

Marketing Motherhood: The Visual Rhetoric of Cleopatra's Cypriot Coin

The creation of a popular public image has always been a matter of concern to government leaders, quite as much to ancient figures as to modern ones. Of the various means exploited by political figures for the construction of a chosen image, the visual representations made available for public consumption are some of the most significant (Smith, 1988). Lacking the aid of the internet, television, and print media, ancient heads of state propagated their self-portrait in coins, sculptures, gems, cameos, and painting. Cleopatra VII was no exception. No painted images of the queen survive, nor do any securely identified gems and cameos, but the early sculpted and coined representations can provide valuable insight into the image she wanted to promulgate during her reign (Kleiner, 2005). This paper will concern itself specifically with a distinct Cypriot coin type, minted in copper and featuring Cleopatra with her infant son, Ptolemy Caesar (Kyrieleis, 1975).

The Cypriot coin poses both chronological and interpretive challenges (Kyrieleis, 1975). This paper will briefly locate the coin chronologically and then devote itself to deciphering the political rhetoric of the image. The depiction of Cleopatra here differs dramatically and importantly from earlier coined representations. In other early coin portraits, Cleopatra appears as a Ptolemaic *king* rather than as a Ptolemaic queen. In the Cypriot issue, Cleopatra emphatically recalls her female predecessors. Key attributes of Ptolemaic queens, elsewhere avoided by Cleopatra, are present here, attributes that traditionally denote divinity (Stanwick, 2002). By comparing the iconography of the Cypriot issue to the other early, and distinctively masculine, coin type, I will explain why Cleopatra adopted a typically queenly image and made pretensions to divinity at this moment in her history.

By the time of the Cypriot coin's issue, the queen had, with Caesar's help, defeated key political enemies and secured her claim to the throne of Egypt. Her newly won political safety might by itself justify the queen's symbolic elevation to goddess. More importantly, two other significant changes had occurred. First of all, Cleopatra had, in addition to the throne of Egypt, remarkably secured the return of Cyprus to Ptolemaic control, and it is significant that the visual transformation occurs on a coin of Cyprus. Furthermore, Cleopatra had become a mother—an exclusively female accomplishment—and she highlights her maternal identity by including, naturally, an image of her baby, but also by adopting the familiar image of female Ptolemaic rulers. She did not, as we shall see, diminish her power thereby, but she added to her kingly duties those traditionally belonging to the queen. The birth of a son proved that Cleopatra had the divine power of creation, the ability to furnish an heir and, by extension, to guarantee the transition of power within the royal family, and thus the order and stability of Egypt (Koenen, 1993; Schiff, 2010).

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