

Creating a Successful Dynasty:  
Arsinoe II as King of Upper and Lower Egypt

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Arsinoe II was a powerful female ruler in the early Hellenistic World. She was queen of Egypt for the duration of her marriage to her brother Ptolemy II in c. 275<sup>1</sup> to the much debated date of her death in 270(68) BCE.<sup>2</sup> In traditional Greek and Roman society, it was not uncommon for women to be in secondary, or lesser, roles to men.<sup>3</sup> The Hellenistic period was an exception. Women played incredibly powerful roles, particularly those that were hungry for power. After the death of Alexander the Great, the first Ptolemy, given the name Soter (Saviour), became the ruler of Egypt and needed to legitimize his rule and lay the foundation for his future dynasty. Being the first of the Ptolemies in power, his reign was still precarious in a tumultuous time. The successor states were in the early stages of establishment and as a result, power struggles were a common occurrence. The newly conquered lands had recently become accustomed to being ruled by Alexander the Great before his untimely death and needed to readjust to the new rulers assigned to the different territories. Ptolemy I was assigned to Egypt and consequently tasked with the legitimization of his rule over a culturally rich society. This was necessary to avoid revolts and ensure Egypt would remain under his control and the populace would be loyal to him, accepting him as their ruler. Ptolemy II, being the next to succeed, had the task of further establishing a strong foundation for himself and his wives. Him and his wives would need to find a way to reinforce that they were the rightful rulers to a society consisting of Egyptians, Macedonians, and Greeks. Arsinoe II, his second wife and also his sister, played a considerably dominant role in the Hellenistic world, both within Egypt and

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Donnelly Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 70.; c.f. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon*, 70.; See Stefano Caneva, *From Alexander to the Theoi Adelphoi: Foundation and Legitimation of a Dynasty* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 135-141. for a discussion of the debate between Hermann Diels, Rudolf Pfeiffer, and Ehrard Gryzbeck over the date of the death of Arsinoe II.

<sup>3</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 7. There is evidence for other cultures in antiquity where women experienced greater freedom and power, and sometimes even equality with men.

outside of it. Both alongside her brother and on her own, a detailed image was constructed so as to both legitimize their rule internally and be seen as powerful rulers externally. Her own self-image was consequential in appearing legitimate. Arsinoe II created a full image for herself by focusing on the cultural appeasement of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Macedonians through a sibling marriage to Ptolemy II, which helped pave the way for her own religious cult. She also skillfully managed her involvement in internal and external affairs, taking on a role that was traditionally a man's role. Through these mediums, Arsinoe II expertly exercised her agency, setting a precedent for other queens, not only in Egypt, but in the Hellenistic world.<sup>4</sup>

Even before her marriage to Ptolemy II, Arsinoe II was a force to be reckoned with. A product of both her upbringing and the tumultuous events after the death of her first husband, Lysimachus, Arsinoe II was no stranger to making her own decisions and portraying herself as a powerful woman.<sup>5</sup> While married to Lysimachus, Arsinoe had a certain level of political involvement. Arsinoe was given control of the city of Heraclea to do with what she wished.<sup>6</sup> This would have meant either ruling over it herself or appointing someone to be in charge. Either way, the decisions involving the city would have remained under her control. Additionally, Justin refers to Cassandria as "her city" and according to Carney, other women in this era were in a similar situation and controlled many cities.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is reasonable to assume the same with Arsinoe. These lavish gifts are also evidence of the control Arsinoe exercised as a young wife of the sixty-year-old Lysimachus.<sup>8</sup> With the vast amounts of territory Hellenistic queens had at their disposal there was a high level of income involved.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the cities gifted to Arsinoe, it

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Duvall Jr. Penrose, *Hellenistic Warrior Queens: From Battlefield to Throne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon*, 35 and 65-66.

