Women in Egypt: A Case Study of Influential Hellenistic Royal Women

The history of Egypt confirms that Egyptian society recognized the power of women. Egypt’s royal tradition, while predominantly male, did include several famous queens. The legacy of Hatshepsut, the shrewd and powerful ruler of eighteenth dynasty Egypt survives as an eminent example. The social, political, religious, and historical norms of Egypt set the stage for women in the Ptolemaic period in Egyptian history.¹ The Ptolemaic rulers continued multiple traditions and structures that had previously been in place in Egypt. These included the worshipping of traditional deities, using the Egyptian crowns², and continuing relative social and political flexibility for women. Using this tradition, Ptolemaic queens amassed great power, wealth, and fame. Because the tradition of Egypt included strong women, and women in the Hellenistic period proceeded to gain more equality than had been afforded in the Greek Classical era, this provided the perfect culmination for powerful women, such as Arsinoë II and Berenice I to influence the world around them.

The culture of Egypt allowed for elasticity in female behavior in the social sphere. Compared to other cultures, Herodotus, in his Histories, expressed surprise on the status of women in Egypt. He explained that Egyptians “in most of their manners and customs, exactly reverse the common practice of mankind. The women attend the markets and trade, while the men sit at home at the loom.”³ This evidence represents foreign shock at the practices of women, in relation to men, in Egypt. This distinction, of Egyptian women from “the common practice of mankind” lays the foundation for the Ptolemaic period.⁴ Upper class royal women in Hellenistic

¹ For a more detailed discussion on the history of queens and goddesses in Egyptian history, see Susan Tower Hollis, “Queens and Goddesses in Ancient Egypt” in Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today, ed. by Karen L. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
⁴ Herodotus, The History of Herodotus.
Egypt recognized the patriarchal values, virtues, and structures that had previously dominated Greek society and worked within the feasible bounds to accomplish as much as they could. These socially elite women entered into the political realm, a realm which in the so-called “Golden Age” of Greek society had solely been delineated for men. Using their male connections, certain women were able to take hold of power and influence the governmental and social spheres around them. The changes in society most likely came from external factors such as the continual political strife, however women at this time seized upon the new opportunities allowed to them and ambitiously broke the barriers that had been in place. Through a case study of several significantly influential women in ancient history, these themes can be explored. Although it is not possible—due to lack of sources—to make a “definitive evaluation” of the completeness of women’s power at this time, a study of the history and the lives of these women may elucidate more about the social structure at the time.¹⁵

During the Hellenistic period of Egypt, the social norms for women were not as stringent as they were elsewhere. Some Hellenistic women in Egypt did in fact hold the title of citizenship, or a status of “aste,” meaning citizen.⁶ This status holds significance as women in Grecian society in the Athenian classical age possessed “no political rights.”⁷ Formerly, women retained no ability to hold any sort of position of power, and “were not citizens.”⁸ This sharp contrast in these two time periods is telling: it shows how Egypt’s social structure existed as inherently different than that of Greece’s, especially during the Hellenistic period. The Ptolemaic dynasty

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⁶ Sarah B. Pomeroy, Women in Hellenistic Egypt, 46.
⁷ Marjorie Wall Bingham and Susan Hill Gross, Women in European History and Culture: Ancient Greece and Rome, vol. 1 (Minnesota: Publisher of Women’s History Curriculum, 1983) 27.
also created Greek courts in addition to keeping the traditional Egyptian ones.\textsuperscript{9} This shows a Ptolemaic understanding of the difference in culture, and a sort of accommodation for that, in order to preserve social normality.

In Egypt women maintained a legal status, with certain rights and privileges. In marriage contracts in Egypt at this time, although a woman did wield considerable legal power to initiate divorce against her husband and maintain dignity against abuse, she still needed to be obedient to her husband.\textsuperscript{10} However, it is noteworthy that there existed “no standard format” of marital contracts used throughout Egypt. Although each individual contract possessed unique qualities, the similarities of creating a code of conduct for men and women remain a running theme across the papyri.\textsuperscript{11} Despite lower status, women did petition for higher standing, such as in the case of a literate woman petitioning for more freedom in the economic realm, and in addition women often held jobs.\textsuperscript{12} Women legally retained basic rights, such as a right to life; yet despite their legal standing in society, these rights were considerably enforced by men.\textsuperscript{13} The theme of male connections to women runs across the lives of many women, of all statuses, in Egypt. A close study of influential women and their connectivity to males in their life in Hellenistic Egypt can potentially clarify more about the inherently patriarchal power structures of Ptolemaic Egyptian society at the time.


