

HUMANISM AND FEMINISM

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, an old Greek mummy tells us about the Renaissance. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

You've surely asked yourself, "If I could go back and visit another age, which one would I choose?" You may well have chosen the Renaissance -- that glorious age of high culture and beauty!

The Renaissance is tied to classical Greece through the ancient Greek idea that the world is shaped to its human occupants. That idea was far from early medieval thinking. Medieval interest in Greek literature had been growing since scholars rediscovered it around 1200. When printed books made that literature generally available after 1456, that interest turned into a passion.

In the medieval world, female values had been strong. God wore the female face of the Virgin Mary. Then classical Greek ideas gained momentum. Greek women hadn't even been allowed at public meetings. Except for a few thinkers like Pythagoras and Plato, the principle of male dominance had been unquestioned.

Now science writer John Noble Wilford tells about new work by archaeologist Joan Connelly. She's been studying the 524-foot frieze from the Parthenon in Athens. It shows a formal procession. We'd thought that procession was part of a regular Athens festival. But Connelly finds too much wrong with that idea. It would've been sacrilege to decorate a temple with current affairs.

The penny finally dropped when Connelly got her hands on some long-lost pages of a Euripides play. The papyrus pages were found in 1962, wrapped around a mummy. The play tells the story of Queen Praxithea, who sacrificed her daughters to save Athens.

Connelly realized that that same story had also been wrapped about the Parthenon -- as a centerpiece of Hellenic thinking. That frieze didn't represent a festival at all. It was a ceremony of human sacrifice. Just as boys went to war, girls went to sacrifice -- all for the good of the city-state, Wilford reminds us.

Greece was the cradle of modern Western culture, philosophy, even democracy. But Greece also practiced slavery, and it gave women no place at all. Late medieval scholars rediscovered those virtues and vices. They replaced the concept of corporate submission to God with the power of the individual.

We call that shift the Renaissance. It gave us astonishing individual accomplishments. But, almost subconsciously, we also took up the attitudes of an ancient age. Slavery had died out in the Middle Ages. Now it came back. So did witch-burning.

Archaeology is an odd business. A fragment of missing text turns up in a tomb. We start rethinking old virtues. And suddenly -- our view of the past has changed.

I'm John Lienhard at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Wilford, J.N., New Analysis of the Parthenon's Frieze Finds It Depicts a Horrifying Legend. *The New York Times*, Science Times, Tuesday, July 4, 1995, pp. 19, 21.

Grafton, A., *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* (with April Shelford and Nancy Siraisi). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

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