

Episode 063: Ptolemaic Egypt – Berenice’s Lock and the Gates of Babylon

Having spent the last few months combing over the finer details of Hellenistic Egypt, it is now time to return to where we left off in our last narrative episode dealing with the Ptolemies, way back in episode 035. Much of the 3rd century was dominated by the lengthy career of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who built upon the institutions laid out by his father Ptolemy I Soter, turning Egypt into an economic superpower and cultural capital of the Mediterranean world. His reign did have issues: his controversial marriage to his sister, Arsinoe II, his unproductive wars against the Seleucid kings Antiochus I and II, and the loss of Cyrene to the machinations of King Magas.

Since it has been a considerable amount of time since our last narrative episode focusing on Egypt, let me give a brief recap of events. Cyrene was a prosperous Greek settlement in modern day Libya, the larger region known in antiquity as Cyrenaica. Its considerable wealth was supplied by the sale of local products like fine horses, flowers used in aromatics and perfumes, and the wonder plant known as *siliphium*, a now-extinct species that was used for seasoning and contraceptives.¹ After Alexander’s death, Cyrenaica had passed into the hands of Ptolemy I, until a rebellion in 300 forced him to dispatch his stepson Magas to quell it.² For nearly 25 years, Magas acted as governor for his stepfather and later his stepbrother, Ptolemy II. But by 276, he felt confident enough to wrestle independence away and declare himself king, treating Cyrene as his own personal Alexandria.³ Despite a failed invasion of Egypt on Magas’ part and a failed counter-invasion from Ptolemy, both mutually refrained from openly challenging one another thereafter.⁴ As for Magas, he spent the remainder of his rule lording over Cyrene, patronizing philosophical schools like the Cyrenaics and hosting ambassadors from the Indian emperor Ashoka. But like any true Ptolemy, ancient authors remembered his vices over his virtues. Perhaps because of his association with the hedonistic Cyrenaic philosophers, Magas earned the reputation of a notorious glutton, and allegedly ate himself to death by the year 250.⁵

Magas’ passing resulted in a bit of a problematic situation. Throughout the marriage with his wife Apama, he fathered only one child, a daughter named Berenice.⁶ At the time of her father’s death, she may have been only around 15 years old, but was already proven to be a formidable young lady. According to a work attributed to the 1st century Latin poet Hyginus, Berenice was said to have fought in a battle alongside Magas and saved him by rallying their troops from horseback.⁷ The story is suspect, as even a crown prince like Alexander the Great did not have his first battle until he was 16 years old but it does attest to her reputation among the writers of antiquity.⁸ Interestingly, we also have coin specimens minted by Magas with Berenice’s portrait and holding the title of *basilissa*, which attests to the power she held within the kingdom.⁹

¹ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 15.689; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.3.20-24; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 19.15

² Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.6.8

³ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.7.1

⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.7.2

⁵ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 12.550C; Clayman. D.L. 2014: 33

⁶ Attempting to date Magas’ marriage to Apama, the birth of Berenice, and the death of Magas himself has proven to be problematic due to a lack of sources, see van Oppen de Ruiter, B.F. 2015: 7-22

⁷ Hyginus, *De Astronomica*, 2.24.3

⁸ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 9; Pomeroy, S.B. 1985: 20 takes it at face value, van Oppen de Ruiter, B.F. 2015: 39 and Clayman. D.L. 2014: 157 suggest it may be possible

⁹ van Oppen de Ruiter, B.F. 2015: 42-45

But events following Magas' death threatened her position within the kingdom. From what the epitomist Justin tells us, Magas sought reconciliation with Ptolemy II shortly before his death, and arranged a marriage between Berenice and the soon-to-be Ptolemy III.¹⁰ It certainly seemed like the most peaceful solution, for lack of a male heir to continue an independent dynasty in Libya meant that a Ptolemaic reconquest was inevitable, and it is unlikely Berenice had any objections about becoming the most powerful woman in the wealthiest kingdom on earth. There were, however, other parties at work.

