

Warrior Queens of the Hellenistic World

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1 Introduction

Ancient imperial rulers resemble gangsters collecting protection money.¹ There are many similarities between the foremost dynasties of the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta, Campanian Camorra and Sicilian Cosa Nostra, and the Argeads, Antigonids, Ptolemies and Seleucids. This concerns most of all the elaborate, ritualistic ways in which these families embellish and glorify the violent foundations of their power (rather than covering them up). As one Italian judge said at a mass trial in Palermo in 1985–1986, “murder [...] is the means by which the organisation achieves its aims and affirms its power; the rest is mystification and lies”.² Another case in point is the central importance of gifts to ensure the allegiance of followers in both contexts, and of course the ideology of providing protection in return for loyalty and tribute.

I always felt that Clare Longrigg's interview-based book *Mafia Women* (1998) seemed to offer insights into the exceptional power enjoyed by Hellenistic royal women. In the absence of male clan leaders, their mothers, sisters, or wives often rose to prominence, especially when the organisation was family-based.³ Notorious ‘godmothers’ like Erminia Giuliano, Maria Angela di Trapani, and Maria Licciardi protected the interests of their families by assuming roles traditionally reserved for men, including the ritualised reception of petitioners and the management of violence. In the context of the Hellenistic monarchies—strongly family-based enterprises as well—royal women, too, crossed the line between female and male spheres with exceptional frequency.⁴

1 For a more elaborate exposition of the dynamic interrelationship of coercion and capital in ancient imperialism, see Strootman 2014, 49–53.

2 Stajano 1992, 71; quoted in Longrigg 1998, 11.

3 Longrigg 1998, xi–xii.

4 Macurdy 1932 is very dismissive of Hellenistic queens' political agency and especially their role in warfare (see below). Scholarly interest in the agency of royal women in the Argead, Seleucid, and Ptolemaic empires has increased vastly since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Carney and Müller 2021 offer no less than fifteen separate chapters on Hellenistic queens and aspects of Hellenistic queenship. See further e.g. Ogden 1999; Carney 2000; Strootman 2014; Bielman Sánchez, Cogitore and Kolb 2015. See also below, n. 45. That Hellenistic

In this chapter we will look at royal women's roles in the most male-dominated public sphere according to the normative texts and images from antiquity: warfare.⁵ Classical literature abounds with stories about barbaric warrior women, stressing these women's otherness,⁶ and about female citizens defending their homes against external aggressors—though the latter type of stories, too, may have moral dimensions (shaming alleged cowardly males, for instance). Some scholars have cautioned against overestimating the distinction between a male-dominated world of war and a female world beyond it; even when not actively participating in combat, they argue, women are regularly at the heart of military conflicts in various roles.⁷ That being said, military *leadership* is normally the prerogative of men. Yet in the Hellenistic period (fourth-first centuries BCE) we find a relatively high number of queens in command of armies or fleets, for instance Olympias, Arsinoë III, Teuta, Kleopatra VII, Amanirenase of Kush, and perhaps Salome Alexandra of Judea.⁸ How, and why, did royal women negotiate these boundaries?

In what follows, I will first present a source-based overview of noteworthy warrior queens from the so-called Hellenistic world. I hope to show that the phenomenon is not limited to the age of the Diadochs, but that it continued and further developed until the very end of the Hellenistic period. In conclusion, I discuss explanations found in modern scholarship for the prominence of warrior queens in the Hellenistic world (I speak of 'warrior queens' analogous to Hellenistic male rulers' common self-presentation as heroic 'spear fighters').⁹

I define 'Hellenistic world' geographically as the interconnected area between the eastern Mediterranean and the Himalayas (the cultural and political heart of the ancient world, roughly corresponding to the former Achae-

empires were in fact family-based enterprises is argued by Strootman 2014, 93–110; the 'clan'-based nature of the pre-Hellenistic Argead monarchy was emphasised by Carney 1995.

5 In the context of the classical polis, this morality is expressed by the common image in Attic vase painting of the warrior preparing to leave his home, assisted by a woman who hands him his armour and weapons (Lissarrague 2015; also see Fuhrer 2015 on the wide-spread image of women as spectators in war). Of course, polis cults offered female citizens a public sphere in which they not only participated alongside men but often assumed leading roles that both reinforced and challenged gender norms (Goff 2004; cf. Dillon 2002).

6 Evidence from steppe burials suggests that some Skythian and Sarmatian women indeed took part in military operations: see Melyukova 1990, 111–112; Mayor 2016.

7 See Ducrey 2015 and Payen 2015, both focusing on ancient Greece.

8 It is an interesting coincidence that the preeminent Roman example of a leading 'warrior woman', is Fulvia, who was involved in the Perusine War (41 BCE) as the representative of her husband, Rome's 'Hellenistic king' Mark Antony; on Fulvia's military activities, see Hallett 2015.

9 See e.g. Barbantani 2010.

menid Empire's sphere of influence), with its extensive Inner Asian, West Mediterranean, and African peripheries, from the mid-fourth century BCE to the early first century CE. The main examples come from Argead Macedonia, the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Middle East, and Meroitic Kush. The Antigonid Empire is conspicuous by its apparent lack of prominent women after the death of Phila I in 287, as are the minor dynasties of Hellenistic Anatolia and Armenia.¹⁰ Hellenistic Illyria on the other hand has its queen Teuta, whose expansionist activities in the Adriatic provided the Romans with a justification to embark upon their Illyrian Wars.¹¹ The Arsacid dynasty has one prominent queen in the later Hellenistic period, Mousa, who ruled the Parthian Empire for her son Phraates V from 2 BCE to 4 CE; but for all we know she never engaged in military activities, at least not directly.¹² The Hasmonean queen Salome Alexandra (reigned 76–67 BCE), on the other hand, is known to have launched military campaigns against “the nations roundabout”.¹³ The Mauryan and Greco-Bactrian dynasties in Central Asia lack sufficient narrative sources to evaluate the role of royal women in these families.¹⁴

