal in the iconographic and archaeological record. And yet this is very much not the case. Portrayals of woman and child or children are far from universal, and in point of fact are actually far rarer than much current scholarship would recognize.¹ Even rarer in the iconographic repertoire of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East are depictions of pregnant women or women in the process of parturition.² To put it simply, the universal realities of childbirth and child-rearing are anomalies in ancient imagery.

This book is a study of one of the few depictions of the woman and child pair in the ancient repertoire, called here by the Greek term *kourotrophos*. The *kourotrophos*, at its most basic, shows an adult – almost inevitably female – mortal or divine, who holds and/or nurses an infant. The image is deceptively simple. To the modern eye the icon appears to represent a mother nursing or nurturing her child. For many, it is a depiction of a goddess of fertility, or the embodiment of fertility itself. Such interpretations, though, are based on preconceived notions of the universality of the image, of its automatic relationship

¹ See especially Merrillees 1988.

² On pregnant females in Eighteenth-Dynasty Egypt, see Speiser 2004: *passim*. On birthing iconography in Cyprus, see Chap. 5.

with fertility, human or otherwise, and essentializing notions about the female body and its relationship to reproduction. In truth, none of these postulates are accurate. Although more popular than images of pregnancy or childbirth, the kourotophos is a highly specialized, localized, and contrived image that appeared only in a limited scope in the ancient world. Making use of recent archaeological studies combined with current theoretical approaches to women, gender, and the body, this book examines the contexts and circumstances that gave rise to this motif, and offers a cross-cultural study of the range of its meanings in the ancient world.

To date, no complete study of the kourotophos has been attempted, in spite of growing recent interest in children and childhood in the ancient world, as well as ongoing attempts both to engender and to ungender archaeology.³ Much work on kourotophism has been accomplished for the Greek materials. T. H. Price's 1978 book *Kourotophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities* gives a light survey of kourotophic iconography in ancient Greece as a whole, while Elizabeth French's monumental 1971 article on Mycenaean figurines had a substantial section on the Bronze Age kourotophic figurines known at the time. French's work has since been complemented by a thorough study of Mycenaean kourotophic figurines in Korinna Pilafidis-Williams's 1998 monograph *The Sanctuary of Aphaia on Aigina in the Bronze Age*. The same year saw the publication of Barbara Olsen's article "Women, Children, and the Family in the Late Aegean Bronze Age." Farther east, kourotophic iconography has at best been lumped together with other images of women in similar media. The kourotophic plaques of Old Babylonia have been studied and published side by side with the full corpus of Old Babylonian plaques, receiving special treatment only insofar as they are grouped together with other depictions of women in this medium. Important works on such corpora have been written in recent years, notably P. R. S. Moorey's *Catalogue of Terracotta Figurines in the Ashmolean*, as well as more theoretical works by Zainab Bahrani and Julia Assante. Similar cataloging has occurred for the Bronze Age Cypriot figurines, all

³ Some recent studies of ancient childhood are Neils and Oakley's *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece* (2003), Cohen and Rutter's *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy* (2008); and Papageorgiou (2008) on Minoan Crete specifically. For Egypt, the Janssens' 1990 *Growing up in Ancient Egypt* remains a standard reference. Treating a slightly later period is Cecily Hennessy's 2008 work *Images of Children in Byzantium* and Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot's co-edited work *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*.

gathered in Vassos Karageorghis's recent publications on the coroplastic arts of ancient Cyprus. More theoretical studies on this material have been done by Anna L. a Campo, Marcia K. Mogelonsky, and most notably Diane Bolger in several articles and her 2003 book *Gender in Ancient Cyprus: Narratives of Social Change on a Mediterranean Island*. Kourotrophic iconography from the Levant has appeared in studies of female iconography generally, especially in Urs Winter's masterpiece *Frau und Göttin*, Othmar Keel and Christophe Uehlinger's *Gods, Goddesses, and Depictions of God in Ancient Israel*, and Keel and Silvia Schroer's *Eva – Mutter alles Lebendigen*, which includes data from the entire ancient Near East (ANE). Different categories of Egyptian kourotrophi have been studied and published over the past several years. Catherine Roehrig's 1990 dissertation on royal caretakers examined the titles and depictions of female and even male kourotrophi from Eighteenth-Dynasty Egypt.⁴ Geraldine Pinch's 1993 book *Votive Offerings to Hathor* is still the standard reference on the so-called "fertility figurines," of which kourotrophi form a significant part, as is also the case with her 1983 article "Childbirth and Female Figurines at Deir el-Medina and el-'Amarna." Pinch's work has now been complemented by the 2007 doctoral dissertation of Elizabeth Waraksa, *Female Figurines from the Mut Precinct: Context and Ritual Function*. Winfried Orthmann's "Die säugende Göttin: Zu einem Relief aus Karatepe" still serves as an introduction to the Egyptian "Divine Wet-Nurse" motif, as does Emma Brunner-Traut's "Das Muttermilchkrüglein: Ammen mit Stillumhang und Mondamulett" for the kourotrophic flask. Hartmut Kühne's "Das Motiv der Nährenden Frau oder Göttin in Vorderasien" serves as a synthesis of the Near Eastern and Egyptian data.

