

"Ptolemy the Thunderbolt":  
Vile Villain or Victim of Vitriol?

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One of the paradoxes of monarchic rule is the tension between the dire pressures to produce a blood heir on the one hand and the problems created by the generation of too many of the same on the other. The Hellenistic kings – the rulers of a Greek world vastly changed in the wake of Alexander the Great's conquests – experienced that tension in all its painful ramifications in every generation. The situation was particularly strained in the early decades of the Hellenistic age, in the years before the new monarchies had established an accepted mode of succession. Even Ptolemaic Egypt, the most stable of the Hellenistic kingdoms, suffered its share of rival – and violent – claimants to the throne.

Perhaps the most universally reviled of the would-be royal successors, the villainous *bête noir* of Hellenistic history, is Ptolemy Keraunos ("Ptolemy the Thunderbolt"), the elder half-brother of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, the "legitimate" heir of Ptolemy I. But there is room here to try to salvage, if not an individual of gentle philosophy, at least a man who was no worse than others of his age and whose actions were provoked in part by the aggressions (whether perceived or real) of his relatives and contemporaries.

Ptolemy Keraunos was the son of Ptolemy I, the general of Alexander the Great who had succeeded immediately after Alexander's death in establishing himself and his rule in Egypt. He laid the foundations for a kingdom – an empire, in fact – that was to prosper for at least one century, and survive for three. In its early days, the Ptolemaic kingdom, like the other Hellenistic kingdoms, had no set pattern of succession. Nevertheless, the eldest son was likely to be a leading candidate for the role of heir to the throne. But in the case of Ptolemy and his sons (at least two of whom were of course named "Ptolemy"!), however, matters were complicated by the marital preferences of the aging king. Ptolemy Keraunos – probably the oldest of all Ptolemy I's children – was the son of Ptolemy I by his wife Eurydike, while the younger brother Ptolemy was the child of Ptolemy I's mistress, Berenike. Ptolemy I clearly preferred his mistress to his wife, and eventually put aside Eurydike in favour of Berenike. This preferential treatment extended to the children of these women – Keraunos, the elder

son, was dispossessed of an inheritance he would have seen as naturally belonging to him, and the younger son Ptolemy (soon to be Ptolemy II Philadelphos) was made the royal heir and co-regent with his father.

The literature treats Ptolemy II Philadelphos more kindly than it does Ptolemy Keraunos; the distinction between the characters of these two men is drawn so sharply that we tend inevitably to draw the conclusion that Ptolemy I passed over his oldest son because he was already aware of the latter's vicious propensities. But there is nothing in the sources to support the view that Keraunos had already distinguished himself at an early age by his vile behaviour; and furthermore, there is reason to believe that the younger brother could be just as ruthless as anyone else. Keraunos left Egypt "in fear" when his younger sibling was announced as co-regent, and that fear was probably justified, given that Ptolemy II had two other brothers executed or assassinated shortly after their father died.

Keraunos took refuge at the court of one of Alexander's other Successors, Lysimachos. Lysimachos was married to a much younger wife, who just happened to be Keraunos' half-sister – Arsinoë, the daughter of Ptolemy I and Berenike. Arsinoë, who had married Lysimachos when she was about sixteen, had already had three sons by him when Keraunos appeared on the scene; the eldest of her boys was named (wait for it) Ptolemy. But Lysimachos had other children as well, notably an already adult son named Agathokles. Agathokles had all the necessary talents a king would have wanted in an heir – and he was popular to boot – so Arsinoë's ambitions for her own children had no hope of fulfillment as long as he was alive. Since Agathokles alive was bound to block the advancement of her own sons, Arsinoë decided that she needed to see Agathokles dead. She evidently succeeded in persuading her elderly husband that his son was a traitor, and Lysimachos had Agathokles put to death. But some sources suggest that Agathokles was murdered, not by his father, but by Arsinoë's half-brother Ptolemy. There seems to be no evidence to support this accusation – other than Keraunos' evil reputation – and scholars conjecture that the "Ptolemy" who had a hand in Agathokles' demise (if there is any truth in this at all) may have been not Ptolemy Keraunos, but his nephew Ptolemy, the son of Lysimachos and Arsinoë. Certainly the principle of *cui bono* operates better for the nephew than for the uncle.