2 Argead Royal Women

Late fourth-century Macedonia offers the highest density of powerful women of any period in antiquity.¹⁵ The first Argead queen to have a strong public role as representative of the dynasty was Eurydike, the wife of Amyntas III and mother of Philip II.¹⁶ Eurydike is also the first for whom military activities

10 On Antigonid queens, see Carney 2021a; cf. id. 1987, 501–502 n. 14: “the extremely military nature of the subsequent power struggle [in Macedonia] necessarily eliminated royal women from real political power.” The agency of royal women in the Anatolian kingdoms in the context of Seleucid imperialism has been studied recently by *i.a.* D’Agostini 2013 and McAuley 2017. On queenship in the Attalid kingdom, see Mirón 2021.

11 Derow 2003, 51–54; Eckstein 2008, 29–76.

12 Madreiter and Hartmann 2021, 238–240.

13 See below.

14 We do have two references to female royal guards in Mauryan India: Megasthenes FGrH 715 F 32 *ap.* Strabo 15.1.55 claims that at the Mauryan court “the care of the king’s person is committed to women”, and describes how armed women accompany the king during the hunt. In the *Arthaśāstra* attributed to Kautilya (1.21.1) women warriors guard the king’s bedchamber; for the Hellenistic-period origins of this text, see Trautmann 1971.

15 See generally on Argead royal women, Macurdy 1932, 13–76; Carney 2000, 2019; Müller 2021a.

16 As noted first by Greenwalt 1988, 41–44, *contra* Macurdy 1927; cf. Carney 1993, 19 n. 1. On Eurydike and her role in Argead dynastic representation, see now Carney 2019.

have been recorded: through her Greek *philia* network she hired mercenaries to expel a pretender who had invaded Macedonia.¹⁷

Political history after Alexander's death is notoriously confusing. Important to note for now is that for five years there simultaneously were two Argead kings: Alexander's half-brother Arrhidaios, whose throne name was Philippos; and Alexander's son by Roxane, Alexander IV. The relative weakness of the two kings—Philip III Arrhidaios was mentally limited and Alexander IV quite young (he was not yet born when the Macedonian assembly proclaimed him king in Babylon)—offered opportunities to the strongminded women of the dynasty, including Alexander's mother Olympias; her daughter with Philip II, Kleopatra; and Philip's (grand)daughters from other marriages, Kynnane, Adea, and Thessalonike. As we will see, there is more to their rise than historical coincidence: the royal women in successor dynasties with no lack of able male rulers, too, played remarkably significant roles in political history, e.g. Amastris, Apama, Phila, Arsinoe II, and many more. We will not discuss all of them, of course, especially since not all of these powerful women qualify as 'warrior queens'. Not only did these women perform representational roles in the public sphere, they also often had leading political, economic, and indeed military responsibilities.¹⁸

Let us begin with the best-known case from the Argead context, Olympias. As widow of Philip II and mother of Alexander III, the Molossian-born Olympias was already a powerful figure during her son's reign. In his absence she appears to have served as the head of the Argead *oikos*—and perhaps as a counterweight to Antipatros, commander-in-chief of the Macedonian armed forces in Europe after Alexander's departure to Asia in 334.¹⁹ In 331/30 BCE, although she did not have the title of 'Queen' (*basilissa*)—no Argead royal women had such a title at that time as it had not yet been invented—Olympias represented her son as monarch when she dedicated spoils at Delphi.²⁰ She became an active participant in the power struggles after Alexander's death, when the warlord Polyperchon urged her to assume the *epimeleia* and *prostasia* of her grandson, the minor king Alexander IV.²¹ She returned to Macedonia with an army

17 Aeschin. 2.27–29; Nep. II.3.2. On Eurydike and the Athenian mercenary captain Iphikrates, see Carney 2019, 38–40, 64–67.

18 Carney 2004 offers a thorough discussion of Argead warrior queens and princesses. I was unable to consult Pillonel 2008.

19 Olympias' conflict with Antipatros, which caused her to withdraw to her native land Epeiros after c. 330, is mentioned by Plut. *Alex.* 39.13; *Mor.* 180d; Diod. Sic. 17.118.1, cf. 19.11.9; Curt. 10.10.14. On her career, see Macurdy 1932, 22–44; Carney 2006.

20 *SIG*³ 252. On the introduction of the title *basilissa*, see Carney 1991.

21 Diod. Sic. 18.49.4, 57.2.

provided by her nephew, the Molossian king. Douris, Justin, and Pausanias all say that Olympias was in overall command of the campaign.²² At the final confrontation with the forces of her rival, Adea-Eurydike—the young wife of king Philip III Arrhidaïos, and a famous Hellenistic warrior queen herself (discussed below)—she was personally present on the battlefield. Our sources agree that when the opposing Macedonian troops recognised Olympias, they changed their allegiance to her.²³ This implies that Olympias was at the head of the army, regardless of who was in effective command; and that Macedonian commanders and troops accepted her leadership. Athenaeus, quoting Douris, gives a fanciful description of the queens confronting each other at the Battle of Euia:

Douris of Samos says that the first war between two women was that between Olympias and Eurydike. In this Olympias advanced something in the manner of a Bacchant, to the sound of drums-beats, while Eurydike came forward armed in the Macedonian manner, having received a military training from (her mother) Kynnane the Illyrian.²⁴

