

The *Damnatio Memoriae* of Arsinoë III

The life of Arsinoë III has long been shrouded in mystery. Historians and Classicists have previously assumed that she was curtailed in her queenly endeavors by her brother-husband, Ptolemy IV, and his advisors, Sosibios and Agathokles. As *basilissa*-consort of Ptolemaic Egypt, she followed Arsinoë II and Berenike II, who both helped establish the policies that would define the dynasty, so, when contrasted with these two monumental figures, Arsinoë III seems comparatively inactive. While her supportive image was utilized in monumental religious depictions within Egypt, evidence for the more extracurricular duties of her role, such as the religious euergetism and social benefaction that were so prevalently commemorated for her two predecessors, is missing or sparse. Thus, the theory that she was purportedly repressed by her brother, his advisors, or both is the easiest to arrive at, given the scarce evidence of her life and actions.

If, however, the evidence of her life is analyzed more carefully, a second, new theory of her rulership can be put forth. Arsinoë III may have accomplished many of the duties of queenship, following the examples set by Arsinoë II and Berenike II, but after her death a *damnatio memoriae* was put into effect, by the same advisors who had plotted her murder, in order to cover up how active and effective a queen she had been. This theory can be supported by several aspects of her life. In this presentation, I will reevaluate the extant evidence of Arsinoë III's life to demonstrate that a *damnatio* was carried out against her. This evidence includes the biography written about her by Eratosthenes, dedicatory inscriptions to the queen found outside of Egypt in Greece, the use of her imagery within Egyptian temples, her popular worship during her lifetime, the reaction of the Alexandrian populace to her murder, and her involvement in the Battle of Raphia.

This reevaluation of her life is necessary because Ptolemaic queens are too often held to the norms of only Greek society. Since women in Classical Greece were not permitted to participate in governance, Ptolemy IV's purported action of removing his wife from power seems like a move that would have fit with the Greek culture at the time. Yet, we must remember that the Greek culture that was transmitted to Ptolemaic Egypt was a Greco-Macedonian culture, one that was heavily shaped by the Macedonian royal tradition and Philip II's actions of emphasizing the women in his life. Furthermore, the public actions available to Ptolemaic queens must also be evaluated according to the double cultural milieu of Greek and Egyptian over which they ruled and by which the early royal couples had defined their rulership.

While Arsinoë was a queen of the dynasty during the early decades, when the Greco-Macedonian influence was not yet fully intertwined with the Egyptian traditions, the precedents set by Arsinoë II and Berenike II made it clear that the Ptolemaic queen had an important role to play within Ptolemaic society, one that broke the mold from the traditional place of women in the Greek world. They, along with cooperation from their husbands, had created the position of a queen who actively ruled alongside her husband. I argue, since this precedent was so newly established and continued well after Ptolemy IV's reign, it was not one he and his advisors would have been able to overturn during their period of control, but rather they sought to hide that Arsinoë III had been an effective queen. After they murdered her, the advisors needed to justify their assumption of the regency of her young son that should have been hers to oversee, by rights of the Egyptian royal tradition.

While current scholarly consensus is that Arsinoë III was a meek queen who was not given the opportunity to participate in the traditional activities of Ptolemaic queenship, a reexamination of the available evidence can provide a convincing argument that she was a

much more active queen than previously thought, who had many of her actions covered up after her death on account of political scheming. The presentation of reevaluated evidence of her life will ideally change the picture of this queen that scholars have held for so long.

Bibliography

General ancient sources/inscriptions from which material about Arsinoë III's life is drawn and reevaluated-

Athenaeus. *Deipnosophistae*.

Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker.

Inscriptiones Graecae II et III: Inscriptiones Atticae Euclidis anno posterioris.

Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae. Supplementum Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum.

Polybius. *Histories*.

Raphia Decree. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, 31088/50048.

Third Maccabees.

Modern Sources-

Hölbl, Gunther. *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire*. Translated by Tina Saavedra. London:

Routledge, 2001.

Bielman-Sánchez, Anne and Virginie Joliton. "Marital Crises or Institutional Crises? Two

Ptolemaic Couples Under the Spotlight." In *Power Couples in Antiquity: Transversal*

Perspectives. Ed. Anne Bielman-Sánchez. New York: Routledge, 2019: 69-98.