\textsuperscript{10} For the transcript of the original marriage contracts, see Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 90-91.

\textsuperscript{11} For a more detailed discussion of marriage contracts, see Sarah B. Pomeroy, Women in Hellenistic Egypt, 83-85.

\textsuperscript{12} For a more detailed list of the jobs that women held in Hellenistic Egypt (and Greece) see Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome, 220-224.

\textsuperscript{13} A clear example of this can be found in the legal protocol of a judge’s decision regarding the punishment of a murderer, a senator of Alexandria who murdered a prostitute. He subsequently spent time in prison and paid the mother of the prostitute one tenth of his property. For the original transcript, see Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome, 125.
To make a larger generalization about royal women living in Egypt during this time, their marriages oftentimes seemed to forward “political arrangements” and allowed women to advance and maintain political alliances. Although men still arranged marriages for women, such as Ptolemy I arranging his daughter Arsinoë II in marriage, women still utilized their position to gain power, such as Arsinoë’s vast accumulation of wealth. Using the royal system in place, these women gained “access to money and power” through intermarriage. Because Greek society valued virtue and wisdom – traditionally male attributes- women like Berenice I, a Ptolemaic queen, who operated under those virtues gained public praise. Female queens at this time owned and operated property, in contrast to previous times and even in contrast to other places during the Hellenistic period, such as Rome. These examples of female power show a structure in place that potentially affords women certain advantages.

Scholars, such as Dorothy J. Thompson, have argued that education situated itself as “a strong feature of the Hellenistic world.” Egypt therefore, under Ptolemaic rule, would have been influenced by Greek education. Upper class women most likely had the ability to read, judging from the terracotta figurines that show girls reading (see Figure 1). Although it is not completely clear if many of the women could write, letters authored by women in Egypt do exist. There remains a definite possibility that women may have been the authors of their own

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18 Dorothy J. Thompson, “Education and Culture in Hellenistic Egypt and beyond” Escuela y literatura en Grecia Antigua (Cassino: University of Cassino, 2007), 127.
19 For a more detailed explanation of the influence of Greek culture and education across Egypt during the Ptolemaic period, see Dorothy J. Thompson, “Education and Culture in Hellenistic Egypt and beyond.”
21 For an extensive collection of letters, see Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – AD 800*. 
letters; alternatively, scribes could have actually written it down.\textsuperscript{22} Despite this, the surviving evidence of Egyptian women’s letters in the Ptolemaic period exists in scarcity.\textsuperscript{23} Yet Arsinoë II continued this tradition of women in education by being a patron for literature.\textsuperscript{24} The Ptolemaic reign in Egypt constituted “a time of renascence for women” in literary and educational studies.\textsuperscript{25} This occurrence is significant because the flourishing of the arts included women. The entrance of women in this sphere sets the stage for future women, such as the distinguished female philosopher Hypatia, whose influence was felt all across the Hellenistic world.\textsuperscript{26} Women in educationally influential places, as in many other aspects of high society, often had a relation to a prominent male in academia.\textsuperscript{27}

Berenice I, the wife of the first king of the Ptolemaic dynasties, Ptolemy I, ultimately exerted power as Queen of Egypt. She came from a background that, although not technically royal, did encompass an upper class lifestyle. She held the position of “lady-in-waiting to Eurydice” the former wife of Ptolemy. She finally replaced Eurydice as the wife of Ptolemy, and he favored Berenice so greatly that he even brought her with him on a campaign in Greece. Her rise to power constitutes an interesting ascent, as she was not a royal born woman, yet Ptolemy fell in love with her positive attributes. Her depictions are seemingly divine in nature, such as the gem carving that is believed to be Berenice I (see Figure 2).\textsuperscript{28} Plutarch’s description of her as having a significant amount of power shows her status as a prominent queen.\textsuperscript{29} Her marriage to Ptolemy gave her access to power and allowed her to flourish in the royal arena. While she did