Queen Apama rejected the match for her daughter, though on what grounds we aren't told. It is possibly tied to Apama being a royal lady of the Seleucid house, her father Antiochus I having married her off to Magas as a potential buffer to Ptolemy II.¹¹ On her own initiative she had invited a new suitor for Berenice to come to Cyrene, a man known as Demetrius the Fair.¹² It is unlikely that Demetrius' candidacy was tied to his good looks – "Fair" may have also been an insulting nickname that essentially meant "gigolo" – but Demetrius' pedigree had tied him to the Antigonid kings of Macedonia, as he was the son of Demetrius I Poliorcetes and the half-brother of its then-ruler Antigonus II Gonatas.¹³ The Antigonids and Seleucids were on good terms for most of the 3rd century, and preventing the reincorporation of Cyrenaica into the Ptolemaic kingdom would certainly aid Seleucid interests, if Apama was following this line of reasoning.¹⁴

There also were the interests of the people of Cyrene. While Magas had ruled for the better part of 50 years as governor and king, the Cyreneans themselves fondly remembered their days as a republic from after ending the old monarchy in the middle of the 5th century. They had already revolted once from 305 to 300 when Ptolemaic power slipped in the region, and the chance to reassert their independence was a distinct possibility with no king on the Libyan throne. The conduct of Demetrius did not help the situation either. After marrying Berenice, he seems to have earned the ire of everyone involved by his general arrogance and selfish rule. Scandalously, he also seems to have preferred the bedside company of Apama, and gradually pushed Berenice out of the picture.¹⁵ It is unsurprising to hear then that a conspiracy had quickly developed among the various groups against the king. In roughly 249/248, assassins set upon the royal couple while they were in their bedchambers, and both Demetrius and Apama were murdered.¹⁶ Berenice's role in the plot remains murky. Justin, from whom we can thank for this soap opera, claims that she was at least aware of the plot and stood at the door of the bedroom asking for the assassins to spare her mother's life to no avail.¹⁷ A passing comment in the poetry of Callimachus (more on him later) refers to a "*brave deed by which [she] gained a royal marriage*".¹⁸ If her brave deed was participating in or even organizing the plot, it may have been for her own preservation, and perhaps to take her chance at becoming queen of both Cyrene and Egypt.¹⁹

¹⁰ Justin, *Epitome*, 26.3.2

¹¹ Eusebius, *Chronicles*, Pg. 249; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.7.3

¹² Justin, *Epitome*, 26.3.3, though he mistakenly refers to Apama as Arsinoe

¹³ Plutarch, *Life of Demetrius*, 53; Clayman. D.L. 2014: 37

¹⁴ Hölbl, G. 2001: 45

¹⁵ Justin, *Epitome*, 26.3.4

¹⁶ Justin, *Epitome*, 26.3.6, 8

¹⁷ Justin, *Epitome*, 26.3.7

¹⁸ Callimachus, *Fragments*, 110; Catullus, *Works*, 66.27-28

¹⁹ Clayman, D.L. 2014: 98

But at the moment, the immediate beneficiaries of Demetrius' death were the Cyreneans themselves, who were able to reestablish the republic of Cyrene once again. Again, little is known about this affair. A passing reference from Plutarch and Polybius suggests that two men named Ecdelus and Demophanes, citizens of the Grecian city of Megalopolis renowned for their role in toppling tyrannies, had been brought to Libya to restore the freedom of Cyrene and oversee the setup of a new republic.²⁰ But their work was not meant to last, and the republic collapsed as quickly as it was revived. The dating of all these events, from the death of Magas to the arrival of Demetrius the Fair and the brief restoration of the republic is extremely problematic, and honestly not worth spending a whole lot of time on. What we can take away is that the young Berenice, perhaps no older than 20 by the year 246, was clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Now we come to her husband to be, Ptolemy III. Born in approximately 284 as the son of Ptolemy Philadelphus and his first wife Arsinoe I, Ptolemy had lived in Alexandria until his mother had departed for the settlement of Coptos in Upper Egypt by 276.²¹ What limited information we have suggests that Arsinoe might have been involved in some sort of intrigue against Philadelphus, and instead of being executed she was exiled to a residency within Egypt's borders. She may have been sent away because of the impending marriage of Ptolemy to his sister Arsinoe II, and both have been accused of conspiring to get rid of Arsinoe I using superfluous charges to make it happen.²² However, her status as a royal lady was never really abolished, as can be attested by inscriptions from the island.²³ Arsinoe's children were also never disowned, and were adopted by Arsinoe II – in later inscriptions recounting his genealogy, Ptolemy III would list Arsinoe II rather than his biological mother.²⁴ Of course, this probably doesn't reflect his personal feelings. Claiming descent from the deified sibling-loving gods instead of including technicalities like divorce reinforces the image of an unbroken semi-divine household.

