

Ancient Power Women Series by Patricia Sargent - Excerpts

Book I *Realities*

Woman's Issues Determine Her Standing

In the ancient world, women continuously dealt with men's fears and suspicion concerning their nature. Women were thought to be jealous, destructive, emotional, irrational, dangerous, fecund, and a definite liability to a man. In addition, women's fertility, not always a matter of choice. It reminded men of the prehistoric time, a primal time when people stood in awe of the magical forces of nature and considered women to be powerful beings because they manifested that fertility.

Their allure, their beauty, could often control men's decisions because men's urges were still primal. Because women were considered man's property and often his source of status, they had to be protected from the prying eyes of competitors who might steal them away. Such a creature might also run away. For these reasons, women in most cultures in the ancient world were not allowed to go out in public. The few cultures that allowed women to go to the marketplace insisted that a family guardian and protector always accompany them.

Sensuality, the Unfair Lure of Men

Along with being unworthy, women were considered powerful beings to be feared and distrusted. Their sexuality, above all, was to be feared and checked for the good of the family, the tribe, or the city-state. Unless they could blame actual magic, men blamed women's sexual power for their woes. However, sex has a magic of its own, and like the **Mother Earth** and nature, it has both constructive and destructive qualities.

Greek myth and ancient tribal tradition were notorious for casting blame on women's desire and desirability. This applied to both humans and the goddesses who represented them.

Isis Resurrects Osiris

The essential and primordial power of the Egyptian deities is the power of magic.¹ The Egyptian **Isis** myth is full of magic. According to the myth, a sister/wife to her husband Osiris, **Isis** labored long to find all the parts of his body that had been hacked apart when his evil brother Set killed him. Flying as a bird, she traveled throughout Egypt, finding one part here and one there until she reconstructed his body. Only one part was missing—Osiris's penis, which had been eaten by a fish. **Isis** magically reconstructed that seminal part herself. Assuming his essence through magic, **Isis** conceived the son Horus, who became Osiris's avenger.

Unique Burial Customs

More bizarre was the custom of the Massagetae, nomads from the steppes.² “When someone becomes old,” wrote Herodotus, “all his relatives get together and sacrifice him with some sheep. They then cook all the meat and have a banquet.” Nomadic elders might not be able to keep up with the tribe as they traversed the terrain. Similarly, as nomads, they would not have had a traditional burial ground, so eating the unfortunate elder nourished the bodies of the descendants and kept the person from being devoured by carrion birds or mammals. Furthermore, the Massagetae, whom we now call the Huns, considered this

¹ Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Greco-Roman World*. Cornell University Press, Ithica, NY, 1971. p. 14. Quoted in Forrest p. 55.

²A vast plain, often dry and without trees. Grass covered lands of Central Asia. Not conducive to agriculture or sedentary lifestyle in ancient times.

custom a blessing. If people died from disease, they buried them, moved on, and regarded it as a misfortune that the man or woman did not get to be sacrificed.³ Herodotus does not mention what they did with the hallowed bones, but at least they were not scattered by creatures that might take the parts to their caves.

³ *Ibid.*

Book II *Expressions*

The Madame

On the other hand, the woman in charge of an extensive prostitution business could be successful as long as her will to succeed and business acumen continued to grow. Unlike the women in their charge, she did not have to remain young. It did not matter if she were beautiful or had a youthful body. As enterprising **Hetaerai**, well educated and well groomed, knew men in high places, business boomed. The same thing is true for those who managed male prostitutes. For example, as long as Nero kept his eunuch Sporus gowned and coiffed as a woman, **Calvia Crispinilla**—in charge of Nero’s pleasures—had a good job. She arranged Sporus’s wardrobe including his wedding gown.

Vicious Revenge

Like John Chrysostom, who railed against an empress for her luxury and lavish spending, John the Baptist made **Queen Herodias’s** sin public.⁴ Not surprisingly, **Herodias**, like **Empress Aelia Eudoxia**, took the harsh criticism personally.