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\textsuperscript{22} Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, \textit{Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt}, 16.
\textsuperscript{23} For a discussion on the possibilities of this scarcity, see Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, \textit{Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt}, 15.
\textsuperscript{24} Sarah B Pomeroy, \textit{Women in Hellenistic Egypt}, 59.
\textsuperscript{25} Sarah B. Pomeroy, \textit{Women in Hellenistic Egypt}, 71.
\textsuperscript{26} For more on the life of Hypatia, see Michael A. Deakin, \textit{Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician and Martyr} (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).
\textsuperscript{27} Sarah B. Pomeroy, \textit{Women in Hellenistic Egypt}, 65.
\textsuperscript{28} Image 2 from Joyce E. Salisbury, \textit{Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World}, 30.
\textsuperscript{29} Sarah B. Pomeroy, \textit{Women in Hellenistic Egypt}, 18.
not seem to have a formally specific position in the government, “her influence must have been great.” This evidence shows an intriguing upsurge in female power, and elucidates much about the characteristics of Berenice, as she was celebrated for her intellect and virtue. The fact that she ascended to the position of wife of the Pharaoh of Egypt, despite not being born into the royal family, represents an interesting historical example of a woman rising to from a lower class to higher society by using a male connection, that of her royal husband.

Arsinoë II, a Ptolemaic queen of Egypt, amassed great power and influence during her reign. Born as the royal daughter of Ptolemy I and Berenice, she in her early teens married the King of Thrace, Lysimachus, most likely as a political arrangement. She bore several children for Lysimachus, who died in battle against the Seleucid dynasty. After fleeing to Macedonia, Arsinoë attempted to claim power as queen of Macedonia, with her half-brother Ceraunus ruling there as king. He attempted an assassination against her and subsequently killed one of her children, but Arsinoë ultimately escaped to Egypt, and married her brother Ptolemy II. Her marriage to Ptolemy allowed her even more contact in the royal sphere than she previously had. She only ruled as queen of Egypt for five years, yet she left considerable impact on Egypt. Arsinoë II’s depictions included the double cobra, according to Egyptian tradition, thus authorizing her influence in Egyptian society. Her marriage to her brother united the family and the kingdom, “solidifying her power among the Egyptian priests” and paralleling the marriage of the divine brother and sister, Osiris and Isis, two main gods in Egyptian culture. That action

33 Sally - Ann Ashton, “Ptolemaic and Roman- Egyptian Sculpture” in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt* ed. by Alan B. Lloyd (Singapore: Wiley &Sons, 2010), 971.
continued the ancient Egyptians traditions, which the Ptolemaic dynasty appropriated, which constitutes an “ongoing symbiosis of both cultures.” This blending afforded the Ptolemaic rulers authority in their rule over the Egyptians.

Arsinoë II, according to Egyptian sources, wielded a fair amount of power as a royal figure in Egypt. Her title, “King of Upper and Lower Egypt” signifies her as a pharaoh, however it remains unclear if this title was bestowed upon her posthumously or while she was living. This title does show at least a semblance of a sort of political power in the Egyptian government. Arsinoë even accompanied her brother and husband on the battlefield. Although the historical record remains ambiguous if she actually fought, her mere presence at the site of active war does demonstrate some sort of political existence. Along with her official title, this evidence begs the question of the extent of her power. Multiple Egyptian legal records, such as the record of a transaction of the sale of a young female slave, refer to her as “being [one of] those in office in Alexandria.” This shows that politically, Arsinoë must have held a certain amount of authority in order to be honored in an official legal document, seen on the battlefield, and awarded the title of ruler of Egypt. Scholar Grace Macurdy even describes Arsinoë as being “the directing power in the government” of Egypt. Another indication of Arsinoë’s power in the ancient world lies in Ptolemy’s grant of honors towards her, and the towns that were named after her. This allowed her reputation to spread farther than her mere physical presence could reach. Arsinoë also