On January 28th of 246, Ptolemy took the throne at roughly 38 or 39 years of age following the death of Ptolemy Philadelphus.²⁵ One of his first acts was to marry Berenice. This effectively reunited Libya and Egypt for the first time in over three decades. But the Ptolemies were willing to compromise with the Cyreneans, allowing them and a few other neighboring cities to organize into a loose league to give themselves a degree of self-autonomy.²⁶

The wedding celebrations would be brought to a premature close by the arrival of news from the north. In July of that same year, the Seleucid king Antiochus II Theos had died of unknown causes in Asia Minor.²⁷ Charges had been laid against Antiochus' first wife, Laodice, who was accused of poisoning her husband.²⁸ This plot had supposedly been brought about due to the repudiation of Laodice by Antiochus in favor of a newer, better bride: Berenice Phernophorus, the daughter of Ptolemy II and sister of Ptolemy III who was married to the Seleucid king as part of the peace settlement of the Second Syrian

²⁰ Plutarch, *Life of Philopoemen*, 1.4; Polybius, *The Histories*, 10.22.3

²¹ Anonymous, *Scholia Theocritus*, 17.128

²² Carney, E.D. 2013: 67-70

²³ Stele CCG 70031

²⁴ *OGIS* 54

²⁵ Eusebius, *Chronicles*, 127

²⁶ Hölbl, G. 2001: 46-47

²⁷ Babylonian King's List 6, Obv.11.; BCHP 10 Rev.5-6; Eusebius, *Chronicles*, Pg. 251

²⁸ Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 65; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 7.53; Porphyrius, *Fragments*, 43; This is something that has been heavily challenged, see episodes 056 and 057 for a further discussion.

War in 253/252.²⁹ She had just given birth to a son shortly before Antiochus' death, and must have realized her precarious position in the face of Laodice's schemes to raise her son Seleucus to the position of king.³⁰ Berenice's message was relayed to her brother, who at once prepared an invasion force necessary to protect the lives of his beloved sister and nephew. Out of grief and concern, the ever-dutiful Queen Berenice had shorn a lock of hair from her head as an offering for the temple of Arsinoe to try and guarantee her husband's safety in the upcoming conflict.³¹ But by the time he and his expedition left Egypt, Berenice and the baby had long since died at the hands of Laodice and Seleucus' assassins.³² Bidding farewell to his new bride, Ptolemy would seek to avenge his fallen family members, bringing righteous retribution upon the house of Seleucus for violating the agreement laid out by their fathers.

Well, this is how the outbreak of the Third Syrian War is relayed to us by Ptolemaic propagandists.³³ Truthfully, the speed at which Ptolemy was able to bring his army across the Syrian border indicates that preparations must have been in the works for several months. The marriage of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic houses was almost certainly not intended to bring about permanent peace, as most agreements would only last within the lifetime of the kings who made it. Given the humiliating indemnities (*vis a vi* Berenice's enormous dowry) and land that Philadelphus was forced to hand over as part of the settlement of the Second Syrian War, it is likely that Ptolemy began to plan for a renewed attack into Seleucid territory as soon as he took the throne.³⁴ It just so happens that Antiochus' death was a matter of convenience, and the precarious situation of his sister and nephew expedited the process. When word of their assassination reached his tent, Ptolemy kept it a secret. According to the writer Polyaeus, the king apparently had issued letters to the Seleucid satraps under the guise that Berenice and her son were still alive, and managed to convince them to switch sides.³⁵ Polyaeus' claim is a little far-fetched, but as Ptolemy entered Seleucid Syria he faced almost no resistance. A Ptolemaic report on the Third Syrian War shows how the king's entourage was welcomed by the governing body at the city gates of both Seleucia-in-Pieria and Antioch, two major capitals of the Syrian Tetrapolis.³⁶ Perhaps Polyaeus' story may have a grain of truth if the city elites were willing to supplicate so easily – of course, the immediate threat of an enemy army at their doorstep while Seleucus III was off in Asia Minor gathering allies and preparing a counterattack may have been sufficient motivation to avoid a vicious siege.

