Never Marry a Man Called Thunderbolt: Ptolemy Ceraunus and Arsinoë

The brief marriage (c.281/80) of Arsinoë, daughter of Ptolemy I and Berenice I, and Ptolemy Ceraunus, son of Ptolemy I and Eurydice, had disastrous consequences. Once Arsinoë opened the great citadel of Cassandreia (previously under her control) to her new husband, he murdered two of her sons by her first marriage to Lysimachus, despite his earlier promises to treat them as his heirs. Ceraunus did not long survive this particular thunderbolt of violence. Invading Gauls, lured by Macedonian political disarray, slaughtered him in battle and paraded his head around on a stake (c. 279). The grieving Arsinoë, on the other hand, fled first to Samothrace and then to her native Alexandria where she married her full brother, Ptolemy II and ended her days in security, wealth, and even divinity.

The wedding (hardly a marriage) of Ceraunus and Arsinoë raises a number of specific issues. Why did Arsinoë want to marry him and why did he want to marry her? Did her brother Ptolemy II have anything to do with her marriage to his defeated rival, Ceraunus? Was it a "trick" marriage, never intended by Ceraunus to do anything more than give him the opportunity for murder or did the actions of Arsinoë and her sons somehow force Ceraunus to act as he did? Did Arsinoë marry Ceraunus because she wanted to be a *basilissa* once more or was she in fact still a *basilissa*? Is it mere coincidence that the same woman who married her half-sibling next married her full sibling, initiating the series of close-kin marriages that came to characterize the Ptolemaic dynasty? Is there a connection between the hostility to polygamy (or at least its consequences) demonstrated by Arsinoë in these marriage negotiations and the rise of royal endogamy?

Macedonian/ Hellenistic dynastic history can resemble a series of *Sopranos* episodes. Court and family do often seem to be waiting to see who is going to whack whom next. Again, like the series, dynastic history can seem so bizarre, contrived, melodramatic that it is somehow funny or, at the very least absurd, not real. The bombastic prose of Justin (the major source for this episode) and ancient authors like him not only contributes to one's sense that this is not serious history but at the same time has not inspired confidence in the details included in these narratives.

This paper will try to provide a sense for what drove the participants to act as they did. The children of Ptolemy I made decisions marked by the prolonged succession struggle in Egypt; this is evident in the actions of both Arsinoë and Ceraunus. Too often scholars have, in effect, taken sides in dynastic dispute (Heinen 1972, for instance, tends to favor Ceraunus and blame Arsinoë and her sons for the murders). A more useful approach is to place the actions of individuals in the context of dynastic dynamics that often left them with comparatively little agency. Moreover, this paper will suggest that we may need to rethink our distrust of lurid narrative detail. Recent scholarship has recognized that Hellenistic monarchy had many theatrical elements (see, for instance, Chaniotis 1997). Ceraunus in effect staged his murders and Arsinoë, in turn, had to play, not simply be, the grieving mother. Homer and tragedy provided plot lines. For instance, Justin (24.3.7-10) reports that Arsinoë offered herself in place of her sons, tried to shield them, was denied the right to bury them, and was finally forced out of the city accompanied by only two slaves, her clothes in tatters and her hair disheveled. Circumstance forced her to be a tragic queen, so she played one, just as earlier she had apparently constructed a public ceremony to welcome her new husband to the city, one meant to force him to act out his promised recognition of them as heirs. Ceraunus was working with a different script.

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