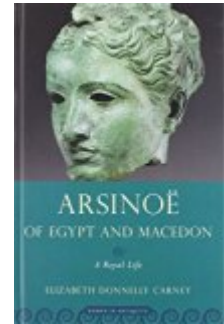


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Reviewed by Nikolaus Overtoom (Louisiana State University)

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## The Most Known Unknown Queen of Egypt

Elizabeth Donnelly Carney's *Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon* brings to life the shadowy, yet remarkable life of one of Ptolemaic Egypt's most dynamic queens. When one thinks of queens of Egypt, Cleopatra VII immediately comes to mind. Yet Carney demonstrates that until the Roman period Arsinoë II was the most revered, popular queen of Egypt. Her image graced everything from art, to coins, to cult, and she became a model of Ptolemaic Egyptian royalty. Her immense influence and popularity throughout the Ptolemaic period makes it a bit surprising that Arsinoë has faded into historical obscurity. Carney offers the first ever comprehensive academic study of her life. Two things appear to attribute to Arsinoë's relative anonymity: the near rock star status achieved by Cleopatra after her fall in 30 BCE and the poor quantity and quality of the extant source material about Arsinoë's life. Carney's work is a modest 133 pages, much of which is spent discussing the various men in Arsinoë's life. Through a brief introduction and six chapters she patches together the important events and people of Arsinoë's life, of which there were many. She graciously includes a general timeline, genealogical table, relevant maps, and a list of important people with short descriptions. These each prove quite useful as the reader attempts to wade through the tumultuous period of the Successor wars. Carney also provides an extensive bibliography.

In her introduction, Carney considers the role of royal women in three monarchic traditions: Macedonian,

Hellenistic, and Egyptian. In the Macedonian system, women supported the prospects of their sons but obtained limited political exposure. In the Hellenistic system, the role of royal women became more institutionalized as they were meant to publicly support the dynasty. In the Egyptian system, royal women experienced heightened power and prestige because of their dualistic attachment to the power of the pharaoh. Arsinoë worked within all three systems. Carney cautions against labeling too quickly the characters in this period as villains or heroes because of the poor and unreliable source material. Within the courts of the Successors, rivalry, deception, and even murder were not uncommon. The highest of stakes were at play, and the political environment required harsh action for survival. Moreover, Carney is cautious not to overstate Arsinoë's influence and agency. Much of the details of her life are lost to history, leaving mere contexts. Hence Carney emphasizes in her work the few events where Arsinoë clearly functioned independently. Carney also is mindful of the fact that Arsinoë's potential desires and ambitions were not unitary throughout her life. Scholarly debate over her potential influence and agency has ranged between "an extreme of wishful (or fearful) thinking about the great extent of Arsinoë's power and influence and an equally extreme reaction against this point of view" (p. 9). Carney offers an appendix discussing the various source materials and the varying academic assessments of Arsinoë. Carney's stated goal is to chart a middle course in her understanding of the life and character of Arsinoë. Furthermore,

she looks at the queen's career within the context of her Argead and early Hellenistic predecessors, both inside and outside Egypt, in order to gain added perspective.

In her first chapter, Carney discusses Arsinoë's background and youth. She sets out the long-term effects that her father Ptolemy I had on Arsinoë. Carney offers background information on her extensive family and the dynastic rivalries of the period. Ptolemy I practiced polygamy, which created tension between the families of his different wives. Through the favor of her father, Arsinoë's branch of the family eventually became primary. The next chapter charts Arsinoë's marriage to Lysimachus and provides his background information. Arsinoë was a prestigious bride who heightened Lysimachus's political stature. As wife of Lysimachus in Thrace and western Anatolia, she gained some institutionalized powers in cult and patronage. Lysimachus also practiced polygamy, and his court equally was filled with dynastic rivalry. Arsinoë's sons were not first in line to the throne. Carney argues that her possible role in the execution of Lysimachus's eldest son and heir Agathocles was an act of survival. If Arsinoë had a hand in the execution, she was protecting her own sons, which Carney contends was a common pattern for royal women in this period. Chapter 3 covers a short period of Arsinoë's life (281-276 BCE) where she uniquely acted independently. Lysimachus had died in battle, and she reluctantly married her violent half-brother Ptolemy Ceraunus in an attempt to secure the throne of Macedonia for her eldest son. This decision proved disastrous as Ceraunus sought power and vengeance, killing her two youngest boys after the wedding. Ptolemy I had favored Arsinoë's full-brother Ptolemy II over Ceraunus for the throne of Egypt. Carney argues that Arsinoë agreed to the marriage in a desperate attempt to gain position and security for her and her sons. Such a miscalculation demonstrates that she was no political genius but shows her ambition and willingness to take political risks. The following chapter discusses Arsinoë's defeated return to Egypt and her subsequent return to power through her marriage to her full-brother Ptolemy II. Carney argues that the marriage was a political move by Ptolemy to unify his dynasty. This revolutionary practice became a Ptolemaic tradition. A great deal of money and energy was spent on royal propaganda to connect the married siblings to the stability of the kingdom and the divine. In her fifth chapter, Carney illustrates how Arsinoë's public role as queen of Egypt was unprecedented. As queen she was a public advertise-

ment of dynastic wealth, power, and continuity. She had a hand in foreign policy, religion, and patronage. The final chapter looks at Arsinoë's image after her death. Carney argues that even in death her image throughout the Ptolemaic period "remained a critically important figure in the memory history of dynasty and in the evolving rule of royal women in Ptolemaic monarchy" (p. 106). Her brother-husband honored Arsinoë with a major cult, in which she acted both as a Greek and Egyptian goddess. Carney provides a discussion of Arsinoë's image in art and coinage. This image also reinforced the double role of Arsinoë as a Greek and Egyptian queen. She was able to retain her influence and power in the Ptolemaic period even in death because of her iconic image.

In her biography, Carney is mostly successful in maintaining a moderate assessment of Arsinoë. She compensates for the patchy, inadequate source materials on Arsinoë with important considerations of other important royal women and men. It was wise of her to pull in examples from other contemporary royal women to offer added perspective. Her lucid prose and organized structure help to clarify what could otherwise be a bewildering period of continual dynastic struggle, war, and murder. Carney is correct to point out the high pressure and high stakes environment of the Successor courts. The pressures of the system were considerable, and fear of extermination was real. When dealing with such a poorly sourced ancient figure, speculation is unavoidable. Carney deals in a great many "perhaps" and "maybes," but for the most part her conclusions appear logical, and she does not allow her imagination to run wild. However, there are a few issues of note in this work. It seems rather obvious that Arsinoë's marriage to Lysimachus was purely political. Carney's explanation for the match is too wordy and the pop-culture analogies are unnecessary. Perhaps Arsinoë is not a villain, but if she had a hand in the murder of Agathocles, this is a despicable act and deserves more censure than Carney offers. She mistakenly states that Ptolemy I made Ptolemy II his co-regent in 385 BCE instead of 285 BCE (p. 53). Finally, the use of endnotes is an unfortunate annoyance. These minor quibbles aside, Carney should be commended for shedding light on an underrepresented and fascinating life from antiquity. Even if Carney does not paint a picture of the Macedonian-Ptolemaic queen's life exactly as it happened, she soundly portrays a life that very well could have been Arsinoë's.

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