For this insult, she wanted her husband to have the Baptist killed; however, Herod Antipas admired John and was not inclined to kill him. Still, the barb festered until a delicious opportunity to rid herself of her critic occurred. At a party, her daughter **Salome**, the child of her first marriage, danced, to the delight of Herod Antipas. Like many rulers of Asia Minor, particularly the Persians, he showed his joy and appreciation of her dance by

⁴ The story is told in Mark 6:19–20.

promising to give her whatever she asked. After conferring with her mother, this nubile child⁵ asked for John's head on a silver platter.

Power Women Unafraid to Die

Like **Queen Artemesia, Deborah** did not fear the onslaught of swords. Her mission was to save the people, to fight—and die if necessary—for their cause. For **Artemesia** it would be for Xerxes, her liege, the Persian conqueror; for **Deborah** it would be for her God. Others, like **Queen Zenobia** from Syria, **Queen Candace** from deepest Africa, and **Queen Boudicea** from Britain, would fight in the front lines, leading their armies against the disciplined, polished, and terrifying Roman military machine for their lands, their honor, and the lives of their people. They were indeed Power Women.

Conquering the World's Greatest Conqueror

Queen Tomyris had ruled her lands peacefully and had not wanted the advances of a foreign fortune hunter. This regal tribeswoman would not become just another trophy to be added to Cyrus's harem, following his campaigns to serve his ego and applaud his slaughter. Nor would she cower in the face of his experienced and formidable forces. Instead, fired by the passion and rage of a mother, she slew him and defiantly soaked his bloated head in a skin filled with blood with which the warrior was so well accustomed.

⁵ Girls were marriageable at about age twelve, and as **Salome** was not betrothed or married, she undoubtedly was at the cusp of childhood—a pre-teen she would be called today, hardly as guilty as her mother.

Book III, *Cameos*

To Marry or Not to Marry

In ancient times, being a wife was not a matter of choice. A woman's father, and in some cultures the parents, bargained for matches. These bargains included a bride's price, the bridegroom's cost of gaining a wife, and a dowry, material goods given by the wife's family to the bridegroom, *e.g.* land, goods, or treasure. While having a husband was a continuation of woman's life long servitude, first with the father, then with the husband, and finally with the son, being without a husband was a woman's shame. That condition was as true in China as it was in the West.

Only in Egypt

In the Cradle of Civilization, along the banks of the fecund Nile, Egyptian women enjoyed equality, freedom, and power as no other women in the ancient world. As early as the third millennium BCE women sometimes ruled the Two Lands with dignity, integrity, grit, and power. Some fought off challengers, usurpers, and pretty boys who sought to use their marriage as a rung in their own ladder leading to their own power. For that reason some remained single. Some queens measured their success by peace and some by war. All were amazing women.

First Woman Pharaoh, and World's First Woman Ruler

From the first pharaohs in the early Dynastic Period from 3150—2686, militant “God Kings of the Nile,”⁶ fought petty kings of the individual *nomes*, villages, up and down the Nile River, eventually unifying Egypt. Few women are mentioned during this period; however, even in Dynasty I, two queens are mentioned. One even ruled the kingdom, the first woman pharaoh, **Merineith**.

Ultimate Sacrifice for Sumerian Queen

Compare **Queen Merneith's** sacrificial tomb *circa* 2800 BCE with that of **Puabi/Shub-Ad**, a queen or perhaps a priestess in the Sumerian city of Ur during the first dynasty of Ur *circa* 2600 BCE, perhaps two-hundred later. **Merineith's** tomb was surrounded by forty-one burials of servants⁷ whereas **Puabi's** sacrificial tomb housed all her entourage in one place. Clearly, the Egyptians and Mesopotamians practiced sacrificial interment from the earliest times. We might infer that the sacrificial burial practice indicates a belief in life after death—at least for queens, kings, and the common people who served them. Imagine being told that the queen was about to die and you have the distinction of serving her in the afterlife!

World's Most Miraculous Pregnancy

Three years later, on the twelfth month, fourteenth day, “The empress **Jingu** gave birth to the Emperor Homuda in Tsukushi.”⁸ Human gestation is from 259 to 280 or thirty-

⁶ A descriptive phrase Clayton used in his introduction to the dynasties.

⁷ Clayton, p. 22.