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35 Katelijn Vandorpe, “Ptolemaic Period” in *Companion to Ancient Egypt* edited by Alan B. Lloyd (Singapore: Wiley & Sons, 2010), 178.
36 This practice was not generally done by Greek kings, and so historians such as Jan Quaegebeur have contended that her title reflected her power in Egyptian government. For more reflections upon this, see Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 19.
38 For a translation of the complete document, see Jane Rowlandson, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998),167. See page 248-249 for other examples, such as a document detailing a woman buying property and making a loan, of this.
exercised not only political, but also economic power, as records from papyri in Oxyrhynchus (circa 239-238 B.C.E) show that she transacted several loans. This record signifies that she maintained economic autonomy, and possessed the ability to manage her own financial affairs. In addition, she served as a patron in intellectual endeavors, influencing poets such as Theocritus. Theocritus linked both Berenice I and Arsinoë II, as he wrote poems that praised Berenice, yet Arsinoë commissioned him. Arsinoë’s social influence is significant as it contributes to her wide array of impacts across society. Through her marriage to her brother, Arsinoë became queen of Egypt, which allowed her to influence society in many considerable and lasting ways, both socially and politically.

Both Arsinoë and Berenice’s husbands deified them, although the impact of Arsinoë’s deification is arguably more prominent. Both women were recorded as “queenly priestesses” for their royal cult. Berenice I, while she was still living, had a temple dedicated to her as a goddess, where Egyptians would go to worship her. Both queens’ divine status and worship allowed these women to encompass a historically significant part of Egyptian society. Ptolemy II established a cult for Arsinoë after her death. This cult achieved prominence because Arsinoë herself received acceptance into the Egyptian tradition “when she entered the sacred enclosures of Memphis” which represented an integral religious center for Egypt. Her physical entrance into an Egyptian holy place strengthened her reputation and verified her power. “Egyptian religion had a concentration in the temples which existed as the “earthly dwellings of divine

41 Sarah B. Pomeroy, Women in Hellenistic Egypt, 55.
42 Sarah B. Pomeroy, Women in Hellenistic Egypt, 81.
43 Jane Rowlandson, Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt, 330.
45 For the entire list of queenly priestesses, see Jane Rowlandson, Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt, 61.
47 Jane Rowlandson, Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt, 30.
This action shows that she became constituted as a fundamental part of Egyptian religion. This direct influence in the religious sphere must have been important for Egyptians, because Arsinoë was depicted on temples as a deity. A stele, an Egyptian monument that honored someone or something, dating from around Arsinoë’s death describes her as a goddess. With religion being a huge part of the ancient and Hellenistic lives of Egyptians, including women, the impact definitely would have been felt. The fact that their husbands contributed to their reputation shows a definite divide between the power held by men and women, despite the powerful impact of the women themselves and their eminent positions.

The cultural and political milieu of Hellenistic Egypt made it possible for powerful women, such as Arsinoë II and Berenice I to achieve prominence and have social impact in areas such as religion, economics, and politics. Both rulers achieved a divine status, with Arsinoë being the first Hellenistic queen to achieve this during her own lifetime. Berenice embodied a remarkable rise to power: she was not royal by birth yet she achieved the title of queen of Egypt and goddess status. Arsinoë endured intense political strife in the beginning of her life, and went on to rule Egypt as queen, achieved divine standing during her lifetime, and used her economic power to affect literature. The history and traditions of Egypt in having strong woman rulers, education for their upper class women, and an egalitarianism of men and women relative to other parts of the ancient world, allowed for these women to achieve prominence not only during their lives, but also after death. Both queens, upon marriage to a Ptolemaic king, had considerable

50 See Jane Rowlandson, Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt, 28-30 for a more detailed explanation of religious and divine depictions of Arsinoë.
influence in economic, political, religious, and social matters in Hellenistic Egypt. Their reputation, which continues into the modern day, provides an example of how women could work inside of an inherently patriarchal system, drawing upon the advantages of their birth, standing, and connections. The theme of male connections, specifically as to marrying a Ptolemaic king, provides an interesting insight as to the patriarchal values of Hellenistic Egyptian society at the time, yet does not detract from the incredible capabilities and accomplishments of women rulers at this time.
Pictures:

Image 1 from Sarah B Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 61: (image of a terracotta figurine depicting a woman reading)

Image 2, source: Joyce E. Salisbury, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World*, 30 (image of a gem carving with a divine depiction of most probably Berenice I)
Bibliography


