

The Image of Women in Iberian Culture (6th–1st Century B.C.)

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Iberian Culture in the Mediterranean Framework

Iberian culture, with its dynamics and its characteristic features, is recognized today as one of the most important cultures in the ancient Mediterranean. The hierarchical nature of this culture, as well as its plurality, should be emphasized. It is a culture, moreover, that projects its ideology through a rich and complex corpus of images. In hierarchical societies, like that of Iberia, the aristocracy monopolizes the symbols of rank, as is clear in the iconography. Gender, too, plays an important role.

The Theoretical Framework: Archaeology and Gender

Our approach to Iberian society follows the methodology of gender archaeology, which relies on a body of theory developed over the last two decades, and which holds important implications for the future.

For the definition of gender, we follow the already classic text of Roberta Gilchrist (1994). Today, the research on gender in the past is conceived as a necessary part of any theory about social relations. The objects of this research are: the “invisible segments” of society, age categories, relations between men and women, the characteristics of processes of production, and female participation in different social fields, among many other subjects.

Precedents: The Late Bronze Age and the Orientalizing Period

Before concentrating on the Iberian period, it is necessary to consider its precedents in the stages known as the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, with special reference to the horizon designated Orientalizing Tartessian, in which a rich catalogue of female images is already documented. From the funerary world, we know about decorated stone

stelai that served as the monumental signs of outstanding tombs. This group of stelai is the first manifestation of changes in the indigenous societies of the southwestern



Fig. 1. Stele with female figure from Hernán Pérez (Extremadura) (photo Museo Arqueológico Nacional)

Iberian territories. Its original iconographic program displays signs of gender in elements of clothing, head-dress, adornment, jewelry, and attributes associated with both male and female figures. Moreover, these anthropomorphic images are related to places where not only is it important to control access in a mainly pastoral economy, but where also the distribution of metalliferous sources must not be forgotten. By considering these circumstances, we might conclude that the role played by women at that time was highly significant. On some stelai, armed warriors flank a person shown with a diadem and breasts which prove her assimilation to the male personage (Fig. 1). In contrast, however, are proposals like that of Celestino (2001), for whom these stelai signify male burials. The theory has been proposed that the first stelai were identified with an idol of native origin that accompanied the warrior in his burial.

But the female image does not appear only in stone at this period. In time, with the disappearance of decorated stelai before and during the seventh century, prestige objects in bronze, like the ones called “braziers,” jugs, and *timiateria*, mainly with female images, will be integrated within the horizon that we call Orientalizing in the furnishing of the most aristocratic tombs. The primary function of the *timiateria*, however, is to make an offering through fire, which means when the *timiaterio* figure is represented on cultic or liturgical objects, it is related to the idea of divinity. For this reason, the personages that are represented on such objects are invested with a sacred nature. As an example we can mention the *timiateria* that appeared in the Iberian sanctuary of La Quejola (Albacete), which specialized in the wine trade.

Likewise, the isolated female figure, less common than male ones, doubtless refers to the religious context. An example is the statuette of Astarté in the Seville Museum, which probably comes from the nearby archaeological site of El Carambolo. The nude goddess is shown seated, wearing an Egyptian wig. Her name, along with its ritual epithets in Phoenician characters, can be read in the inscription on the pedestal. The statuette is dated between the eighth and seventh centuries before Christ; we may, therefore, speak of it as the oldest known Phoenician statuette with a dedication to Astarté. Nor can we forget the image of the divinity presented by another famous bronze from the province of Seville, “the Carriazo bronze,” with a divinity between two water birds (Fig. 2) (Jiménez Avila 2002)

Another extraordinary alabaster piece found in a tomb of the Tutugi necropolis (Galera, Granada) is related to this sacred and ritual world. It shows a seated woman, wearing costly robes, among Egyptianizing sphinxes. The sacred liquid flows from her pierced breasts and is collected in a vessel that she holds in her lap. No doubt this image refers to the female divinity of Oriental nature.

Our approach to the female image in Iberian culture has been determined by two basic contexts: on the one hand, the funerary space, involving analysis of tombs, furnishings,



Fig. 2. Carriazo bronze from Seville (photo Ministerio de Cultura)

and, cremations; on the other hand, the sacred space, which calls for study of sanctuaries, votive offerings, and representations of gestures.

The Iberian Funerary Context

The reflection of the living world in the funerary world has been established by a series of well-known and frequently discussed theoretical assessments. The necropoleis can offer parameters of analysis for the social study based on gender. If we assume that it is possible to get some idea of the characteristics of ancient societies through funerary remains, we need to establish ways of analysis in order to interpret the codes of gender which are present in the material remains of the site. The strategies for the gender research that we propose include the study of the actual funerary space and the selection of material represented in the furnishings and offerings; and the analysis of the cremated remains and the design and decoration of the tombs.

One of the basic areas of focus in funerary archaeology is the spatial dimension. It is interesting to assess it from the perspective of gender since the funerary space is created and designed by social relations and by natural and cultural objects. It could thus furnish a promising framework of analysis, if we start, obviously, from a comprehensive documentation of the archaeological excavation.