With such a smashing success in Syria and Seleucus nowhere to be seen, Ptolemy decided to take the initiative and carried his expedition east into Mesopotamia. We have an account of the invasion preserved in the chronicles written by Babylonian scholars, though relatively terse in detail. By late 246, the Egyptian army crossed the Euphrates and attacked the settlement of Seleucia-on-the-Euphrates.³⁷ News of Ptolemy's arrival reached Babylon, and the Seleucid garrison sealed itself within the palace

²⁹ P. Cairo. Zen. II 5925; Porphyrius, *Fragments*, 43

³⁰ BCHP 10 Rev.5-6

³¹ Catullus, *Works*, 66; Callimachus, *Fragments*, 110

³² Justin, *Epitome*, 27.1; Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 8.50; Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 65

³³ P. Gurob (P. Petrie II 45; III, 144); Piejko, F. 1988: 13-27; SEG 42.994

³⁴ Grainger, J.D. 2010: 154

³⁵ Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 8.50

³⁶ P. Gurob III; Justin, *Epitome*, 27.1 states that the cities of Seleucid Syria revolted *because* of the murders of Berenice and the baby, but the argument is essentially irrelevant

³⁷ BCHP 11 Obv.2-3

complex.³⁸ Unable to take Seleucia, Ptolemy turned his attention to Babylon proper, and set up siege equipment in January of 245.³⁹ On January 13th, Egyptian troops managed to break into one of the citadels, massacring both the Seleucid soldiers and any unlucky civilians seeking refuge.⁴⁰ A week later, Ptolemy brought in a subcommander named Xanthippus to act as governor while he returned to Alexandria to take care of other concerns. Likely in a show of good faith, Xanthippus attempted to pay homage to the god Marduk in the temple of Esagila by making an offering “in the Greek fashion”.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the Seleucid commander remaining within the palace complex ordered attacks on the Ptolemaic troops, but his men would be slain as Xanthippus was able to get the best of them. Another Seleucid official, confusingly named Seleucus, brought reinforcements from Seleucia and tried one last effort to rout the Egyptian army, but was also killed in the process.⁴²

The text cuts off from this point, but we know that by the late February-early March 245, the Ptolemaic army retired from Babylonia back west. Though Seleucus III suffered a catastrophic loss of his fleet due to a storm in 245, he was mounting an effective comeback.⁴³ Antioch would be returned to Seleucid hands by mid-244, while his brother Antiochus (later known as the usurper Antiochus Hierax) was maintaining control of Asia Minor and threatened to bring reinforcements across the Taurus Mountains into Syria.⁴⁴ Always looking to hinder Ptolemaic power in the Aegean, Antigonos II Gonatas of Macedonia struck a blow against the Egyptian navy as Ptolemy was distracted with his affairs in Syria and the East.⁴⁵ By 241, everyone had enough, and both Ptolemy and Seleucus agreed to bring the Third Syrian War to an end by signing another treaty.

By all accounts, things were going well for Ptolemy III. It had been nearly 80 years since Ptolemy I had left Babylon for Egypt, and now his grandson had returned from the east once again at the head of a victorious army. Despite going through two Syrian Wars, Ptolemy Philadelphus could not point to any significant military accomplishments gained against the Syrian kings that were worthy enough to place as feathers in his cap. But less than a year into his own reign, Ptolemy III had penetrated the core territories of Syria and Mesopotamia into the Seleucid royal heartlands. While his control over Babylon was brief, the terms of the treaty enabled him to keep much of his Syrian conquests including the city of Seleucia-in-Pieria, a humiliating concession since it contained the mausoleum of the Seleucid dynasty.⁴⁶ As icing on the cake, Egyptian records indicate that the victorious army carried off 1500 talents worth of plunder and booty.⁴⁷ Never before had the dynasty achieved such phenomenal military success against their Syrian rivals –nor would it again, as we soon shall discover.

Ptolemy’s need to demonstrate his success in the war and reaffirm his military might was carried even to the farthest reaches of his empire. One of the unique Ptolemaic sources on the Third Syrian War is

³⁸ BCHP 11 Obv.4-5

³⁹ BCHP 11 Obv.6-8; Grainger, J.D. 2010: 162 argues that Ptolemy only crossed the Euphrates, but never reached Babylon proper.