<sup>6</sup> Memnon; FGrH 434 F5.4-5

<sup>7</sup> Carney, 37; Justin 24.3.3

<sup>8</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> See Pomeroy, 14. for examples of other women who both held territories and gained wealth as a result.

is very likely she would have acquired her own disposable income with which she could do as she pleased. As is fitting for a queen, evidence of the vast wealth Arsinoe controlled is the largest round building in the Greek world: the rotunda at Samothrace, dedicated to the Great Gods.<sup>10</sup> Clearly Arsinoe was a capable woman who knew how to craft her image into that of a capable queen. Rather than spending her wealth on frivolous items, she dedicated the money to build a religious building, showing above-all her piety and generosity to the gods, thus building a foundation upon which to create her goddess-like image as the Queen of Egypt. While Queen of Egypt would not have been her goal at this point, creating the image of an adept queen would have been. These actions show that she already presented a strong political and religious image before her marriage to Ptolemy II, a characteristic largely uncommon in regard to women and queens of the Greek and Macedonian world before the Hellenistic era.

Sibling marriage was just one of the ways Arsinoe II and Ptolemy II both set a precedent and established themselves as divine rulers. While this was most certainly not accepted among the Greeks and Macedonians, there was a history for it in Egyptian culture.<sup>11</sup> Earlier in Egyptian history, Pharaohs would often enact incestuous marriages. Pausanias highlights this practice.<sup>12</sup> By following this precedent, the Ptolemies were likely to be seen as a continuation of legitimate power due to the adoption of this characteristic in pharaonic culture. This was a viable option if the Ptolemies really wanted to lay a foundation for their iconography. The marriage was not a negative portrayal towards the Greeks and Macedonians either considering the myths of sibling marriage between gods. In fact, for all three ethnic groups, sibling marriage established a parallel of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II as gods, setting them apart from what Pomeroy refers to as

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<sup>10</sup> Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Penrose, *Hellenistic Warrior Queens*, 209.; cf. Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon*, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Pausanias I.7

“ordinary mortals.”<sup>13</sup> In the Egyptian pantheon, Isis and Osiris were full sibling spouses. Arsinoe II is often associated with the cult of Isis, likely due at least in part to this reason as her sibling-marriage was a major element of her internal image to the Egyptians.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology were also involved in a sibling-marriage. While the major difference between the Greeks and Macedonians compared to the Egyptians was the precedent for sibling-marriage between mortals, the parallel established between the gods in each of the pantheons would have enabled at least some level of acceptance of the marriage. As brother and sister, they were given the status of *Theoi Adelphoi*, or Divine Siblings.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this opened the door for them to become divinized during their lifetime, which was previously unprecedented territory.

It is true that Ptolemaic women enjoyed a great deal of power, as they were officially recognized as ruling alongside their husbands or sons.”<sup>16</sup> For Arsinoe II alone, a sibling marriage was beneficial because when a Ptolemaic princess returned home for the purpose of marrying her brother, she could take advantage of an opportunity to consolidate power at home.<sup>17</sup> Although Arsinoe II did not become queen of Egypt until thirty-seven, she still reaped the benefits of marriage to her brother.<sup>18</sup> Pomeroy, a classics professor whose main focus is women’s history, points out that Arsinoe II was older than Ptolemy II, and despite the gender norms in antiquity it would be natural for the older female sibling to be more authoritative over the younger male.<sup>19</sup> Whether due to hierarchical nature between siblings or not, Arsinoe II was able to achieve more authority through her marriage to her brother than the average Hellenistic queen. She was able to

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<sup>13</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 16.; Carney, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Carney, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Penrose, *Hellenistic Warrior Queens*, 185.

<sup>17</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Pomeroy, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Pomeroy, 17.

assert herself in politics to the extent that she was mentioned in the Chremonides Decree of 266 BCE. The decree mentions that Ptolemy II “followed the policies of his ancestors and of his sister” in granting freedom to the Greeks.<sup>20</sup> “His sister” is a clear, albeit indirect, reference to Arsinoe II and, as Macurdy notes, up until this point in the history of Macedonia a woman’s policy had not been mentioned in an extant public document as having had influence over the affairs of the state.<sup>21</sup> In the short five years during which Arsinoe II was the Queen of Egypt, she was able to achieve a level of political involvement as a woman that warranted her mention as an influence on public affairs. She died without leaving her brother any children, and for this an Egyptian district was named the Arsinoite nome after her which further reinforces Pomeroy’s theory of consolidating power at home explored above as well as introduces the cult of Arsinoe II that emerged after her death.<sup>22</sup>

