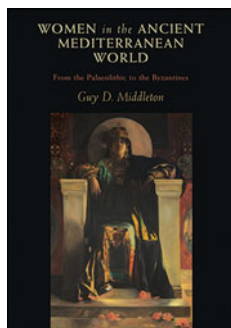


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GUY D. MIDDLETON. 2023. *Women in the ancient Mediterranean world: from the Palaeolithic to the Byzantines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-70383-3 paperback £22.99.



With dynamic storytelling and refreshing sincerity, Guy Middleton delivers a compelling collection of narratives about the lives of women in the ancient Mediterranean world. Spanning the Palaeolithic to the Byzantine Empire, 30 women from around the Mediterranean area are reimagined using archaeological and textual sources. In doing so, Middleton does not seek to problematise the Mediterranean as a concept; rather, the sea merely serves as the setting for the tales to unfold. This narrative strategy allows him to focus on the women themselves—the book foregrounds women where they have been historically neglected, if not outright erased.

The Introduction begins with a discussion of female infanticide, making this absence especially visceral. Not only are women often excluded from historical narratives, but they were also (and continue to be) selected against for survival in the past. Though this example is among the most explicit manifestations of misogyny, Middleton discusses others that are more subtle, such as in patriarchal social structures. The transgression Middleton seeks to rectify in this book is the absence of women in the history of the ancient Mediterranean. This absence is due in part to the limited number of surviving textual sources written by women, but also due to the implicit assumption that ancient women did not have lives that are worthy of study. Of course, progress has been made on this front; with each successive wave of feminism, the visibility of women in both history and scholarship has increased. Much work is still required, however, necessitating projects such as this.

The book begins in the deep past, recounting the lives of three women who lived between 35 000 and 5000 years ago. In examining cave paintings from the Palaeolithic, Middleton challenges the traditional assumption that men were responsible for these early forms of art, suggesting instead that women made them. From the late Neolithic, meanwhile, a woman from Malta showed skeletal evidence of receiving care; at some point, she had sustained a broken arm but it had been treated and healed well. Moving to the Bronze Age, Middleton discusses eight women who lived around the Mediterranean. We encounter Queen Merneith and the Pharaoh Hatshepsut from Egypt, two rulers who commanded respect in a world built for men. In Anatolia, Puduhepa is another powerful woman who managed the Hittite kingdom alongside her husband. The section on the Iron Age introduces eight more women from diverse backgrounds and origins. Previously known to archaeologists only as the ‘Rich Athenian Lady’, a woman from ninth century BC Athens has been reimagined as Herse, who was buried by her loving sister and husband. Then, from a legal speech given by Demosthenes but probably written by Apollodorus, we meet Neaira who had been raised from a young age to be a courtesan but may have eventually found love

with a man named Stephanos. Middleton's discussion of the Hellenistic world includes four women of high status: Mariamne, whose beauty rivalled that of Helen of Troy but whose life ended tragically; an Etruscan aristocrat named Seianti Hanunia Tlesnasa; Olympias, wife of Philip II and mother of Alexander; and Terentia, ex-wife of Cicero, who reportedly lived to the age of 103 years. Finally, in what Middleton calls the 'Age of Empire', the lives of seven women are recounted from a broad array of sources. A graffito introduces us to Eutyichis, a prostitute in Pompeii whose original name is unknown. We meet Achillia and Amazon, two of the many often-forgotten female gladiators in the Roman world whose names are preserved on a marble relief. The remarkable life of Perpetua, a Christian woman in a pagan empire, is preserved in texts that may have been autobiographical. These narratives, though disparate in time and place, are similar in that they centre women in Mediterranean history, a space that had been lacking them for far too long.

Considering the temporal and spatial breadth of this project, a concluding chapter for summation and reflection would have been helpful to reorientate the reader to the issues highlighted in the Introduction. Overall, though, this book makes a notable step toward the goal of increasing the presence of ancient women in history, ancient history and archaeology. It uses a wide variety of historical and archaeological evidence, including burials, pottery, graffiti, texts and even handprints. The author is sensitive to the nature of these sources and what insights they can plausibly reveal; for instance, the positionality of most ancient textual sources limits the conclusions that can be made about the perspectives of women, if any can indeed be made at all. The reader is never overwhelmed by the quantity and diversity of evidence as they are woven seamlessly into the narrative. The prose, too, is expressive and approachable, which makes this book accessible to both academic and interested non-academic audiences.

Women in the ancient Mediterranean world: from the Palaeolithic to the Byzantines is a vibrant addition to the fields of archaeology, ancient history and women's and gender studies. By recasting women at the centre of their own narratives—not as the wives or daughters of famous men, as they often have been historically relegated—this book is both a welcome reprieve and a step towards the increased visibility of women in history. The women described in the pages are dynamic and complicated, powerful and interesting; Middleton not only foregrounds the lives of women in the ancient Mediterranean, he brings them back to life.

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