The groundwork has thus been laid for a more complete treatment of kourotrophic iconography in the ancient world. Pulling together the various data gathered and studied in localized isolation, this work begins with a full study of the rise and transmission of kourotrophic iconography in the ANE and Mediterranean. With a view toward issues of evolution and early dissemination, I am focusing here specifically on the Bronze Age materials, pulling in later data only to consider notions of continuity and change. Seven areas are here implicated: Egypt, the Levant, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, Cyprus, and the Aegean. The organization is partially chronological, partially cladistic. I begin with the kourotrophic imagery of ancient Egypt, extending back into the Predynastic. This is followed by the predominantly Late Bronze

⁴ The only instance of male kourotrophi throughout the present study.

Age Levantine material, as this derives directly from the Egyptian and is, in many ways, a continuation of the Egyptian themes. Bronze Age Anatolia produced a meager handful of kourotophoi, some of which have parallels with the Egyptian canon. Next comes Mesopotamia, where kourotophic imagery first appears in the late third millennium and then disappears, to be replaced by a new style of kourotophism in the Old Babylonian Period (early second millennium). Like Anatolia, Bronze Age Iran produced only a few kourotophoi, heavily influenced by Mesopotamian models. From here I proceed to Cyprus, where kourotophic figurines come into existence in the Early Cypriot III period (c. 2000 BCE). Farther west, the Mycenaeans produced kourotophic figurines in quantity starting only c. 1450 BCE, and thus they are considered last. As a point of contrast, Minoan Crete is also considered here as a sort of kourotophic “dead zone.” In spite of a plethora of attestations to the “Mother Goddess” of Minoan Crete, there is in fact no localized kourotophic iconography from this group. This absence, especially in light of kourotophic imagery in the surrounding regions, will be considered as an aid to understanding the uses and meanings of kourotophic iconography elsewhere.

Theorizing the Kourotophos: Where Sex Meets Gender

An important consideration in the study of kourotophic iconography is getting past the knee-jerk interpretation of mother and child. Some 2,000 years of “Madonna and Child” iconography from the Christian repertoire have been cast back onto the previous 3,000 years, creating an apparent continuum with Isis and Horus at one end and Mary and Jesus at the other.⁵ It is here that modern theories of gender and the body come into play. In truth, there is an ideal interplay of gender theory and analysis in the study of the ancient kourotophos, for the kourotophos stands at the very nexus of biology and engendered culture.

Sex vs. Gender

The relationship between “biological” sex and “cultural” gender has been problematized in the past several decades by scholars working in the feminist and queer theory traditions, notably Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Moira Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray, Robert Stoller,

⁵ Actually, it’s Nekhbet and Sahure, but that’s a matter for Chap. 2.

and Monique Wittig, among others. Although these theorists differ, often considerably, in their understandings of the relationships between sex, gender, and the body, some basic commonalities do exist. Originally, following on the heels of Simone de Beauvoir, it was understood that sex was a biological phenomenon and gender – the cultural attributes associated with the sexes, thus “feminine” or “masculine” – was culturally constructed, and thus relative.⁶ Or, to put it another way, gender was not physiologically determined, and biology was not destiny.

Originally intended to dispute the biology-as-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. . . . Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.⁷

Following in the footsteps of Lacan and Foucault, philosophers such as Butler and Wittig, among others, however, have offered a further suggestion: that because “biological” sex is a “fact” established by those who already embrace notions of binary (and oppositional) genders, the concept of binary sex (man:woman) is *also* an artificial, culturally constructed notion.⁸ In short, there is no more reality behind the idea of two sexes than there is of two genders. Thus Butler argues:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. . . . As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.⁹

⁶ Gatens 1996: Chap. 1, with references. See especially the work of Ortner and Whitehead 1981 as a watershed publication.

⁷ Butler 2006: 8–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 148–150.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 9–10. In paraphrasing the philosophy of M. Wittig, Butler relates a similar ideology: “In other words, there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality. Hence, for Wittig, there is no distinction between sex and gender; the category of ‘sex’ is itself a *gendered* category” (*Ibid.*: 153).