⁴⁰ BCHP 11 Obv.8-11

⁴¹ BCHP 11 Obv. 14-15, Rev.1-4

⁴² BCHP 11 Rev.9-12

⁴³ Justin, *Epitome*, 27.2

⁴⁴ *OGIS* 228; Eusebius, *Chronicles*, 1.251; Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 66; Houghton, A. and Lorber, C. 2001: 229

⁴⁵ Pompeius Trogus, *Prologues*, 27

⁴⁶ Polybius, *Histories*, 5.58.10, 5.60.1

⁴⁷ *P.Gurob*, col. II, l. 6, though no doubt much of this money would need to be spent on replacing the ships lost against Antigonos.

known as the Adoulis Inscription, named after the town of Adoulis where it was set up.⁴⁸ We don't have the actual monument itself, but a traveler from the 6th century AD had witnessed it, and recorded the surviving part of the text.⁴⁹ The inscription mentions all the domains that Ptolemy inherited from his father, that being Egypt, Libya, and the holdings in the Aegean. It is then contrasted with a heavily exaggerated listing of all of the lands conquered during the war.

*...but having become master of all the country this side of the Euphrates and of Cilicia and Pamphylia and Ionia and the Hellespont and Thrace, and of all the military forces in these countries and of Indian elephants, and having made the local dynasts in all these regions his vassals, [Ptolemy] crossed the river Euphrates, and having brought under him Mesopotamia and Babylonia and Susiana and Persis and Media, and all the rest as far as Bactria...*⁵⁰

Additional propaganda may have stretched this claim even further: Polyaeus' anecdote regarding Ptolemy's misinformation scheme against the Seleucid satraps supposedly allowed him to take control of lands as far as India.⁵¹

To put this in context, Adoulis was a trading settlement situated on the coast of the Red Sea in the modern East African country of Eritrea. Pliny the Elder and the anonymous writer of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* both describe it as a trading hub known for elephants and their ivory, and the inscription mentions the use of elephants captured in the area for the war effort.⁵² But to go through the trouble of setting up such an inscription in a relative backwater thousands of miles from Alexandria seems rather odd. Perhaps it was intended as a fluff-piece to express a thank-you to the Ptolemaic hunters and sailors keeping the steady supply of war elephants flowing. More likely, Ptolemy was painting himself as a world conqueror, his domain now (theoretically) encompassing the entirety of the Seleucid Empire.⁵³ Setting up such a monument at or near the southernmost border of the Ptolemaic realm carried significant symbolic and political value – a parallel could be drawn to Alexander's altars at the banks of the Hyphasis River in India, or the altars of the Seleucid general Demodamas along the Jaxartes in Central Asia.⁵⁴ It would also not be farfetched to say that he likened himself to Alexander as well. In both the Adoulis inscription and the Decree of Canopus it is explicitly stated that Ptolemy recovered sacred objects taken from Egypt by the Persians, thereby casting the Seleucids as the new Persia.⁵⁵ This not-so-subtle reframing of Ptolemy as an heir to Alexander the Great also betrays the oft-repeated portrayal of the Ptolemaic state as one of defensive imperialism and limited aims.⁵⁶ Even if his rule was ephemeral in Asia, it was one worth celebrating.

⁴⁸ *OGIS 54*

⁴⁹ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*, 2.58-59

⁵⁰ Translation taken from (<http://www.attalus.org/docs/ogis/s54.html>)

⁵¹ Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 8.50

⁵² Pliny, *Natural History*, 6.34; Anonymous, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 3-4

⁵³ Eckstein, A.M. 2006: 86

⁵⁴ Kosmin, P.J. 2014: 62-63

⁵⁵ *OGIS 54*; Cairo CG 22187/*OGIS 56*

⁵⁶ Burstein, S. 2016: 85

With the Third Syrian War concluded, let us look at the rest of Ptolemy and Berenice's reign. Unfortunately, there's not much in the way of a narrative, so let's touch on some of the more unique features of their rule. The mid-3rd century was the apogee of the Ptolemaic dynasty: the empire reached its greatest territorial extent thanks to the acquisitions from the Seleucids during the war. This enabled the creation of a sort of buffer zone, running along southern Anatolia, the Aegean, and parts of North Syria.⁵⁷ An extensive taxation program, as we discussed in episode 059, combined with the lucrative trade networks of the region made the Ptolemaic kingdom the richest state in the Mediterranean, if not the world.⁵⁸ There was plenty of wealth to go around, and the generosity of Ptolemy III and Berenice II would earn them the moniker "Euergetes", meaning "benefactor".

