

Why a Female Hegemony?

Almost incidental to the main arguments, which are iconographic, in "Sumerian Bats, Lion-headed Eagles, and Iconographic Evidence for the Overthrow of a Female-priest Hegemony" by Naomi F. Goldsmith and Edwin Gould in *Biblical Archaeologist* 53: 142–56, the authors assume that an original female-priest dominion was overthrown by male warriors at the dawn of history. In making such unexamined claims, they are following views popular among feminist spiritualists, pop anthropologists and some mythographers and also suggested by certain anthropologists and archaeologists (Gimbutas 1982; Leacock 1981). However, the idea of prehistoric female dominance is not universally accepted by anthropologists, classicists or others who deal with the artifacts and accounts presumably related to gender roles in archaic societies. The arguments for and against such a supposition are too diverse and complicated to review here. Yet brief mention of several problems with the assertions about primeval female hegemony are in order.

First, the identification of certain female figurines from pre-literate contexts as goddesses, priestesses or prostitutes can never be certain. Without inscriptional labeling or textual clues to iconographic coding that can suggest links between figures preserved in the material culture and mythic or human females known from literature, it is impossible to establish that artifactual renderings of females are meant to represent political female ascendancy. Other explanatory models are no less viable (Binford 1979). Thus, predicating the notion of female political supremacy upon the putative identification of such artifacts is fraught with serious methodological difficulty.

Second, even if artifacts and subsequent myths could be justifiably linked to the concept of an original female-dominated society later overthrown by male warriors, such a concept may not in fact be a reflection of sociopolitical reality. Indeed, it has been shown that some myths and rituals apparently suggesting that women once had power and subsequently lost it are commonly misunderstood (Bamberger 1974). Myths are rarely exact mirrors of society; rather, as part of the cultural record of a people, they often provide ahistorical aetiological justification for an historical present (Lefkowitz 1981). In terms of the bats and eagles in the article, the supposed overthrow of the "once dominant" lioness may simply be an assertion of male power and political ascendancy. Rather than representing a historical event, it portrays the way things are.

The verdict is not yet in on the tantalizing subject of possible female rule in prehistoric societies. Powerful arguments and counter-arguments have been offered. Unless Goldsmith and Gould see some features in the iconographic evidence that can establish the validity of the claim for female hegemony, such an assertion ought to be set in the context of the vigorous anthropological discussion about the origin of gender inequality.

Bibliography

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A Further Note on Purple Dyeing

I. Irving Ziderman's article on "Seashells and Ancient Purple Dyeing" in *Biblical Archaeologist* 53: 98–101, brings a vast knowledge of biochemistry to amplify a specific problem in the field of biblical archaeology. This note is to correct the scientist's statement on the languages of the ancient Near East that refer to purple dyeing.

According to Ziderman, "The first written records of purple dyeing, from Nuzi, Mesopotamia, are about 3,500 years old, followed by texts in Hebrew (the book of Exodus, 3,300 years old), Ugaritic (3,000 years old), Akkadian (2,700 years old), Greek, and Latin." This statement is confusing at best, with multiple errors and omissions to be noted as well.

Ziderman begins correctly: the earliest reference to purple dyeing in ancient Near Eastern texts comes from Nuzi, about 1425 B.C.E. The Nuzi tablets are written in Akkadian, albeit an Akkadian with a heavy mixture of Hurrian. Scholars debate whether the specific word for purple, *kinahhu*, is Hurrian (thus William F. Albright) or Semitic (thus Ephraim A. Speiser) in origin.

The next possible reference to purple dyeing comes from the Amarna letters around 1350 B.C.E., specifically in EA 14, where the word *puati* is considered by some scholars to be a word for purple. These texts also are written in Akkadian, although it is probable that this particular word is Canaanite.

Ziderman's dating of the Hebrew and Ugaritic material is to be reversed. Although scholars debate when the book of Exodus was written, all agree that it postdates the Ugaritic texts. Accordingly, next in line comes the Ugaritic documentation, which has two candidates for purple. The words in question are *argmn* and *pwt*. Although not all scholars are convinced that both of these words refer to purple, either or both of them could have this meaning. If *pwt* does mean purple, and if Amarna *puati* also means purple, then quite clearly these two words are cognates.

From approximately the same time as the Amarna evidence and the Ugaritic material comes the entry *puwattis* in a Hittite lexical text. The exact meaning of this word cannot be determined with certainty, but it may mean purple. If this is correct, then this word is most likely a borrowing from Semitic (see Amarna *puati*, Ugaritic *pwt*) into Hittite.

Next in line comes the earliest references to Hebrew *'argaman*, although again no firm date can be established for Exodus 25:4 and 36:35, the two passages that use this word in the list of materials collected for the construction of the tabernacle.

The placement of Akkadian last in Ziderman's list requires qualification. As noted above, purple dyeing is referred to in the Nuzi tablets and possibly in the Amarna letters, both written in Akkadian. It is possible, even probable, that the words in question, *kinahhu* and *puati*, are not Akkadian, but obviously Mesopotamia was well aware of purple dyeing long before 700 B.C.E. Nevertheless, it is approximately at this time when the word *argam/wannu* begins to appear in Akkadian texts.

Finally, no note on purple in Near Eastern languages would be complete without mention of the ultimate source of the most commonly used word for this color. Hebrew *'argaman* and its cognates are all borrowed from Hittite, where *arkamman* means tribute. Exactly when and where the word for tribute came to mean purple cannot be determined, but it is likely that this process was underway at Ugarit. This major port was within the Hittite realm, and both meanings are attested for *argmn* in the texts discovered there.

An important article that can be added to Ziderman's bibliography, and from which some of the above data has been extracted, is "Ugaritic *pwt*: A Term from the Early Canaanite Dyeing Industry," by H. A. Hoffner in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 87 (1967): 300–3.

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