

Killer Queens: The Prevalence of Political Violence Among Ptolemaic Women

This paper attempts to identify trends of political violence committed by queens and princesses of Ptolemaic Egypt. The Ptolemaic royal dynasty was rife with conflicts and infighting throughout its history, with sibling rivalries and the like often dissolving into violence and instability. Much of this is carried out by the male Ptolemies, but ancient authors recorded a significant number of assassinations and military coups led by the female Ptolemies, which will be considered acts of “political violence” for the scope of this paper. Many of these acts appear to be directly tied to personal motivations, with queens intentionally removing political opponents in order to claim the Ptolemaic throne as their own, thus painting a picture of ambitious—if not violent—Ptolemaic queens and princesses.

In recent years, Ptolemaic queens have gained traction in scholarly research. Elizabeth Carney’s research on Arsinoe II and her predecessor Arsinoe I provides an intriguing discussion of both queens’ involvements in assassination plots, as well as extensive bibliographic information on both queens (Carney 2013). Much of the existing scholarship, however, only records these instances of political violence briefly in their biographies of the queens, which, while useful, do not illustrate the broader trend. John Whitehorne’s study of the many Ptolemaic Cleopatras does note connections between the assassination ordered by Berenice IV and assassinations ordered by her male predecessors, but fails to connect it to the strikingly similar assassination carried out by her female predecessor, Berenice II (Whitehorne 1994). Presenting these actions as isolated for each queen that committed one ignores a larger trend of Ptolemaic queens engaging in the very same actions that their male family members did—and, as this paper aims to prove, with the same motivations of self-interest.

While it is difficult—and often impossible—to know the motivations of these figures, several scholars have attempted to do just that. Carney offers explanations for both the hidden motivations of Arsinoe I and Arsinoe II, noting that Arsinoe I was likely victim to Arsinoe II's schemes, and that Arsinoe II's motivations were to further her own power (Carney 2013). Here, Carney points to Arsinoe II's actions in her life as a Seleucid queen as evidence for the motivation behind her actions, where ancient sources fall short in providing such an explanation. Other queens have more explicit description of their motivations, like Berenice II, whose motivations behind her assassination of Demetrius the Fair were described by Justin, as explored—and challenged—by Dee Clayman in her biography of the queen (Clayman 2014). These studies have been invaluable in scholarship of the Ptolemaic queens, but each has explored the queens' actions in isolation, whereas this paper seeks a comparative approach.

The proliferation of political violence in the Hellenistic period has been extensively covered by modern scholarship. Ptolemaic queens, too, have become increasingly studied by scholars—but not in terms of their own propensity for violence. This paper's aim is to explore this detail, often mentioned as a footnote with these queens, and discuss the overwhelming amount of evidence that suggests that Ptolemaic queens were just as capable of political violence as their male counterparts, and even participated in it for the same motivations as the kings. This exploration of acts, trends, and motivations will take these isolated discussions and consolidate them into a bigger picture of political violence as a tool for self-advancement among the Ptolemaic queens.

Bibliography

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