Gatens takes a somewhat similar approach, although ultimately arguing that the sexed body cannot be divorced from how society engenders difference:

Significantly, the sexed body can no longer be conceived as the unproblematic biological and factual base upon which gender is inscribed, but must in itself be recognized as constructed by discourses and practices that take the body both as their target and as their vehicle of expression. Power is not then reducible to what is imposed, from above, on naturally differentiated male and female bodies, but is also constitutive of those bodies, in so far as they are constituted as male and female.¹⁰

Some theorists maintain, however, that biological sex does influence the construction of gender, in terms both of historical precedent and of ideals for future sociological developments. According to Grosz:

These differences may or may not be biological or universal. But whether biological or cultural, they are ineradicable. . . . It is in any case not clear how one can eliminate the effects of (social) gender to see the contributions of (biological) sex. The body cannot be understood as a neutral screen, a biological *tabula rasa* onto which masculine or feminine could be indifferently projected.¹¹

Taking the argument into the realms of the cellular, it has been argued that not even the usual genetic markers of sex are still accepted as indicating a clear biological distinction between the sexes. More and more evidence is summoned that shows that there are variations on the commonly accepted XX = female/XY = male paradigm, including XX males and XY females, and individuals with XXY, XXXY, and XXXXY who display male or hermaphroditic attributes.¹²

And so the debate revolves around the relationship of sex to gender, and whether or not sex is simply gender (rather than gender being sex). For some, not only is gender a performance of the roles and expectations associated by individual cultures with the sexes, but “sex” itself is also a performance, not a (biological) reality. “No longer believable as an interior ‘truth’ of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not ‘to be’), one that,

¹⁰ Gatens 1996: 70.

¹¹ Grosz 1994: 18.

¹² Butler 2006: 144–147; Knapp and Meskell 1997: 186–187.

released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings.”¹³

In truth, such exceptionally radical notions as espoused especially by Butler have had little part to play in archaeological discourse, where the received wisdom continues to be, as Naomi Hamilton rather realistically noted, that “all known human groups appear to have some form of gender division which relates in some way to the two main sexes.”¹⁴

Ungendering Archaeology

Nevertheless, such reconceptualizations of both sex and gender have had an important ripple effect in archaeology. The 1990s saw important strides in the engendering of archaeology, especially with the 1991 watershed publication of J.M. Gero and M. W. Conkey’s *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*. More recently, the interest in the past decade has been in the *ungendering* of archaeology. Rather than removing notions of sex and gender from archaeological inquiry, *ungendering* archaeology seeks to implement the revised understandings of gender (and sex) constructions in the archaeological record, correcting what Julia Asher-Greve calls “scholars’ tendency to squeeze human figures into an either/or binary gender system.”¹⁵ That is to say, rather than imposing the modern two-sex male/female dyad on the archaeological record, and thus on ancient societies, and then extrapolating modern, Western notions of gender from that, *ungendering* theory seeks to understand how ancient societies may have constructed sex and gender on their own terms.¹⁶ This may include notions of multiple sexes, unsexed individuals, hermaphroditism, and deliberate sexual ambiguity, all of which may play out in the lives of individuals in different ways over the course of a lifetime. As Lauren Talalay cogently put it in regard to early Mediterranean iconography:

What is clear from recent scholarship is that we can no longer think of these early images in simple sexual terms – figures may depict males, females, perhaps some kind of “third gender” hybrids, intentionally ambiguous representations, or even images that moved in and out of traditional sexual categories.

¹³ Butler 2006: 46.

¹⁴ Hamilton 2000: 22. See also Mina 2007: 264. For anecdotal evidence on Butler’s more radical views infiltrating archaeology, though, see Hitchcock 2000: 69.

¹⁵ Asher-Greve 2002:12.

¹⁶ McCaffrey 2002: *passim*; Ucko 1996: 303.

Early Mediterranean taxonomies appear to have embraced multiple or ambiguous genders, a kind of general messiness that rubs against the grain of Western discourse.¹⁷

One example of this new approach is Eleanor Ribeiro's study of Early Cypriot coroplastic scenic compositions. Here she has argued that the apparently unsexed individuals in the compositions might be understood as prepubescent children, who are not necessarily "sexed" or "engendered" until later in life. Attempts by modern scholars to attribute a sex/gender to these individuals overlook the Cypriot ideology, which regards these individuals as (temporarily) gender-neutral.¹⁸ A similar approach was taken by Louise Hitchcock in her analysis of the so-called "Priest-King" fresco of Minoan Crete. Noting that the reconstructed image contains both masculine (kilt and codpiece) and feminine (white skin) gender attributes, Hitchcock eschews modern attempts to assign the "king" a specific sex, and instead considers the possibility that a combination of sexed/engendered traits may have contributed to the Minoan construction of authority. Thus, just as the Egyptian "Queen" Hatshepsut portrayed herself in the official iconography as a male Pharaoh, so too could the Minoan "ruler (?)" have portrayed him/herself as hermaphroditic.¹⁹

That the ungendering pendulum may be swinging back into the realms of gendering again in archaeological contexts is suggested in a recent article by Maria Mina. Analyzing a corpus of 1,093 terracotta figurines from the Neolithic Aegean, of which 243 qualified in Mina's schema as asexual, probably asexual, or ambiguous,²⁰ Mina noted that although it was clear that the apparently "sexless" figurines were deliberately so rendered, there were sufficient correspondences in color and body decoration between the female and asexual figurines to show a correlation between the two categories. Put simply, the asexual figurines were actually coded female.²¹ Directly refuting the hypotheses put forward by Talalay and Hamilton (and, technically, Ribeiro, although not mentioned in the article), Mina concluded,

. . . asexual figurines do not represent genderless people. Where there is no association with gender on the basis of female

¹⁷ Talalay 2005: 146. See also Talalay 2000: 9.