Of special interest is the work of this kind, developed by the team from the University of Jaén investigating the Iberian necropolis of Baza. Here the “hierarchization” of the funerary space is evident and reveals, at the same time, the actual structure of this society. A woman’s tomb, an extraordinary one in many respects, determines the arrangement of the necropolis (Fig. 3). The methodical and hierarchical disposition of the rich tomb at Baza shows the importance given to the burial of a young woman (Ruiz and Molinos 1993). The practical function of objects supposedly diagnostic of gender, such as armor, is currently denied. Armor is traditionally linked to male tombs, but the example

of the Hill at the Sanctuary in Baza, a female tomb with an extraordinary furnishing of arms, places this assumption in doubt.

To sum up, if we maintain that gender in ancient times is symbolically communicated through repetitive elements represented in the archaeological record in such a way that norms and ideas are expressed materially in funerary contexts, we must reread the material documentation and try to decipher this social and gender code. The appropriate interpretation of spaces, tombs, and funerary goods might offer some social and cognitive data about a significant segment of the society.

The study of this iconography must be framed in its historical context. In line with this principle, research has shown, mainly from the beginning of the fourth century before Christ, the important position of the female image in the repertory of funerary sculpture. We follow up recent proposals that have interpreted the series of Iberian “ladies” as the ideal representation of power in this society, superseding the mythological cycles whose protagonist is the hero.

We are familiar with seated and enthroned figures of which the famous Lady of Baza (Fig. 3), the lady of El Cigarralejo, and the lady of Elche with “the opium poppy” are of exceptional importance. As for the possible busts, we have exceptional examples like the celebrated Lady of Elche or the sculpture found in the necropolis of Cabezo Lucero.

Images of young or adolescent people are also included in the construction of funerary monuments of different kinds, such as the young figures from the Corral de Saus in Valencia and the young ladies from El Prado in Murcia, both on pillar-stelai, as well as the young flautist that is part of the monumental compound of Osuna. The integration of young female representations that participate in the Iberian funerary rituals is quite interesting. Ancient societies have understood this moment of transition as a social fact, full of values and symbolic uses, and assigned important values and roles to young people.

The Iberian Sanctuaries

The most important Iberian sanctuaries document ritual activities of which one of the most obvious manifestations is the deposition of elaborate votive offerings in a variety of raw materials, mainly limestone, bronze, and clay. Anthropomorphic male and female votive offerings constitute an important group in themselves. It is obvious that there is a great difference among the votive offerings of some sanctuaries, reflecting their characteristics, their function in the territory, their chronology, and their religious roles. The particular nature of the sanctuaries and also the raw materials from which the votives are made are reflected in the different representations. As we will emphasize later in discussing the funerary sculpture, there is a high proportion of aristocratic figures, both male and female, but together



Fig. 3. Dama de Baza (Granada) (photo Museo Arqueológico Nacional)

with these we find different kinds of offerings that present us with a less élitist type of religion that is more open to wide spectra in the population.

The votive figures display a series of gestures that are common to other contemporary Mediterranean cultures, like the Etruscan, and that have been interpreted as attitudes of offering, greeting, prayer, propitiation for fertility, or even fertilization (Fig. 4). We will briefly point out the possibilities for study offered by the female votive offerings that we could identify with a female divinity, a type of dedication linked to the world of fertility and female procreation. We may also point out also the possibility that any sanctuary linked with a female name or, at least, having been more frequented by women, therefore received offerings of clearly female nature. Such is the case of the sanctuary of Torreparedones where the study of the offerings allows us to raise the possibility of the existence of a mainly female cult in which the women's participation would not be limited to the mere deposition of offerings but extended to a more active role in the cult. In this connection, the famous relief of a scene of libation turns out to be very illustrative. Sculptured on a corner of the monument in the sanctuary but without a clear archaeological context, two women seem to pour out the liquid contained in a chalice-shaped vessel – a characteristic shape in the Iberian sanctuaries – that



Fig. 4. Bronze figurine from the Sanctuary of Collado de los Jardines (Jaén) (photo Ministerio de Cultura)

they both hold (Cunliffe and Fernández Castro, 1999). These features, linked to the divinity in connection with fertilization and health, are often present in Iberian sanctuaries.

Some offerings, like the birds, are exclusively from the female realm. No doubt the meaning is related, once again, to the world of fertility (birds are offered to Artemis, Afrodita, Tanit, and an assimilated native divinity). We are aware of

the existence of dove-shaped vessels, possibly used as libation vases, following Punic patterns, and whose presence is attested in necropoleis and Iberian sanctuaries. Also, the vases and bowls among the small bronze figures are shown in relation to the female world, as is the double offering, which is almost exclusive to female figures. The existence of female divinities, as in the case of the famous clay image of La Serreta of Alcoy, representing a divinity of nourishment in the midst of musicians, in the presence of a bird, probably instructs us about these very aspects.

Conclusions

The combination of the theoretical discipline that we define as the archaeology of gender and its application to Iberian history offers many possibilities, for instance, the recovery of the “invisible social segments” of women, youth, and childhood, their history, functions, identities, and relations.

The Orientalizing Tartessian period, as an essential native precedent for the understanding of the Iberian culture, is suggested as a field of research promising important results, notwithstanding the numerous existing publications. The iconography in stone of the funerary stelai and the metallic types of the sacred statuettes present valuable material for research with the aim of identifying specific characteristics of social and gender relations in these periods.

In conclusion, in this paper we have presented some of the strategies of gender research applied to Iberian culture, starting from the study of female iconography in different materials and contexts (funerary and religious), following lines of archaeological research on the spatial relations and cult, among others. Succeeding works will enrich and develop the proposals that we have outlined here.

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