Philip III and Adea-Eurydike were captured alive and later executed by Olympias, who also began eliminating her other enemies in Macedonia. Perhaps as a result of her harsh rule, she lost support among the Macedonian aristocracy and soon found herself besieged in Pydna. Again, it is clear that she was in command of her own troops.²⁵ The garrison however was starved into surrender and Olympias put to death.²⁶

Let us now briefly look at Olympias' female opponent in the Battle of Euia, Adea-Eurydike. She and her mother, Kynnane,²⁷ have become classic instances of historical warrior women in the modern perception. Kynnane was herself the daughter of Philip II and his Illyrian wife, Audata. Polyaeus reports that Kynnane accompanied her father on a campaign in the Balkans and that she defeated an Illyrian queen in single combat:

Philip's daughter Kynnane used to undergo military training, lead armies and face enemies in battle. When she faced the Illyrians she brought down

22 Douris *FGrH* 76 F 52 *ap.* Ath. 56of (13.10); Just. *Epit.* 14.5.9; Paus. 1.11.3–4. Diod. Sic. 19.11.2 less convincingly places Polyperchon at the head of the Molossian army.

23 The showdown took place at a place called Euia in 317 or 316 BCE.

24 Ath. 13.560–561.

25 Diod. Sic. 19.36.1–6; Just. *Epit.* 14.6.4; Polyaeus, *Strat.* 4.11.3.

26 Diod. Sic. 19.49–51; Just. *Epit.* 14.6.5–12.

27 On Kynnane, see Macurdy 1932, 48–50; Heckel 1984; Ogden 1999, 16–26; Carney 2000, 69–70, 129–131.

their queen with a well-timed blow to the neck and killed large numbers of Illyrians as they fled.²⁸

Philip married her to his nephew, Amyntas, the son of Philip's predecessor as king, Perdikkas III. When Alexander shortly after his accession executed Amyntas (who was a potential claimant to the throne), Kynnane remained unmarried and gave her daughter by Amyntas, Adea, a similar military training as she herself had received.²⁹ After Alexander's death in Babylon, Kynnane apparently commanded enough support and wealth to assemble a small army and march east, hoping to marry Adea to the new king, her half-brother, Philip III Arrhidaios. Polyaeus writes:

Antipatros tried to stop her, but she overpowered the forces blocking her way and crossed the river. Then, defeating those in her path, she crossed the Hellespont, for she wished to join up with the Macedonian army.³⁰

Kynnane was slain by the Macedonian army's commander in 322/1, but Adea still married Arrhidaios because the troops supported her cause.³¹ Adea, took the Argead dynastic name Eurydike upon her marriage. In terms of dynastic legitimacy, she and Arrhidaios were the power couple par excellence of the Diadoch era. As respectively the son and granddaughter of Philip II they both were the heirs to his *basileia*, while Adea in addition was the granddaughter and only heir of Perdikkas III (in the Macedonian dynasties, kingship was transmitted also in the matriline). In 319 Adea allied herself to Kassandros son of Antipatros, a powerful warlord in search of legitimacy. She then led an army against Olympias, who had become the guardian of her grandson, Alexander IV. The Battle at Euia as we have seen ended with Adea's downfall when her Macedonian troops went over to Olympias.³²

There may exist some remarkable archaeological evidence for Adea's military persona. The richly decorated Tomb II inside the Great Tumulus at Vergina consists of two rooms, a main burial chamber and an antechamber, in which

28 Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.60, transl. Yardley.

29 Douris *ap.* Ath. 13.560–561; Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.60.

30 Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.60, transl. Yardley.

31 Arr. *FGrH* 156 F 9.22–24. On Adea-Eurydike, see Macurdy 1932, 48–52; Carney 1987 and 2000, 132–137. Adea is the most interesting character in Mary Renault's novel *Funeral Games* (1981); it should be only a matter of time before the first young adult novel will appear about the life of the Badass Teenage Queen of Ancient Macedonia.

32 Carney 1987, 502 attributes Adea's downfall to her failure to produce a male heir to assure the support of the nobility.



FIGURE 1.1 'Skythian'-style gilded *gorytos* (combined bow case and quiver) from the antechamber of Tomb II at Vergina (replica)
AFTER VOKOTOPOULOU 1983, P. 221 NO. 259

the cremated remains of respectively a middle-aged man and a young woman were uncovered by Manolis Andronikos and his team in 1977–1979. Though controversy about the identity of the buried remains, most archaeologists and historians now seem to settle for Philip III and Adea (rather than Philip II and an unidentified young wife, as Andronikos believed).³³ Among the grave gifts in the antechamber were a number of weapons and pieces of armour: two gold-trimmed iron spear heads, a pair of gilded bronze greaves, a piece of pectoral armour covered with gilded silver, and the gilded outer covering of a *gorytus* (a case for bow and arrows) decorated with a Greek-style depiction of the fall of a city (fig. 1.1).³⁴ If the arms and armour in the antechamber were intended for

33 See Andronikos 1984. Already in 1980, Lehman suggested that the inhabitant of Tomb II more plausibly was Arrhidaios, not his father, and that the young woman buried near him therefore must have been Adea; we are indeed told that the royal pair was buried in Aigai (Vergina) by Kassandros: Diyllos, *FGrH* 73 F 1 *ap.* Ath. 4.155a; Diod. Sic. 19.52.5. The number of publications has since expanded enormously. In 1984, Musgrave et al. published osteological research that to their mind proved that the inhabitant of Tomb II was Philip II (and on which the famous reconstruction of the face by Richard Neave was based), but this was refuted by Bartsiakos in 2000 (see however Musgrave et al. 2010; Antikas and Wynn-Antikas 2015). Borza and Palagia 2008 adduced stylistic arguments to show that Tomb II postdated Alexander, and that the most likely candidate was Arrhidaios. Carney 2016 focuses on the identity of the female buried in the antechamber, making a convincing case that she is Adea.

