

*'Modern' Women of the Past?:
Unearthing Gender and Antiquity Conference*

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*Fragment of a Queen's Face ca. 1353–1336 BCE
New Kingdom, Amarna Period.
Metropolitan Museum of Art (26.7.1396)*

In March of 2021 the AAIA, in collaboration with Centre for Classical and Near Eastern Studies of Australia (CCANESA), The Chau Chak Wing Museum, Australasian Women in Ancient World Studies, and the University of Sydney Departments of Archaeology and Classics and Ancient History, hosted an international online conference *'Modern' Women of the Past? Unearthing Gender and Antiquity*. What had begun life as a series of informal discussions between myself and Louise Pryke around a public outreach event on the theme of women in antiquity exploded into a dynamic, global affair which attracted contributions from over 60 speakers from more than a dozen countries. The conference was held over two intense 12-hour days on the 5th and 6th of March.

The response to the call for papers was both humbling and overwhelming, and we discovered the exciting degree of connectivity that an online conference can bring. Freed of the (often prohibitive) costs of international travel we were able to accommodate the voices of emerging scholars from far-flung nations. We were inspired by the work of Dinara

Assanova (Kazakh National Pedagogical University) who has single-handedly created a national Online Museum of Women of Kazakhstan. Her work is both a means of preserving Kazakh heritage and amassing a wealth of sources for an expanding research archive. Oluwafunmiyi Raheem (Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding) sparked tremendous discussion with his research into votive practices, dedicated to *Olokun Seniade* in Ile-Ife, Southwest Nigeria. Speakers overcame the tyranny of distance and international timezones to share their research. Tais Pagoto Belo (LARP Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Saõ Paulo) presented her work on early Imperial Roman coinage at 3am Brazilian time in what was for her a second language, an impressive feat.

Beyond the demonstrations of stamina and linguistic flexibility, we were pleased to showcase impressive research by both emerging and established scholars, who were prepared to cross disciplinary boundaries and engage in enriching discussions and debates. Graeme Miles (University of Tasmania) examined the challenges Eunapius faced in his efforts Representing Sosipatra in Eunapius of Sardis' *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists*, while Lakshmi R (Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University) wrestled with the use of forms of Nañkai or Nañkaiyār in early medieval references to royal women in Tamil epigraphy.

Heidi Koepp-Junk (University of Trier) not only delivered a thought-provoking paper on 'Women, Music and Eroticism in Ancient Egypt' but went on to treat us with an impromptu performance, singing in ancient Egyptian, while playing a replica ancient Egyptian lute.

Discussion time at the end of sessions, and during break periods, was rich with debate. Amjad Alshalan (King Saud University) revealed a razor-sharp scholarly intellect that marked her out as an emerging scholar to follow. Her paper 'Euripides' Medea: An Exploration of Male Representation of Women', was a mere prelude to the pearls of wisdom she shared during discussions. Similarly

Athenodora Nguyen received kudos as the non-speaker delegate who posed the most astute questions. Session after session they cut to the core of tangled issues of gender representation and interpretation, with a wit and humour that encouraged speakers to reveal their deeper thoughts on their chosen topics.

The first day of the conference concluded with the first of two keynote lectures. Dr Rachel Pope (University of Liverpool) delivered a powerhouse public lecture, hosted by the Chau Chak Wing Museum. With devastating precision, she laid bare the lack of representation of female scholars in the discipline of archaeology, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, and the deep impact this had on how the archaeological record – as it relates to women, especially powerful women – has been interpreted. She went on to explore the challenges that women working in the field face today, and the ways in which this continues to impact on how we understand the women of the ancient past. Beyond simply quantifying the nature and extent of these problems Dr Pope offered ameliorating measures such as support for women with caring responsibilities and critical re-appraisals of past interpretations of the archaeological evidence to offer more holistic understandings of the diverse experiences and roles of women who lived in the deep past.

At the commencement of the second day's proceedings Professor Gina Luria Walker (New York School) delivered our second keynote lecture, outlining the *New Historia* initiative which redresses the ignorance of earlier female figures and the erasure of female historians through the creation of new biographies of female historians. She began this project with the British historian Mary Hays, whose own work *Female Biography: or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (1807) set the course for Gina's efforts to put women back into the histories from which they have long been erased, overlooked or underplayed.

This theme continued through the day as speakers examined the ways in which women's roles and experiences are ripe for re-evaluation. Valentina Limina (Università di Pisa) shone new light on the shifting reception of Arria from Roman times to the Renaissance, while Pablo Varona Rubio (Università degli Studi di Perugia) re-examined the roles of women in small Roman communities through a case study of Varia Gestiana Urvinum Hortense.

Staff and associates of the AAIA were well-represented at the conference. Beatrice McLoughlin delivered a paper on the Women's Works and Days project which incorporates ethnoarchaeological research to rediscover the agency of female potters in Cyprus. Andrew Hazewinkel challenged perceptions of masculinity and femininity through the myth of Herakles enslavement by the Lydian queen Omphale and their switching of conventional gender roles. For my own research, I was thrilled to have an opportunity to share research into perceptions of female power and influence through reception of the British queens Boudicca and Cartimandua during the Roman conquest of Britain.

The conference concluded its second day with a publication session during which speakers were put in direct contact with the editors of the book series *Women in Ancient Cultures* at University of Liverpool Press. Led by Commissioning Editor, Claire Litt, the team outlined the entire process from proposal through to finished publication, answering many questions from our speakers.

It was a true joy to be able to host such an expansive conference and I am incredibly thankful to Dr Louise Pryke, Dr Emma Barlow and Candace Richards for their diligent hard work, patience and support in our endeavours to bring the conference to life.

A final word goes to our speakers who offered their gratitude in numerous emails of thanks in the days following the event:

...Seeing the positive side of things, the pandemic has allowed me to participate, from Spain, in an event held in Sydney, which demonstrates our resilience in the face of adversity.

I am fascinated by the number of participants, the number of presentations, the organisation and the interaction you have made possible. Amazing!

I want to thank you for the great organization of the conference. It was something beautiful in these troubled times.

Yvonne Inall is an AAIA Project Officer. Her research focusses on Iron Age, weapons, warfare, violence and the construction of martial identities.