If we are to absolve Keraunos of blame in the Agathokles affair, he is not quite so easy to clear in the next stage of the unfolding drama. In the

turmoil caused by the death of Agathokles, Keraunos is said to have fled to the court of Seleukos (yet another of Alexander's Successors); he was accompanied by Agathokles' widow Lysandra, who just happened to be Keraunos' own full sister (don't ask). Seleukos was persuaded by them to make war on Lysimachos, and at the Battle of Koroupedion in 281 BC, Lysimachos was defeated and killed. It may be that Keraunos expected that Seleukos would hand him Lysimachos' kingdom on a platter, but that's not how things turned out. Even though Seleukos was eighty years old, his ambitions still burned brightly – he made it clear that he intended to take over Lysimachos' kingdom himself. Perhaps it was at this point that something snapped for Keraunos, who was finding himself balked of a kingdom at every turn. As Seleukos, covered with glory from his victory, prepared to march to the eternal homeland of Macedon, Keraunos stabbed him, literally in the back. So died the last of Alexander's Successors.

The crime of murder was exacerbated by Keraunos' breach, in murdering his benefactor, of the sacred code governing the guest-host relationship (although it is questionable to what degree Seleukos had dealt real benefactions to his guest). The murder of Seleukos stained the pages of history backwards for Keraunos, implicating him, regardless of his guilt or innocence, in incidents such as the death of Agathokles. At the time, however, it proved to be a successful – if despicable – political maneuver. Keraunos was able to get the Macedonian army to proclaim him as king, on the audacious grounds that he was the avenger of Lysimachos! Whatever else Keraunos was or wasn't, he didn't lack chutzpah.

One fly in Keraunos' royal ointment remained. He now finally had a kingdom (the Macedonian portion of Lysimachos' old realm), and he had a (reasonably?) loyal military following. But there were potential rivals to his claim: Lysimachos' sons by Keraunos' half-sister Arsinoë. It was imperative that Keraunos neutralize the claims of Arsinoë's sons to the throne of their father's kingdom. A marriage with his half-sister was the perfect solution; for Arsinoë herself, this may have been an opportunity unhopd for, one that would enable her to be a queen again. The only hindrance to the success of this plan was Arsinoë's eldest child, Ptolemy, who, while young, was far from naive (especially if he had had a hand in the death of his half-brother Agathokles). He warned his mother against the marriage; that he had no intention of quashing his own ambitions is evident from the fact that he shortly embarked on a military campaign against his new stepfather. This ill-mannered behaviour may have

prompted Keraunos to the action so luridly described by the ancient writer Justin: the brutal murder of Arsinoë's younger boys in their mother's arms.

Keraunos might ultimately have succeeded in his bid for power in Macedon had it not been for a singular event that had long term repercussions: the invasion of the Celts. About February of 279, a Celtic band invaded Macedon, and repaid Keraunos for all his crimes (as Justin saw it) by killing him in battle and sticking his head on a pike. He never was able to establish his own dynasty – or write his own history. Those who did not succeed in the royal game, or leave heirs behind them to preserve the positive and eliminate the negative, are often those who are most vilified in the sources. Keraunos, ruthless as he may have been, was on occasion as provoked as he was provoking. But he had the misfortune to be survived by his most pitiable victim – his half-sister Arsinoë. She herself was not above suspicion in the eyes of the ancient writers (witness the reconstruction of events leading to Agathokles' death), but from the nadir of her career – the murder of her sons and her subsequent exile – she rose again to its zenith. After the death of Keraunos, Arsinoë made her way to Egypt, where she married again and made this third marriage pay for all: this time she married her full brother, Ptolemy II, and became until her death the queen of Egypt. And Arsinoë and her brother-husband were in an excellent position to calumniate the dead half-brother who had been an enemy of them both.