34 In terms of style, the *gorytus* looks 'Skythian' and the pectoral Thracian; they may have been gifts or even war booty.

the woman buried there,³⁵ this is not proof that she actually engaged in combat; but it does show that she was commemorated as a heroic warrior woman, an image that was fitting for the Illyrian identity that the Greek sources give Adea, even though her ethnicity first of all was Macedonian and Argead (only her grandmother was actually Illyrian).³⁶

A last example from the context of the Argead Empire, is Kratesipolis. She was the wife of Alexandros, the son of Polyperchon (Olympias' ally in the struggle for power after the death of Alexander), who commanded the Macedonian garrisons at Sikyon and Corinth. When her husband was assassinated in 314 BCE, Kratesipolis assumed command of his troops, with whom, as Diodoros writes, she was popular on account of her kindness.³⁷ Diodoros also praises her political skills and bravery, and says that when the people of Sikyon took up arms to drive the garrison from their city,

she drew up her forces against them and defeated them with great slaughter, but arrested and crucified about thirty. When she had a firm hold on the city, she governed the Sikyonians, maintaining many soldiers, who were ready for any emergency.³⁸

In 308, however, she was forced to give up the citadel of Corinth to Ptolemy I, and withdrew her forces to Patras. After a failed attempt in the following year to join forces with Demetrios (and perhaps marry him), Kratesipolis disappears from our sources.³⁹

Olympias, Kynneane, Adea, and Kratesipolis are the main examples of royal women leading armies during campaigns; but there are at least two more instances of royal woman in command of military forces even as they may not have been present on the field of battle themselves. The first is Olympias' daughter Kleopatra, Alexander's full sister and the last surviving heir of Philip II's *basileia*. She ruled the kingdom of Epeiros in the absence of her husband, the Molossian king Alexander I, and after his death in 331/0 became regent for their minor son.⁴⁰ Her later, important role in the struggle for power among the Diadochs seems not to have involved any significant military activity on her part.⁴¹ The second is Amastris, a scion of the Achaemenid royal house who

35 Hammond 1991, followed by Antikas and Wynn-Antikas 2015; Carney 2016.

36 See Carney 2016, 127–129.

37 Diod. Sic. 19.67.1.

38 Diod. Sic. 19.67.2.

39 Plut. *Demetr.* 9.

40 Whitehorne 1994, 58–60; Carney 2000, 75–76.

41 On the last phase of her career, see Meeus 2009; Müller 2021b.

became the ruler of Herakleia in Pontos after the death of her second husband, the tyrant Dionysios.⁴² She was the first queen ever to issue coins in her own name, bearing the legend ΑΜΑΣΤΡΙΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ (“[coin] of Queen Amastris”).⁴³ She founded a new city in Paphlagonia, named Amastris after herself, and ruled there from c. 300.⁴⁴ Again, no military activity has been recorded for her, but it is clear that she was in command of the armed forces of Amastris’ city until her assassination in c. 284.

3 Ptolemaic Warrior Queens

The Diadoch period saw the beginning of the development of female power and visibility that would become a more established practice in the Hellenistic period. In both the Seleucid and the Ptolemaic empires, royal women were extraordinarily visible in the public space as emblems and active agents of their dynasties (less so in the Antigonid monarchy after the reign of Demetrios I).⁴⁵ They receive civic honours, appear on coins and in the public rituals of monarchy, and in Egypt they are depicted on temples. They frequently oversee the political, diplomatic, and military affairs of the monarchies they represent. This happened more often than is usually accepted by modern historians. For not only did royal women in the Hellenistic empires sometimes ‘rule’ as regents for their minor sons after the death of their husbands, they also regularly served as the focal points of diplomatic affairs while the husband was elsewhere. For instance, Berenike II stayed behind as ruler in Alexandria while Ptolemy III went to war against the Seleucids in 246.⁴⁶ The best-attested

42 See Van Oppen 2020; D’Agostini 2020; Ramsey 2021, 192–193.

43 Van Oppen 2020; cf. De Callatay 2004. The obverse of these remarkable ‘Persianistic’ coins shows a youthful, beardless head wearing a Phrygian cap or Achaemenid satrapal *kyrbasia*; and on reverse an enthroned goddess with royal sceptre (most likely Aphrodite-Anahita; on ‘Persianistic’ dynastic identities in the Hellenistic period, see Strootman and Versluys 2017).

44 Cohen 1995, 383–384.

45 See Macurdy 1932; Whitehorne 1994, 80–196; Müller 2009; Bielman Sánchez and Lenzo 2015; Van Oppen 2015; Coşkun and McAuley 2016; Carney 2018; Hämmerling 2019; Llewellyn-Jones and McAuley 2019; cf. n. 4. On the political agency of royal women in the Hellenistic empires, see Strootman 2021.

46 Callimachus fr. 110 Pfeiffer (‘The Lock of Berenike’, preserved in its entirety in a Latin adaptation by Catullus [*Carm.* 66]). Berenike II is the first Ptolemaic queen to appear alongside the male ruler as *Per-aat Pr-ʿ3.t*, the feminine form of ‘pharaoh’, in the opening lines of official Demotic papyri (Bielman Sánchez and Joliton 2019, 72). The title *basilissa* has also been attested for her, but by this time that title was no longer restricted to first queens and

example is Laodike III who represented the Seleucid dynasty in Asia Minor while her husband, Antiochos III, campaigned in the east.⁴⁷ This ad hoc policy of splitting up the court made big empires more manageable. A century before the activity of Laodike in Asia Minor, her Iranian ancestress Apama, co-founder of the Seleucid dynasty and the second Hellenistic queen for whom the title of *basilissa* has been recorded, was honoured by the *demos* of Miletos with a statue for the 'goodwill and kindness' she had shown towards Milesian troops who had fought for Seleukos I in the east.⁴⁸