The cultic worship of Arsinoe II began largely after her death and was done in the manner of god-like worship. Later queens followed the example set by her cult and the way in which she was worshipped.<sup>23</sup> By examining Arsinoe’s afterlife, we can see how the population perceived her based on the level of importance they placed on her worship. This ties into the way the Ptolemies portrayed themselves as legitimate Egyptian pharaohs and how they intended to be worshipped as divine rulers. Whether or not Arsinoe II was divinized before or after her death is debated among scholars. There are coins in which Arsinoe II wears a diadem, which is explicitly reserved for divinities, although the dating of these coins is not exact.<sup>24</sup> What is clear, is that Ptolemy II expended large amounts of money for the purpose of celebrating his sister-wife as

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest: A Selection of Ancient Sources in Translation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 131. or source 61, line 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Grace Harriet Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), 119.

<sup>22</sup> Pausanias I.7

<sup>23</sup> Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Pomeroy, 29.

divine.<sup>25</sup> Before his death he had planned to construct a temple for her. Callicrates did complete a temple for Arsinoe II at Zephyritis where she was worshipped as Aphrodite Z, where the Z was derived from the location of the temple.<sup>26</sup>

The internal image of Arsinoe II cultivated for her subjects is an important source of her power, however, her external image through militaristic involvement and dynastic relations are important for her perception throughout the rest of the Hellenistic world. A considerably rare ability of women in the Hellenistic period was their military involvement. This seems to have stemmed from the repeated succession wars and overall instability throughout the various dynasties.<sup>27</sup> Women generally had less direct power in Macedon compared to Ptolemaic Egypt, where they were officially recognized as co-rulers. Penrose attributes this to role models such as the New Kingdom pharaoh Hatshepsut.<sup>28</sup> However, Arsinoe II's actions on the battlefield occurred before she became the queen of Egypt. Although she was a Ptolemy by blood, she had been married to Lysimachus as a very young bride and was likely less influenced by previous women pharaohs than Penrose claims. Her willpower likely stemmed from her independence as a young bride to a sixty-year-old successor and the wealth she gained, first from him and subsequently from her own cities. She was clearly no stranger to making her own decisions and applied her skills towards her own soldiers. As previously discussed, Arsinoe II's first marriage was to Lysimachus, who was in charge of Thrace. After his death in 281 BCE, she used the immense amount of wealth she was able to acquire to hire soldiers and engage in warfare. Her motivation stemmed from the need to secure a throne for herself and her sons, as she no longer

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<sup>25</sup> Pomeroy, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Johannes (Tübingen) Scherf, "Zephyritis", in: *Brill's New Pauly*, Antiquity volumes edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, English Edition by Christine F. Salazar, Classical Tradition volumes edited by Manfred Landfester, English Edition by: Francis G. Gentry (2006).

<sup>27</sup> Penrose, *Hellenistic Warrior Queens*, 184.

<sup>28</sup> Penrose, 185.

had one after her husband's death.<sup>29</sup> This was, in fact, the largest motivating factor for any woman or wife to an influential man to take matters into their own hands. Oftentimes, a woman could only gain a modicum of power through their sons and thus fought for them to succeed against their half-siblings. This extends back to Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great. She was very determined to ensure that Alexander came to power, as made abundantly clear by removing Philip III's new wife and child from the competition in 336 BCE. Additionally, she did lead an army in a symbolic role against Adea Eurydice, the wife of Philip Arrhidaeus who was the half-brother of Alexander the Great. Both of these women were the symbolic heads of their army and it is likely Arsinoe II drew inspiration from the example they had set in 317 BCE. What is unparalleled about Arsinoe II's military involvement is that once she was married to Ptolemy, her symbolic role was officially recognized and directly related to her position as both sister-wife to Ptolemy II and her title as "King of Upper and Lower Egypt."<sup>30</sup> Arsinoe II herself set a precedent for later Egyptian queens, as it expanded the role of the Egyptian queen due to the highly symbolic nature for Egyptian power and naval protection in particular.<sup>31</sup> This title is that of "King" which when applied to Arsinoe II, a woman and a queen, elevated her status to that of a king and placed her into a quasi-masculine position. The nature of promoting a woman to what is generally considered a masculine role signifies the shift in Hellenistic Egypt of broadening women's power, thus allowing future queens a pathway to follow.

