

**Arsinoë, Queen of Egypt:
Asset or Assassin?**

by S.L. Ager

Perhaps the most famous woman of antiquity is Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt during the 1st century B.C. Cleopatra was the last monarch in the long line of the Ptolemies, a Greco-Macedonian dynasty which had ruled Egypt for 300 years. But she was not the only woman of consequence in the family over the years. The Ptolemies produced many queens of great power and influence during the centuries of their rule. One of the most talented and perhaps the most revered of them all was Arsinoë, the daughter of the founder of the dynasty, Ptolemy I.

Arsinoë was born around 316 B.C., less than ten years after the death of Alexander the Great. Her father Ptolemy had been one of Alexander's generals, and almost as soon as Alexander died, in the summer of 323, Ptolemy took Egypt for his own. Over the next several years Alexander's other generals were to divide up the rest of Alexander's empire. So Arsinoë grew up during a time of turmoil in the eastern

Mediterranean. Although Ptolemaic Egypt itself was generally peaceful and secure, the decades after Alexander's death were marked by the struggles and conflicts of his successors.

Arsinoë eventually came to be of great importance to the Ptolemaic dynasty; but at the time of her birth she was an illegitimate child of Ptolemy I's "secondary" family, the daughter of Ptolemy's mistress Berenike. Ptolemy's legitimate queen was Eurydike, by whom he had a son, also called Ptolemy, and a daughter, Lysandra. Since the Ptolemies often confuse students of their dynastic history by having insisted on calling all the male members of the house "Ptolemy", perhaps it will be easier to refer to these individuals by the "nicknames" that they were generally given. Ptolemy I's legitimate son was later given the name "Keraunos", the "lightning-bolt". But Ptolemy I had another son also, an illegitimate child who was born of the beloved Berenike, and who was therefore Arsinoë's full brother and Keraunos' half-brother. This male child was also called Ptolemy; his nickname in later life was "Philadelphos", as was Arsinoë's, for reasons which we shall see later.

Hence Ptolemy I had two families, one from his queen Eurydike, whom he had married for political reasons, and one from his mistress Berenike. But Berenike was evidently the object of all Ptolemy's love, and eventually he made her his queen. Marriage as a political alliance was paramount in the Hellenistic age, and virtually all the marriages of the Hellenistic dynasts were contracted with this purpose in mind. Love was not generally a consideration, except in unusual cases such as that of Ptolemy I and Berenike. Arsinoë's first marriage was no different from the common pattern. She was married, at the age of 16, to Lysimachos, the king of Thrace, a man who was 61 years old. This was clearly a political marriage, one which sealed a bargain between Lysimachos and Arsinoë's father. The teenaged Arsinoë could have had little or no say in the matter.

Nevertheless, Arsinoë was evidently one to make the best of what might have been a difficult situation. She herself might not have married Lysimachos for love, but she succeeded in inducing the elderly king to fall in love with her. Her youth and the beauty which she was reputed to have no doubt were valuable in this regard; but we know from her later history that Arsinoë was also intelligent, capable and talented in matters of statecraft. Her husband probably found these to be worthwhile assets as well. For some 16 or 17 years the marriage of Lysimachos and Arsinoë was successful, as such marriages go, and it resulted in three children.

But in the year 283, when Arsinoë was in her early thirties, disaster struck, a disaster which may have been instigated by Arsinoë herself, and one which illustrates the ruthless side of her character. Lysimachos had a grown son by a previous marriage, a man who would have been only a few years older than Arsinoë herself. Rumour had it that when Arsinoë first came to Lysimachos' court she and her husband's son Agathokles became lovers; there is nothing to prove this charge, but it certainly seems to be the case that in later years Arsinoë increasingly saw Agathokles as a threat to her own position and that of her children. Agathokles was marked out to be Lysimachos' heir; when Lysimachos died, what would prevent him from killing Arsinoë's children, and perhaps Arsinoë herself, as potential rivals to his power? That she was motivated by fear is the charitable view of Arsinoë's actions; but another possibility is that she acted out of sheer ambition for herself and her children. Whatever the case, she evidently persuaded her husband, still firmly attached to his young and beautiful wife, that Agathokles was plotting against him. Lysimachos believed her, and had his son and heir killed, perhaps even using poison provided by Arsinoë herself.