Of the two, however, it is Berenice who would be most remembered in both antiquity and beyond. Though concrete information about her life remains sketchy, she has a remarkable presence thanks to a vast artistic output with her as the focus. One of the queen's most ardent supporters – or flatterers, depending on your point of view – was the poet Callimachus. A fellow native of Cyrene, Callimachus was the foremost poet of the Hellenistic period, and Berenice was to be his muse:

*Four are the Graces; for beside those three another has been fashioned lately and is yet wet with perfume. Happy Berenice and resplendent among all - without whom even the Graces themselves are not Graces.*⁵⁹

While Berenice seems to have been the subject of many poems and epigrams, the most famous of these is known as the *Coma Berenices*, "Berenice's Lock". Earlier this episode, I made a passing reference to Berenice dedicating some of her hair in the temple of Arsinoe to ensure Ptolemy's safe return from the Third Syrian War. The event was immortalized by Callimachus, and although we only have fragments of the original work in Greek, the later Roman poet Catullus preserved it, albeit in a Latin translation. According to the poem, the lock of hair had been carried by a breeze into the heavens. Shortly thereafter, the famed Alexandrian astronomer Conon had discovered a new constellation just west of Leo and north of Virgo, which he affectionately named "Berenice's Lock". There are many layers to Callimachus' poem, some of the passages glorifying the majesty and bravery of both Ptolemy's war against the Seleucids and Berenice's daring following Magas' death. Others are explicitly erotic in tone, evoking Berenice as Aphrodite and stressing her romantic relations with her new husband.

*...that same Conon saw me shining brightly among the lights of heaven,
me, the lock from the head of Berenice,
me whom she vowed to many of the goddesses,
stretching forth her smooth arms,
at that season when the king, blest in his new marriage,
had gone to waste the Assyrian borders,
carrying the sweet traces of our battles at night
which he had won by conquering my virginity...*

At that time how from your whole breast did your anxious

⁵⁷ Polybius, *Histories*, 5.34.2-9

⁵⁸ Manning, J.G. 2010: 125

⁵⁹ Callimachus, *Works*, 52; Translation from [here](#)

*spirit fail, bereft of sense! and yet truly
I knew you to be stout-hearted from young girlhood.
Have you forgotten the brave deed by which you gained a royal
marriage, which none else could venture and so win the title of braver?
But at that time in your grief, when parting from your husband, what words did you utter!
How often, O Jupiter, did you brush away'the tears with your hand!*

*But rather, O ye brides, may concord evermore dwell
in your homes, ever abiding Love.
And you, my queen, when gazing up to the stars
you propitiate Venus with festal lamps,
let not me your handmaid want perfumes,
but rather enrich me with bounteous gifts.
Why do the stars keep me here? I would fain be the queen's lock once more...⁶⁰*

To be compared to Aphrodite was quite common for Ptolemaic queens, but Callimachus' work adds a degree of agency and passion that is not seen with either Berenice I or Arsinoe II.⁶¹ It was not considered unbecoming to be seen in a more erotic light: as queen, Berenice's primary duty was to provide royal heirs for the dynasty, and provide she did. Berenice bore Ptolemy no less than five children, including the future Ptolemy IV and Arsinoe III. This proved to be invaluable from a propagandistic perspective: she and other Ptolemaic royal women were often the embodiment of Egypt's fertility, both in terms of the land's agricultural bounty and in literal childbirth. Berenice is frequently associated in works of art carrying cornucopias overflowing with food. Her statues and coin portraits, which we will discuss in a moment, show her as being plump-featured and globular-eyed, evoking a divine appearance.⁶² Within the confines of Egyptian religion and the monarchy, Berenice's frequent pregnancies resulted in her being portrayed on a temple relief in Bab-el-Amara as a visibly pregnant Hathor, the goddess of motherhood and fertility.⁶³ A strong union between the king and queen and the birth of new heirs ensured dynastic continuity and stability for the realm as a whole – at least on paper, anyways.