There is a specific instance which pertains both to Arsinoe II's military prowess as well as her imagery after death. Posidippus wrote a poem in which he addressed Arsinoe:

This fillet, Arsinóë, is for you,  
 Fine linen cloth whose pleats the wind blows through,  
 From Naúkratis. For once a maiden dreamed  
 You wished to wipe sweet sweat off, when you seemed

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<sup>29</sup> Penrose, 208.

<sup>30</sup> Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon*, 85 and 91.

<sup>31</sup> Carney, 91.

To pause from busy labor and stand near,  
 Shield on your arm and, in your hand, sharp spear.  
 That Macedonian maid at your command,  
 Called Hegesó, gave, Mistress, this white band.<sup>32</sup>

The strip of cloth she is wearing around her head is the diadem which symbolized the royal status of the Ptolemies. It is also very important in showing that Arsinoe II was divinized. Gordon affirms that both Arsinoe II and Ptolemy II were deified in 272/271 BCE, which would put her deification before her death.<sup>33</sup> It does seem logical that for Arsinoe to appear in a dream, the poem would have been written after her death. Although whether Arsinoe II was deified before or after her death is not widely agreed upon, the fact that her image after death shows the imagery of her wearing a diadem speaks volumes of Arsinoe II's image after death. The poem's description of the weaponry Arsinoe carries as well as her pausing from busy labour is directly pertaining to her military prowess, insinuating she might have fought in battle, or perhaps she wore the outfit for symbolic purposes, related to her symbolic role at the head of the military. It could also simply be evidence that Arsinoe II was involved in the Egyptian army in some manner and Posidippus translated that idea into an image. Carney believes the imagery portrayed in the poem reflects back towards Arsinoe II's involvement in the Chremonidean War. It could also be purely spiritual, as a direct link to either Athena or Aphrodite, who was occasionally portrayed as an armed goddess.<sup>34</sup> Whatever the case may be, there is a direct correlation between Arsinoe's military involvement and her worship after death, suggesting that the two were somehow intertwined. It would make sense that she was being portrayed to either Athena or Aphrodite or both. The Ptolemies were no stranger to appealing to the Greeks, Macedonians, and Egyptians and this symbolism could be applied to all three cultures. The woman who has the dream is

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<sup>32</sup> Gordon L. Fain, *Ancient Greek Epigrams: Major Poets in Verse Translation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 78.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, 86.; c.f. Carney, *Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Carney, 91.

referred to as a Macedonian, outside the Egyptian world. While addressing the internal symbolism of Arsinoe II's involvement in the army, this poem also addresses the likely external viewpoint of the Macedonians. In this manner of combining the three cultures, the dynastic power and divination attributed to Arsinoe II was likely to extend far past her death through the continuing Ptolemaic dynasty.

Arsinoe II played an influential role not only as a model for future Egyptian queens, but queens throughout the Hellenistic era. The precedents that both she and her brother-husband, Ptolemy II, set as *Theoi Adelphoi*, their cultic worship as gods, and her strong, independent image as a woman are what make Arsinoe II such an important figure in history. The Ptolemaic Dynasty was the longest lasting of all the successor states and was a product of the establishment of the Ptolemies as rightful rulers early on. During a tumultuous era, the importance of establishing a precedent by appealing to the cultures within the area of rule is essential to the continued reign of the successor states and was successfully created by both Ptolemy and Arsinoe II. The particular power and image Arsinoe II crafted on her own conveys the shift in power that would allow certain women to come to power and maintain a long-lasting image throughout the Hellenistic world.

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