The Seleucid and Ptolemaic polities were entangled imperial systems. The two rival empires constantly interacted with each other through conflict, diplomacy, and dynastic marriage. This, combined with their shared Macedonian background, shared reliance on Aegean cities for capital and manpower, and a shared Achaemenid legacy explains why royal women in both dynasties developed comparable agencies on the imperial level, despite various localised differences in form. Two rival queens, Berenike and Laodike—the first a Ptolemaic princess, the second a Seleucid (from the Anatolian branch of the family)—played leading roles in the outbreak of the Third Syrian War (246–241), a succession conflict after the death of the Seleucid king Antiochos II.⁴⁹ Laodike moreover seems to have orchestrated the conflict underlying the so-called War of the Brothers between her two sons, Seleukos II and Antiochos Hierax.⁵⁰ The clearest examples of royal women directly involved in warfare, however, come from the Ptolemaic context, where queens had command of military forces to a degree not seen among the Seleucids. As we cannot discuss all of them, we will highlight four well-attested cases: Arsinoe III and Kleopatra II, IV, and VII.

Polybius tells us as a matter of course that the Ptolemaic army at the Battle of Raphia (22 June 217) was led by Ptolemy IV and his sister, Arsinoe III; he adds

could also be given to princesses of the main line; see Müller 2021c, 84 with n. 3. In 244/3, Berenike and her brother-husband, Ptolemy III, appear as deified Theoi Euergetai on the Kanopos Decree (OGIS 56, l. 8); cf. Pfeiffer 2002, 2004, 16–17. On the career and queenship of Berenike II, see Clayman 2014; Van Oppen 2015.

47 Austin 1981, no. 156; SEG 26.1226 (c. 195 BCE). A similar role could be played by the courts of 'viceroys' such as Achaïos or Zeuxis.

48 I. Didyma 480 (299/8 BCE). Four new attempts to understand Apama's role in the establishment of the Seleucid Empire recently appeared: Widmer 2015; Engels and Erickson 2016; Harders 2016; Plischke 2016; Ramsey 2016. On the role of queens as royal 'favourites', see Strootman 2017.

49 The war was known to contemporaries as the Laodikean War (I. Priene 37, l. 134: Λαοδίκειος πόλεμος); Berenike was killed at the beginning of the war. On the outbreak of the war, see Coşkun 2016.

50 Plut. *Mor.* 18.

that after the troops had been drawn up in battle order, Arsinoe and Ptolemy rode before them to “inspire them with spirit and courage” and promised them rich rewards if they were victorious—a role normally reserved for the king or other commander-in-chief; her responsibility thus was more than just symbolic and she and her brother were equally important in inspiring the troops by their presence.⁵¹ The account of the Battle of Raphia in Third Maccabees closely resembles Polybius’ but paints a more vivid picture of Arsinoe’s role, which is now placed at the height of the battle:

When a bitter fight resulted, and matters were turning out rather in favor of Antiochos (III), Arsinoe went to the troops with wailing and tears, her locks all disheveled, and exhorted them to defend themselves and their children and wives bravely, promising to give them each two minas of gold if they won the battle. And so it came about that the enemy was routed in the action, and many captives also were taken.⁵²

Both texts imply that Arsinoe rode a horse like her brother. That Ptolemaic royal women’s horsemanship was a conceivable thing is confirmed by a tale told by Hyginus about Berenike II (who had Ptolemaic and Seleucid ancestry),⁵³ incidentally placing her in the midst of a battle as a matter of course:

Once Ptolemy, Berenike’s father, in panic at the number of the enemy, had sought safety in flight, but his daughter, an accomplished horsewoman, leaped on a horse, organized the remaining troops, killed many of the enemy, and put the rest to flight.⁵⁴

On the lunette at the top of the Raphia Stele, Arsinoe wearing the headdress of an Egyptian goddess stands behind a mounted Ptolemy, dressed as a pharaoh on the stele from Memphis and as a Macedonian king on the one from Pithom,

51 Polyb. 5.83.3–84.1; transl. Paton. Carney 2004, 184, distinguishes three categories of female military leadership: battlefield command, symbolic leadership, and administrative leadership; but I think that our examples show that such a division is too strict.

52 3Macc. 1.4–5; transl. NRSV. Note that Arsinoe’s tears and reference to children and wives gives her a role that is both masculine and feminine. Arsinoe III reportedly followed the example of her mother, Berenike II, and dedicated a lock of hair to ensure victory, too, perhaps before the Raphia Campaign; see Müller 2021c, 87 with the references in n. 34. For an in-depth analysis of the battle description in 3 Maccabees, see O’Kernick 2018.

53 Clayman 2014, 157; Carney 2016, 115.

54 Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 2.24.3; transl. Grant. From the text preceding this passage it is clear that Berenike II is meant (whose father in fact was Magas of Kyrene); note however the similarity to the story about Arsinoe III in 3 Maccabees.



FIGURE 1.2 The so-called 'Mistress of the Sea' mosaic from Thmuis (Tmai el-Amdid) in the Nile Delta, showing the face of Berenike II with a warship-shaped headdress
GRECO-ROMAN MUSEUM, ALEXANDRIA

striking down an enemy with a cavalry lance.⁵⁵ As queen, Arsinoe, too, was responsible for maintaining peace and order. This function of the Ptolemaic queen finds confirmation in an epigram of Posidippus on the dedication of a linen cloth adorned with a depiction of Arsinoe II as warrior;⁵⁶ the image cannot be connected to a specific historical event and therefore likely refers to the heroic nature of the Ptolemaic monarchy in a more generic sense.⁵⁷ It brings to mind the famous Queen of the Sea mosaic from Thmuis, probably showing the face of Berenike II with a warship as headdress (fig. 1.2).