Yet despite the consistent presentation of Berenice in the mold of a proper Hellenistic queen, she also has a reputation of having a strong personality that sometimes expressed itself in ways that can be perceived as less traditionally feminine. There are a few examples of her being associated with military matters. I have already mentioned the claim of Hyginus that Berenice fought in battle and rescued her father Magas. But we do have a remarkably preserved contemporary example deliberately casting her as a representation of martial power: a floor mosaic, discovered in Thmouis in the Eastern Delta, depicts Berenice with a rather wild and wide-eyed expression. She is wearing military garb with a shield strapped on her back, while on her head is the prow of a warship – a reference to the Ptolemaic naval hegemony over the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶⁴ Perhaps Berenice was a stand-in for a warrior-goddess such as Athena or Artemis, but there are scant few examples of any Hellenistic queen so explicitly adopting militaristic symbols and iconography. She was also renowned as a sponsor of charioteers, who

⁶⁰ Catullus, *Works*, 66.7-14, 66.24-30, 66.87-93; Translation taken from [here](#)

⁶¹ Gutzwiller, K. 1992: 367-368

⁶² van Oppen de Ruiter, B.F. 2015: 45

⁶³ Llewellyn-Jones, L. and Winder, S. 2010: 256-262; Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 39; Clayman, D.L. 2014: 162

⁶⁴ van Oppen de Ruiter, B.F. 2015: 60-64; [Image](#)

could compete in the Olympic games and claim victories in her name.⁶⁵ Unusual for a royal lady, though not necessarily uncommon, Berenice had multiple coin types minted in her name and bearing her portrait alone on the coin face. There are Cyrenean specimens minted during the reign of her father, Magas, which I spoke of earlier.⁶⁶ There are also the coins struck when she became queen of Egypt, showing her portrait on the front with the cornucopia on the reverse, and along with her husband's they are some of the finest coinage found west of Bactria.⁶⁷ Even in Egyptian documents, we see how they refer to Berenice as the "female pharaoh".⁶⁸ The level of personal power that she held perhaps inspired some rather amusing anecdotes: Aelian claims that Berenice kept a pet lion, and allowed it to eat at the table and lick her face without nary a concern, and in another occasion she openly scolded Ptolemy for playing dice during judicial hearings.⁶⁹

The remaining decades of Ptolemy III's rule are obscure, and not exactly as detailed as we'd like. Though he had great success in the Third Syrian War, the Ptolemaic army was not directly deployed in any conflicts. We know that he was involved in the affairs in Greece, bankrolling movements against the Antigonid dynasty. Some of the recipients of his donations included Aratus of Sicyon, a major member of the Achaean League who oversaw political uprisings in several Macedonian-controlled cities during the time of Antigonos II Gonatas, and for his donations he was given the honorary title of *hegemon* of the Greek cities.⁷⁰ Ptolemy then later struck a deal with King Cleomenes III, a vigorous reformer of Sparta and leader of a campaign intended to overthrow Macedonian power in the Greek peninsula outright.⁷¹ This was par for the course with Ptolemaic foreign policy, and while it wasn't entirely successful, it did keep the Antigonids occupied and destabilized the region. Thanks to the terms laid out by the treaty of the Third Syrian War and the long reign of Seleucus II, Ptolemy did not need to worry about a war with the Seleucids for the rest of his career. If anything, the Syrian dynasty looked like it was in its death throes: rebellious satraps in Bactria, Parthia, and Asia Minor gnawed away at the edges of the empire, and the royal house was itself divided thanks to the civil war between Seleucus and his brother Antiochus Hierax. Ptolemy only got involved in this family squabble after Antiochus was driven out of Asia Minor into Ptolemaic-held-Thrace, the latter believing that refuge with the Egyptian king was preferable than trying to bargain for sympathy from his elder brother.⁷² But rather than having another rogue adventurer wandering about the Mediterranean, Ptolemy thought to imprison the would-be Seleucid king instead. Antiochus later escaped, but quickly fell afoul of a Celtic chieftain and was murdered in 226.⁷³ Seleucus II himself perished not long afterwards, and the new king Seleucus III seemed more intent on reclaiming territory in Asia Minor than pursuing another Syrian War, but he too was murdered in 223.⁷⁴ This left the throne to a young prince named Antiochus, the last remaining male member of the dynasty. One more invasion with Ptolemy at the head of his well-funded army could

⁶⁵ Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 20

⁶⁶ Example [here](#)

⁶⁷ Example [here](#)

⁶⁸ *Pap. Lugd. Bat.* XV; Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 23

⁶⁹ Aelian, *On Animals*, 5.39; Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 14.43

⁷⁰ Plutarch, *Life of Aratus*, 24, 41

⁷¹ Plutarch, *Life of Cleomenes*, 22; Polybius, *The Histories*, 2.51

⁷² Justin, *Epitome*, 27.3.9-10

⁷³ Justin, *Epitome*, 27.3.11; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 8.158

⁷⁴ Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 66; Pompeius Trogus, *Prologues*, 27; Justin, *Epitome*, 27.3.12, 29.1.3; Polybius, *Histories*, 5.40.6; Eusebius, *Chronicles*, 1.253

easily mop the floor with the Seleucid whelp, finally putting an end to their irksome rivals. With the newly added territories in Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia, the Ptolemaic kingdom could become the undisputed superpower of the Hellenistic world.

