

Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies



Call for papers for theme issue

Settling Sophonisba:

Rediscovering a lost figure in the early modern European imagination

1550-1700



Early modern European dramatists, poets, and painters took a striking interest in the Carthaginian noblewoman Sophonisba (c.235-203 BC) who chose to poison herself to avoid the humiliation of becoming a Roman captive. A minor character in Roman and Greek historical sources such as Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, Plutarch's *Life of Scipio*, and Appian's *Punic Wars*, Sophonisba became a popular heroic figure in early modern Europe across national and confessional borders. Why did a seemingly insignificant Carthaginian noblewoman such as Sophonisba become such a popular figure across early modern culture? And what did she come to signify in different early modern contexts? This theme issue is dedicated to this enigmatic figure and her many different appearances in early modern literature and art.

According to ancient historical sources, Sophonisba was a beautiful patriot who seduced the Roman general Scipio Africanus's local ally Massinissa and made him swear not to hand her over to the Romans. Scipio, who was afraid that she might succeed in turning Massinissa against the Roman cause, opposed the match and insisted on taking Sophonisba as Roman war booty. To uphold both his promise to his new wife and the Romans, Massinissa brought Sophonisba poison to spare her from Roman captivity which she accepted willingly and bravely.

The ambivalent nature of this female figure as both victim and dangerous seductress supplied the Renaissance imagination with a flexible character who could be adapted according to multiple contexts. Whereas Latin and Greek historians treated Sophonisba almost exclusively as a dangerous instigator, Renaissance poets and painters developed a more sympathetic character, though not always condoling her marriage to Massinissa. Giovanni Boccaccio thus portrays her as an example of exceptional female fortitude in his *De mulieribus claris* (1361-62), rivalling virtuous Roman and biblical women, even as he simultaneously praises Scipio. The unrequited love of Sophonisba and Massinissa likewise furnished the tragic plot of much early Renaissance drama amongst these Gian Giorgio Trissino's *Sofonisba* (1515) which was translated into French by Mellin de Saint-Gelais in 1556 at the request of Catherine de Medici. The tragic fate of Sophonisba was subsequently taken up by such diverse dramatic traditions as English Restoration drama (Nathaniel Lee's *Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow*, 1676), the German Trauerspiel (Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's *Sophonisbe*, 1680) and Venetian opera (Nicolò Miato's *Scipio Africano, dramma per musica* with music by Francesco Cavelli, 1664). The death of the courageous Carthaginian was also interpreted by painters such as Jacopo Tintoretto, Nicolas Regnier and Rembrandt.

This theme issue of *Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies* (eds. David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt & Anastasia Ladefoged Larn) aims to give renewed attention to this intriguing figure in order to explore her diverse framings across genres, national borders, confessional boundaries, and centuries. We invite scholars from different disciplines (comparative literature, art history, theatre studies, etc.) to reflect on the role that Sophonisba played in the early modern European imagination c.1550-1700 and we invite scholars to contribute with diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. We are furthermore interested in articles which

explore the representation and use of the Sophonisba story within a specific genre, period, national context as well as across these divides. We specifically encourage articles which frame Sophonisba in relation to bigger cultural questions such as the reinterpretation of antiquity, representation of gender, changing dramatic practices and genre theory.

Possible approaches and perspectives may include, but are not limited to:

- Intertextuality and cultural exchange
- Reinterpretation of antiquity in the Renaissance
- Representation of women and gender in early modern literature and art
- Contemporaneous political, cultural and/or aesthetic uses of the Sophonisba story
- Relation between form and theme in the representation of Sophonisba

Please send an abstract in English or French of no more than 300 words to Anastasia Ladefoged Larn (alarn@sdu.dk) and David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt (dhas@sdu.dk) by November 1, 2021. The deadline for finished articles is May 1, 2022. Finished articles are accepted in both English and French. Publication is expected to be early 2023.