⁸ Aston, p. 232.

seven to forty-two weeks. An elephant's gestation is 645 days or nearly two years. Holding a pregnancy for any reason and for any length of time after the fetus is ready to be born is miraculous. Inserting a foot-long stone to share space with a fetus is incredible. And carrying a full-term pregnancy for three years in full battle dress, wielding sword and other weapons, leading an army of 5,000 on the march and on the sea, and maintaining flexibility and agility, dashing about to slay the enemy in personal combat, is beyond human ability.

World's First Author, First Woman High Priest, First Historian

In **Enheduanna's** time, she may have had charge of the entire complex for two cities, Ur and Uruk, as part of her duties as head priest. Soon after 3,000 BCE, a temple the city of Lagash had daily ration lists for beer and bread for 1,200 men and women, of whom 300 were slaves. It ran a cloth workshop employing 205 women and their children as carders, spinners, and weavers. It had bakers, millers, brewers, and cooks. It also employed fishermen, herdsmen, sailors, guards, scribes, blacksmiths and many other workers.”⁹ That **Enheduanna** had time to write hymns, manage the priests of two cities, and keep a history of conquests of her Father, Sargon the Great, with such busy responsibility is commendable. **Enheduanna** held the office of high priestess for over forty years. She survived a coup by a Summerian rebel, Lugal-ane who briefly forced her into exile. Details of her exile are scarce, but the tone of her poetry during a certain period is one of depression, claiming as other religious figures have done, that somehow she disappointed the goddess **Innana** and was being punished by being under subjugation.

⁹ Hamblin, p. 99.

Book IV, *Portraits*

Chaldean Mysteries Credited to Semiramis

Through millennial mists and the broken fragments of man's attempt to tell the truth of the past, we know there once was a proud queen, **Sammuramat**, wife of Shamshi-Adad V and the mother of his successor, Adad-ninrari III. Historians tell us that this queen accompanied her husband on at least one military campaign and is prominently mentioned in royal inscriptions.¹⁰ However, rarely does one ever read even a fragment of her "prominent mention," for her memory appears not to be important. It is thanks to the Greeks, who later interpreted her biography, that we know something about the queen-regent who inspired the Parthians to proclaim her overwhelming beauty and the Greeks—who admired her courage on expedition to India and her magnificent tribute to her husband. The Greeks called her **Queen Semiramis**. From simple fragments arose a legendary queen, one whom magic lore credits her with the Chaldean Mysteries.

Crocodile Power

Nicholas Grimal, formerly a researcher at the French Institute of Oriental Antiquity in Cairo and later Professor of Egyptology at the Sorbonne University in Paris, wrote that Ammenemes IV reigned a little less than ten years and by the time he died, the country was once more moving into a decline. The reasons were two. First, the reigns of pharaohs Sesostri III and Ammenemes III were excessive, about fifty years each. During that time, successional problems arose. This situation, wrote Grimal, explains why, just as in the late Sixth Dynasty, another queen rose to power. **Sobknofrure**, the beauty of Sobek, was a sister

¹⁰ Bertman, Stephen. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 102 Incomplete

and possibly also Ammenemes IV's wife.¹¹ Both Amenemes IV and **Sobeknofrure** built and refined temples and other structures.

Choosing to name herself after the crocodile god, Sobek, might indicate that she wanted all to know she had powerful jaws, “the better to crunch you with, my dear.”

For the first time, her position as woman pharaoh was described in her title.

Mothers Uphold Tradition and Values

A mother's influence is indelible. From the beginning of time, through their nurturance while cooing and cuddling the infant, women teach the children how to speak. Even when their tribes are conquered and they become wives of the aggressor, women's influence keeps the old ways alive. They introduce foreign words into the language of the family and bring with them traditions and rituals that are not always acceptable to those of her new tribe. They tell the tales of their “old country” and children gain vision outside accepted parameters. Spouses from outside the clan or tribe infuse new blood into an old line, and they enrich the language with concepts unknown in a closed community. For that reason, his family asked how Moses, God's chosen leader, could allow such umbrage—the marriage of **Zipporah**, a foreigner—in his own household?