55 CG 31088 and 50048.

56 Posidippus, *Ep.* 36 (*Anathematika*).

57 Seidensticker, Stähli, Wessels 2015, 160.

Further developing the precedent set by several of her predecessors, Kleopatra II ruled the Ptolemaic Empire as the equal of her husband-brother, Ptolemy VI Philometor from c. 180.⁵⁸ After her brother's death in 145 she married her younger brother, Ptolemy VIII Euergetes, who later also married her daughter, another Kleopatra (III), so that there were now three sibling rulers at the same time.⁵⁹ Sally-Ann Ashton comments, "being a woman had its benefits and Kleopatra II was the constant member of any alliance, her unenviable role in fact allowing her more flexibility and power than either of her brothers".⁶⁰ Kleopatra II fought a war against this younger brother, and established herself as sole ruler in 132. The conflict, in which also the Seleucids became involved, ended in 124 BCE when the joint rule of Kleopatra II, Ptolemy VIII, and Kleopatra III was re-established.

Kleopatra IV was briefly joint ruler with her own full brother, Ptolemy IX. When she was deposed in favour of a younger sister, she fled to Syria, where she raised an army to win back her throne, and allied herself to the Seleucid pretender Antiochos IX, whom she married.⁶¹ This alliance, however, got her involved in Seleucid dynastic war and in 112 Kleopatra IV's army was defeated and she was executed while still in Syria.⁶²

The growing prominence of the queen in the Ptolemaic monarchy culminated in the remarkable reign of Kleopatra VII Philopator (51–30 BCE). She first officially shared the throne with respectively her two brothers Ptolemy XIII and XIV, and during the final years of her rule with her minor son, Ptolemy XV ('Caesarion'). But in between these periods of joint rulership was an exceptional, eight-year interlude of sole rule (44–36 BCE). There is no need to summarise her reign here. Like her predecessors, her dynastic and personal charisma won her the support of courtiers and troops in internal and external conflicts. In alliance with Caesar and later Antony, she set about to restore the Ptolemaic Empire in the eastern Mediterranean.⁶³ In her early reign, she had her own army with which she fought the faction of her brother, Ptolemy XIII, in

58 Macurdy 1932, 147–161; Whitehorne 1994, 103–131.

59 "The situation of the two queens, mother and daughter, married to the same man", Macurdy writes, "is the most revolting of all the shames of the house of the Ptolemies" (1932, 158).

60 Ashton 2008, 28.

61 Just. *Epit.* 39.3.3.

62 Antiochos VIII, the dynastic rival of Kleopatra IV's husband Antiochos IX, was married (to complicate matters) to another of her sisters, Kleopatra Tryphaina, who reportedly ordered the execution (Just. *Epit.* 39.3.10–11). On Kleopatra III and her daughters, see Macurdy 1932, 161–170; Whitehorne 1994, 132–148.

63 Schrapel 1996.

the Alexandrian War (48–47).⁶⁴ And at very end of her reign, she was present at the Battle of Actium in 31 with her own fleet, which consisted of Egyptian and Phoenician ships and crews.⁶⁵ Though the ancient sources are generally dismissive of her participation in the battle—her alleged retreat from it was cited by many Roman and pro-Roman authors as the main cause of Antony's defeat—they describe her presence with the Ptolemaic forces in a matter-of-fact manner.⁶⁶ Writing in the second century CE, Florus says that the queen was present on a “gilded ship with purple-dyed sails”; Cassius Dio later claimed that during the battle Kleopatra's flagship remained anchored behind the battle line.⁶⁷

Plutarch has Kleopatra herself explain why her presence during the campaign was necessary:

It was not right (she said) to banish from the war a woman who made such contributions [to the war effort] and that it was not advantageous to dishearten the Egyptians, since they were a large part of the naval force, and, in addition, that Kleopatra was no less intelligent than any of the kings fighting alongside Antony [as] she had been governing such a great monarchy for a long time.⁶⁸

Plutarch moreover claims that it was Kleopatra who insisted on fighting a naval battle.⁶⁹ Though we cannot be sure if Ptolemaic influence on the course of the campaign was really that big, that would indeed be a very Ptolemaic course of action.⁷⁰ Stanley Burstein has given a fair evaluation of Kleopatra's role in the campaign:

Cleopatra played a prominent role when hostilities actually began in 31 B.C.E., commanding the Egyptian fleet in person and participating openly in Antony's war council. [...] Cleopatra's ships formed the core of his fleet, and it was her wealth that paid his troops. Some of his

64 Caes. *B Civ.* 3.103.

65 Plut. *Ant.* 64.2.

66 She had earlier personally led her fleet in support of Antony and Octavian against Cassius, but the operation was abandoned before the ships could see military action; see App. *B Civ.* 4.10.82.