¹⁸ Ribeiro 2002: *passim*.

¹⁹ Hitchcock 2000: 78–83.

²⁰ Mina 2007: 269.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 279–280. See also Mina 2008: 219–224.

anatomy, it is possible they represent genderless stages of life which, however, still carry a gender-specific identity. If we assume that such 'genderless' stages include childhood, we can also assume that children would expect to grow up to be gendered actors and thus would have been treated and conditioned accordingly. . . . I suggest, therefore, that we interpret asexual figurines as representing fully developed gendered individuals, depicted through the application of motifs that denote symbolic markers in the form of attire or body decoration, or as images of individuals that had not yet reached full maturity (prepubescent males or females) in the case of undecorated asexual figurines.²²

Biological Reality

The *kourotrophos* is an ideal image through which to study ideas of sex, gender, and the female body in the archaeological context. As the potentially lactating nourisher of an infant, the *kourotrophos* stands between the biological birth mother and the culturally constructed caretaker, who need not be female but, somehow, always gets portrayed that way.

If we were to create a continuum, with female physiology at one end and culture-specific socialization at the other, our starting point would be physical pregnancy and parturition. It is a 100% constant in human biology that it is the female of the species who receives sperm into her body, where it may unite with an egg and fertilize it. That zygote, still within the female body, may then implant itself into the uterine wall and develop there. If all goes well in terms of fertility, the fetus incubates for approximately nine months (or seventeen, if you ask new mothers what it felt like at the time), at which point the infant is born, or at least removed from the female body. Birth from a female body is a constant factor in human life.

The next point on our continuum is lactation. Even if we remove those females who die in parturition, we must still note that not 100% of mothers lactate. Both biological and environmental factors inhibit lactation in some women. Nevertheless, most new mothers do lactate and feed their newborns via lactation for the first few weeks, months, or even years of life. In many instances, where the biological mother cannot or does not wish to breast-feed, a wet nurse can be hired; antiquity provided few alternatives to breast milk for infants. Although not

²² Mina 2007: 280–281, excerpted.

100 percent of new mothers (or women, for that matter) lactate and feed children via nursing, 100 percent of lactation and nursing does come from women. Men cannot do it.²³ It is a biological process exclusive to females. Therefore, one might argue that on strictly biological criteria, pregnancy, parturition, and lactation are exclusively female occupations.

At this point, our continuum leaves the biological and enters the cultural. As Kathleen Bolen explained the issue:

For conceptual clarity, two aspects of motherhood are often distinguished: biological mothering (the birth relation) and social mothering, although such divisions or categories must remain fluid and permeable. . . . There *is* a relevant undeniable biological “fact” in that females give birth. This reality contrasts with the changing ambiguity of parenting within ethnographic contexts and the growing acceptance of the construction of “biologically” based explanations. The conceptual distinction between mothering labor and birthing labor is important. Birthing labor, which *is* biological and culminates in giving birth, is undeniably female and remains universally in the realm of women. Raising, feeding, protecting, and caring for children commonly defines the activities of motherhood, and occur under a variety of conditions. Socially, all women are potentially mothers, yet often overlooked is the fact that these social functions are not limited to women, or even specific age groups.²⁴

On recovery from parturition, even if the new mother does breast-feed (and this is not a given), there is no biological reason for the mother, or any female, to be the primary caregiver of a newborn, *especially* if the child is fed by means other than human lactation.²⁵ A lactating mother may be present to feed the child, but otherwise that child can remain under the supervision of a father, a grandparent, aunt/uncle, or older sibling. If in ancient and modern times we associate childcare primarily with females, this is a cultural construct; it has little firm basis in biology other than the occasional need for breast-feeding at the hands (and

²³ Although I do vaguely remember that, back in the 1980s, Sharper Image had a dual baby bottle holder that men could strap onto their chests to experience “breast feeding” for themselves. Of course, men also gelled their hair and wore eye-liner in the 1980s, so I suppose it was just generally a good time for men to get in touch with their feminine side.

²⁴ Bolen 1992: 49–50. Emphases in original.

²⁵ The discovery of ancient Greek baby bottles with nipples shows that this was a possibility.