But it was not meant to be, and after two decades of rule Ptolemy III died towards the end of 222 just past the age of 60. He was survived by Berenice, who would oversee the passing of the diadem to their son, Ptolemy IV.⁷⁵ The reign of Ptolemy III and Berenice II Euergetes has been called the apogee of the Ptolemaic power, and I would certainly consider this to be the case. Underneath it all, however, there is evidence that things might not have been as stable as outwards appearance suggests. The bulk of Egypt's wealth was almost entirely dependent on the regular inundation of the Nile and the rigorous taxation program that would exploit the inhabitants. Such a system would reach its greatest extent during the times of Ptolemy II and III, making them the richest men in the world. But cracks start to appear during the onset of Euergetes' reign.

There exists an unusual papyrus fragment which gives us brief snippets of events during the Third and Fourth Syrian Wars, perhaps belonging to the annotations or notes of a lost history. According to this papyrus, the reason behind Ptolemy's departure from Mesopotamia in early 245 was because a revolt of Egyptians broke out, which proved to be significant enough to warrant his rapid return to Alexandria.⁷⁶ The account of Justin seems to support this, though he only lists the cause as a "disturbance" rather than explicitly labelling it a rebellion, and does not directly name the Egyptians.⁷⁷ We don't know the extent or scale of the revolt, but we can guess its root cause. In the Decree of Canopus, the oldest known trilingual inscription of Hellenistic Egypt dated to 238, we can get a better picture, albeit in a very slanted manner: at about the same time as the alleged revolt, the decree states that the Nile failed to flood, resulting in a poor crop yield and outright famine.⁷⁸ The author then says that the Egyptians, that is the indigenous Egyptians, became "faint-hearted". Whether this is a euphemism for rebellion is unclear, but Ptolemy and Berenice imported grain from across the Mediterranean to combat the famine. This generosity to both the temples and natives of Egypt is what earned them the title of *Euergetes*.

We can draw two important conclusions from this event: the first is the general dissatisfaction of the indigenous Egyptians. As we covered in the last episode, the Egyptian experience under Ptolemaic rule was complex, and cannot really be broken down into "oppressed" versus "oppressor". However, the demands placed upon them by the tax regime could cause considerable financial stress, and Egyptians tended to feel the effects of instability more than Greeks or even Hellenized Egyptians. The second point is how dangerously quick the country could fall into anarchy if the seasonal inundation of the Nile deviated to any degree. The fact that the world's greatest exporter of grain needed to import it en masse suggests that it was a particularly bad harvest, which goes entirely against the cosmic framework of the Egyptian way of life. This famine would have a greater negative impact on the Egyptian community, and could inspire them to revolt, especially if the king and a large portion of the army were away in Asia fighting the Seleucids.

⁷⁵ Polybius, *The Histories*, 2.71.3

⁷⁶ *P. Haun.* 6.15-17

⁷⁷ Justin, *Epitome*, 27.1.9

⁷⁸ Canopus Decree (Cairo CG 22187); Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 5.209a-b; Zelinskyi, A.L. 2020 suggests that the famine should be dated to 242-239, rather than 246/245.

This is the extent of our knowledge, and perhaps I am placing too much emphasis on this rather ill-described event. But in the wider context of the Ptolemaic period, especially as we approach towards the end of the 3rd century, I think that this is a keystone moment to understanding the some of the major problems that would afflict the dynasty both in the short and the long term. For the remaining two decades of Ptolemy's kingship, no further disturbances are recorded. For all intents and purposes, things seemed better than ever by the conclusion of 222. Three talented kings ruled over Egypt across a century of history, each bringing their own special skills to ensuring the land's stability and prosperity. With the Seleucid dynasty in shambles and the Antigonids distracted, it would be left to Ptolemy IV to continue to build upon the work of his forefathers. Surely he would be capable of handling the weight of the crown... right?

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