67 Flor. 2.21.8; Dio Cass. 50.33. Also see Hor. *Carm.* 1.37; Verg. *Aen.* 8.685–688, 707–710.

68 Plut. *Ant.* 56.2–3; transl. Jones 2006.

69 Plut. *Ant.* 62.1, 63.5.

70 For an analysis of the Ptolemaic as a naval empire, see Strootman 2019.

Asian allies may even have seen in her the agent of their revenge for all the suffering brought on them by almost a century of Roman oppression.⁷¹

The fact that the ships of Kleopatra's and Antony's fleet carried their sails with them, rather than leaving them on the shore for the course of the battle, suggests that it had been the plan to break away and fight another day.⁷²

4 Other Warrior Queens in the Later Hellenistic Period

In the late Hellenistic period, sole rule by queens recurred in some of the minor, non-Macedonian dynasties. I include these queens in order to complicate the image of warrior queens as a typical 'Macedonian' phenomenon which may have arisen from the preceding pages. The best-known of these is the Hasmonean queen Salome Alexandra. In the *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus describes her reign (from 76 to 67 BCE) as generally peaceful.⁷³ His *Jewish War*, however, contains a passage stating that Salome Alexandra 'doubled the size of her army [and] amassed a considerable body of foreign troops that she used to strengthen her nation, [and] struck fear in the surrounding nations and became their master',⁷⁴ and for this reason a recent popularising account of her reign could present her as a "warrior monarch".⁷⁵

No military activities have been recorded for late Hellenistic regnant queens such as Dynamis of the Bosphorus (sole rule 14–16 and 9/8 BCE–c. 7/8 CE) or Shaqilar, from 70–75/6 CE regent of her underage son Rabbel II, the last Nabataean king before the Roman annexation.⁷⁶ But their status as sole rulers implies that they were accepted by their kingdoms' military leaders and troops.

⁷¹ Burstein 2004, 30.

⁷² Plut. *Ant.* 64.2; Dio Cass. 50.31.2. That Antony and Kleopatra were aiming to break out rather than achieve a naval victory was suggested by Kromayer 1899, 35; against this view, see Lange 2011.

⁷³ Joseph. *AJ* 13.409, 429, 432; on Salome Alexandra's position as queen in the context of Hasmonean rulership, see Wilker 2016.

⁷⁴ Joseph. *BJ* 1.112.

⁷⁵ Atkinson 2012.

⁷⁶ Shaqilar (sometimes spelled Shuqailat) issued coins with the jugate portrait of herself and her son; see Meshorer 1975, 71–76.

5 Warrior Queens of Meroitic Kush

The last queens who merit our attention are the *kandakes* ('queens') of Meroitic Kush. Five regnant queens from the Hellenistic-period kingdom of Meroe on the Upper Nile are attested epigraphically on their tombs at Meroe, in present-day Sudan (and four more from later centuries).⁷⁷ There is some additional information in Greek-language narrative sources,⁷⁸ including the following account by Strabo of a Roman-Meroitic war in the late first century BCE. Kushites troops had attacked and plundered the Egyptian frontier town of Syene (Aswan) in c. 25 BCE. At this occasion the Kushites may have taken the head of a bronze statue of Octavian that was later found buried under the steps of a temple at Meroe, and is now in the British Museum.⁷⁹ After describing two punitive raids into Kush by the prefect of Egypt, C. Petronius, in 24 and 22, and the establishment of a Roman garrison at the fortress Premnis (Qasr Ibrim), Strabo writes that,

Kandake, the queen of the Aithiopians in our time, was a masculine woman, who had lost an eye (in battle). [...] She attacked the (Roman) garrison with an army of many thousand men. Petronius came to its assistance, and entering the fortress before the approach of the enemy, secured the place by many expedients. The enemy sent ambassadors, but he ordered them to go to Caesar (Octavian) instead. They arrived at Samos, where Caesar was at that time [...]. The ambassadors obtained all that they desired, and Caesar even remitted the tribute which he had imposed.⁸⁰

The outcome of the negotiations shows that the Romans were not as successful as Strabo claims they were (though the fact that the envoys travelled *to* the Roman emperor from a Roman point of view was a sign of submission).

77 See the tables in Soulé-Nan 2002, 272 and 286–287. On Meroitic queenship, see Török 1997, 443–448; Lohwasser 2021.

78 On Greek perceptions of Northeast Africa in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, see now Burstein 2021b, with the sources collected in Burstein 1998, 23–61; also see Török, 2014. A note on terminology: Kush is the ancient Egyptian name for the Lower Nile region, sometimes called Nubia by the Greeks (though Nubia *stricto sensu* is the Nilotic region between Egypt and Kush); Meroe is the modern term for the kingdom centred on the city of that name from c. 600 BCE to 400 CE; 'Aithiopians' is the generic Greek designation for the peoples of Upper Nile Africa (cf. Burstein 2021a).

79 BM 1911,0901.1. On the Roman-Kushite War, see Török 1997, 448–455.

80 Strabo 17.1.54; transl. H.C. Hamilton.

The Meroitic monarchy practised matrilineal succession; the title *kdke* or *ktke* (*kandake/kadake, kentake*; Greek Κανδάκη) indicated a sister of the ruler whose son would be the next king but could also rule herself as regent.⁸¹ In contrast to *qore*, which could designate both a female and a male ruler, *kandake* is a title exclusively used for royal women.⁸² Strabo misapprehends *kandake* as a personal name.⁸³ Two queens known from inscriptions can possibly be identified with Strabo's 'Kandake': Amanirenase (or Amanikhabale) and Amanishakheto; both bear the titles of *qore* and *kandake*, which suggests that they were simultaneously queen mothers and rulers in their own right.⁸⁴ An Egyptianising relief beside the entrance of Amanishakheto's pyramid tomb depicts the queen in the act of spearing captured enemies, an act reserved for a male ruler in traditional Egyptian royal art (fig. 1.3).⁸⁵ However, unlike ruling queens from pharaonic (pre-Hellenistic) Egypt, Amanishakheto is not presented as male.⁸⁶

Despite its strong connectedness to other regions of the ancient world, the kingdom of Meroe does not often feature in standard narratives of ancient history, which still tends to focus on Mediterranean cultures and peoples. Solange Ashby recently summarised this problem in a paper on Kushite and Meroitic queens (whose relative neglect she contrasts to the greater interest in Egyptian queens):

The omission of Kushite queens from an analysis of female power in the ancient world could be due to two factors: first, Egyptologists tend not to know much about Kush; second, Egypt has been associated with the Mediterranean world, while Kush is relegated to Africa. For as long as the discipline of Egyptology has been around, there has been a division between those who would see ancient Egypt as part of the Near East, the biblical world, the eastern Mediterranean (...) and those who seek to situate ancient Egypt in its African context.⁸⁷

81 Priese 1968; on the importance of the queen-mother in ancient Kush, see Kahn 2012.

82 Lohwasser 2021, 64.

83 As does the author of Acts 8:27: 'So he started out, and on his way he met a high-ranking Ethiopian eunuch, the treasurer of Kandake, queen of the Ethiopians.'