The Lie

Forced by famine in the land at that time, Abram, **Sarai**, and their entourage left for Egypt. It was there that **Sarai's** beauty became a grave concern for Abram, who felt sure that the Egyptians would kill him—an alien—and claim her as their own. He devised a scheme to pose her as his sister. Delighted with her, the Egyptians told Pharaoh of **Sarai's** beauty and

¹¹ Grimal, p. 171

immediately took her to him. Thinking Abram to be her brother, Pharaoh showered him with gifts of sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and slaves—both men and women. Abram’s wealth had increased, but he had lost his wife.

Immediately, Egypt experienced plagues, and Pharaoh called Abram before him to explain why he had foisted such terrors upon his people with such a lie. Angered by the ruse, Pharaoh cast the clan out of Egypt, and Abram now returned with his wife and his new riches to Haran where he had originally built the first altar to his god.

The Courage to Disobey

“Dealing wisely” Herod meant a timely genocide of Hebrew children. Ordering the massacre of all male children recently born, King Herod told the midwives to dispatch the babies as soon as they were delivered. Stunned at the order, two of the midwives, **Shiprah** and **Rizpa**, refused to take part in the decimation of a people. When called to account, they told Pharaoh, perhaps Rameses II, that Hebrew women, themselves midwives, delivered so quickly that the midwives had missed the opportunity to kill the children.

Someone who wrote of the account thought the women’s act of bravery was so heroic that he was moved to record the names of the midwives. It is interesting to note that neither the name of the pharaoh, nor that of his daughter, was noted in the passage. Names were of considerable importance to ancient people, for they were considered an extension of personality.¹² Throughout the Hebrew texts, women were often not named perhaps because their personality and their deeds had no impact upon the historian.

¹² Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible*. Wings Books, New York, 1981, p. 20.

Questioning Alexander's Legitimacy

With that drunken insult, intended to cut deeply, Alexander was furious. He stood to face Attulus and threw his cup at him. To his surprise, his father lunged forth, staggering with dagger in hand, not toward the offender, but to his loyal son! Alexander never forgot the insult—nor his father's drunken response.¹³ When Philip II, stupid with wine, stumbled and fell, Alexander berated him for his inability to conduct himself in a kingly manner. Alexander is reported to have looked down contemptuously at him and said, "Here is the man who is making ready to cross from Europe to Asia and cannot even cross from one table to another without losing his balance."¹⁴ With insults flying like crazed bees whose hives are ripped apart by a ravenous bear, Alexander left the table, collected his mother, **Queen Olympias**, and rode out of town. After depositing her in Epirus in her brother's court, he traveled north to sequester himself with the Illyrians, his father's enemies.¹⁵

Did the Queen Murder the King?

Was she guilty, or wasn't she? If **Olympias** planned Philip II's death, she also cleaned up the lineage problem by destroying the new "proper" Macedonian wife and her infant, the tiny heir. There would be no more claimants on Alexander's right to the throne, and she would have the distinction of being **Queen Mother** for the rest of Alexander's charmed young life. Stories change from teller to teller.

Many told that **Olympias** forced the new wife, **Kleopatra** to watch as she tortured the baby to death with her ritual snakes. She then gave the anguished mother the opportunity

¹³ O'Brien, p. 28.

¹⁴ Plutarch, 9-10 as quoted by O'Brien, p. 28.

¹⁵ O'Brien, p. 30.

to hang herself. No one doubted the truth of the tale, for **Queen Olympias**, a priestess at Delphi, was accustomed to handling snakes at her worship of the god, Dionysus.

Cleopatra Beguiles Caesar

Julius Caesar summoned the battling **Cleopatra** and Ptolemy XIII to Alexandria. As history and the film industry have attested, Caesar favored **Cleopatra** over the unimaginative and lazy teen-aged Ptolemy. The question was how she would be able to enter the Roman General's presence without incurring violence from Ptolemy's henchmen. To gain the negotiator's attention, **Cleopatra** arrived first in his presence. Posing as a "merchant from Sicily," Apollodorus, her slave, unrolled the bag in which reclined the nude figure of the young queen.

Caesar was obviously amused by the theatrics and fascinated by the impudence of a woman who could emerge from her entry and, unashamedly, hold a "beguiling conversation with him in Greek."¹⁶

¹⁶ Canfora, Luciano, Trans. Martin Ryle. *The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World*. University of California Press, Berkley, 1987. p. 66.