The next few years of Arsinoë's life were years of turmoil and tragedy as she was caught up in the wars and conflicts which still raged between the Hellenistic kingdoms. The assassination of Agathokles had far-reaching

ramifications. Agathokles' wife, who just happened to be Lysandra, Arsinoë's own half-sister, was filled with grief and rage at the actions of Lysimachos and Arsinoë, and she fled to the court of the Asian king Seleukos, persuading him to attack Lysimachos' kingdom. Lysandra was supported in this effort by her own full brother Ptolemy Keraunos, who was now an adventurer seeking a kingdom of his own. He had once been heir to the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt, but ever since his father Ptolemy I had made Berenike his queen, Keraunos had been disinherited in favour of Berenike's son Philadelphos. Thus, during the crises of the late 280's the two families of Ptolemy I were set at each other's throats.

Seleukos' invasion of Lysimachos' kingdom was successful, and Lysimachos was defeated and killed in battle. Arsinoë, in fear for her life, disguised herself as a beggar (leaving behind a maid dressed in her own royal clothing to be killed in her place) and fled to the stronghold of Kassandria in Macedon. There, with the support of an army of mercenaries, she felt strong enough to confront her half-brother, Keraunos, still seeking power through such dubious means as assassinating his benefactor Seleukos and then posing as the avenger of Lysimachos' death, had a proposition for Arsinoë: if she would agree to hand over her wealth and support him as heir to Lysimachos' kingdom, he would make her his queen by marrying her. Keraunos evidently read Arsinoë and her ambitions correctly; she agreed to the arrangement. The new marriage did not, however, commence auspiciously, as Keraunos showed no more tenderness of feeling as a husband than he had shown as a half-brother. His claim to Lysimachos' throne was as the avenger of the old king. But there were still direct heirs of Lysimachos' blood in existence: the young children of Lysimachos and Arsinoë, whom she had so far managed to protect. Immediately after the marriage Keraunos gave the order for the murder of her children. Arsinoë, in spite of her ambition and the ruthlessness she had shown in the Agathokles affair, was still a loving mother and a brave woman: she tried to protect her two sons from the assassins with her own body. When she failed, and her children were dead, there was no question of her continuing to live with her half-brother as queen. She went into exile, and the following year (279) must have brought her bitter joy when she heard that Keraunos himself was finally dead, killed by the Gauls when they invaded Macedon.

Arsinoë had been married twice now, and widowed twice. Her marriage to Lysimachos had been mostly successful, but it had ended in tragedy and in a circumstance which led directly to her second, more disastrous marriage. It was in her third marriage that Arsinoë was to find her greatest measure of success, and perhaps the greatest opportunity for her tireless ambition. Sometime in the 270's she returned to her homeland of Egypt. There she was able to pressure her own full brother, Ptolemy II, who had been king since 285, in the same way she had been able to influence her old husband

Lysimachos. She persuaded Ptolemy that his wife and queen was involved in a plot against him. Ptolemy exiled his wife and took a new queen: his sister Arsinoë. Both of them were henceforward referred to as "Philadelphos", the "sister-lover" and the "brother-lover".

Marriage between full brother and sister was incest to the Greeks and Macedonians, and they were shocked at it. One unfortunate poet suffered severely for his outspoken criticism of the practice; tired of hearing him make obscene jests at royal expense, Ptolemy had him sealed in a leaden jar and dropped into the Mediterranean. But if the Greeks were troubled by this marriage, the native Egyptians welcomed it. It had always been the custom of the Egyptian pharaohs, and now it seemed that the new rulers of Egypt were willing to adopt Egyptian ways. Hence Arsinoë's marriage to her brother benefitted them both.

Arsinoë was beneficial to her brother-husband in other ways as well. It was during this last marriage of hers that she was able to practice her talents in statecraft to the fullest. Although we have little in the way of specific information, the general consensus in antiquity was that Arsinoë gave the dynasty some backbone that her rather indolent brother was lacking. Certainly these were successful years for Egypt. Even after her death, an inscription could refer to an action being taken "in accordance with the policy of Arsinoë"; and amongst the statues of the male Ptolemies set up in Athens there was one also of Arsinoë. She died in 270, so her marriage to Ptolemy Philadelphos lasted less than ten years; nevertheless during the period of her reign she was clearly influential. Ptolemy never remarried; his dead wife was deified and worship of her as a goddess was instituted throughout Egypt.

Arsinoë's last years in Egypt were the glorious summit to a career which had been full of vicissitudes. She was certainly an ambitious woman, and at times could be a ruthless one. But it should be remembered that her actions in no way differed from those of the male dynasts of the day; and at least some of the honours she was paid after death by her worshippers seem to have come from the heart.