84 Lohwasser 2021, 68; cf. Soulé-Nan 2002, 286–287, preferring Amanishakheto.

85 Lepsius 1849–1859, vol. 10, pl. 40.

86 Cf. Ashby 2021, 31: 'ruling queens of Meroe were extravagant in the depiction of their powerful feminine presence, [which] suggested physical power.'

87 Ashby 2021, 24; cf. Török 1998.



FIGURE 1.3 Queen Amanishakheto of Kush spearing captured enemies. Relief from her tomb at Meroe

DRAWING BY ERNST WEIDENBACH; LEPSIUS 1849–1859, VOL. 10, PL. 40

By including Meroitic queens in my discussion of 'Hellenistic' queens, I aim to make a statement, and bridge the artificial divide between ancient Mediterranean studies and African studies. For notwithstanding the unfortunate Hellenocentrism implied in the established term 'Hellenistic', the notion of a Hellenistic World has the benefit that in contrast to most other fields within the study of ancient history it does include Northeast Africa and the wider Indian Ocean region (as well as Iran and Central Asia).⁸⁸ In the recent, more neutral use of the adjective as primarily a reference to a period, Meroitic queens, too, deserve our attention in the context of ancient queenship.

6 Explaining Female Power in the Hellenistic Period

That female rule could be seen as transgressive behaviour is clear from the negative image Hellenistic queens often have in the Greek and Roman literary sources,⁸⁹ especially Olympias and Kleopatra VII. But as Carney pointed out, these very same sources also unwittingly show that the military roles of Macedonian queens were accepted by the Macedonian nobility and army.⁹⁰

Various explanations have been adduced to explain the wide acceptance of female rule in the Hellenistic period. These tend to emphasise either the cultural-specific backdrop of the queens in question, in particular the forms of monarchy of which they were part, or the historical conditions in which they rose to prominence. That we should look to the specific historical circumstances and assess each individual in her own right to avoid generalisations, is a point consistently made by Elizabeth Carney in her many publications on late Argead royal women. Similarly, Clare Longrigg in her book on Mafia women, wrote that,

women in Camorra families frequently find themselves answering the family's needs, stepping into the breach when the boss is in prison or in hiding. But the role they assume depends on their force of character, and the rivalries that already exist within the family.⁹¹

88 The potential greater inclusiveness of Hellenistic Studies in this respect is shown by the pioneering works of Stanley Burstein (see e.g., 1993) and László Török (2011). A recent volume on 'Hellenistic' Baktria and India meanwhile has contributed significantly to the deconstruction of the false notion that *Central* Asia and India constitute the ancient world's 'Far East' (Mairs 2021).

89 Müller 2021a, 295–296.

90 Carney 1995.

91 Longrigg 1998, 36.

In much the same way did Olympias and other regnant queens of the Argead-Molossian house rise to power by a combination of their personal abilities and high status, *and* the historical circumstance that after the death of Alexander III there were no able males within the dynasty, Philip III being unfit to rule himself and Alexander IV being too young. The fact that royal women often ruled as guardians for their underage sons after the death of their husbands of course is also in most cases the result of historical coincidence.

The question remains, however: why were women under these circumstances favoured over further removed male representatives of the dynasty, and why did the prominence of Hellenistic royal women only grow in later centuries despite changing historical circumstances? The crucial role of women in the succession may be the main reason: the fact that in these Macedonian dynasties royalty could also be transmitted in the matriline.⁹² Royal women were responsible for the survival of the dynasty,⁹³ and military action by women in support of dynastic goals was acceptable.⁹⁴ In the Ptolemaic dynasty, sibling marriage was a response to the potential threat this practice posed to dynastic unity, a not always successful strategy to keep *basileia* firmly within the family and forestall succession conflicts. In other dynasties, the faction struggles resulting from the practice of polygynous marriage may have stimulated the central roles of queen mothers in succession conflicts.⁹⁵ Lastly, there is the fact that power was delegated to *basilissai* to create a second court and make the empires more manageable, as in the cases of Olympias, Berenike II, and Laodike III, as we have seen. In sum, royal women were responsible for the survival of the dynasty in a number of ways.⁹⁶

Such explanations of female power in the Hellenistic dynasties only highlight how normal the phenomenon in fact was. What is not elucidated by them, however, is the acceptance of their *military* roles by the nobility and the army. Here, too, explanations vary between the specific and the general. Kynnane, as we saw, allegedly killed an Illyrian queen in a duel. This has compelled modern scholars to understand the martial persona of Kynnane and her daughter, Adea, as an Illyrian 'tradition'. Kynnane, Macurdy wrote, "was of the wild, fierce, fighting type of women who flourished among the Illyrian nobility".⁹⁷ That idea

92 See Strootman 2010, 2016. On succession in pre-Hellenistic Macedonia, see Greenwalt 1989; Anson 2009; Psoma 2012; Müller 2017, 193–195.

93 Whitehorne 1994, 60; Carney 2021b, 329.

94 See Carney 1995; Müller 2013; cf. Granier 1931, 77–78, who assumed that Olympias rose to power because she embodied the dynasty and the idea of unity.

95 Ogden 1999.

96 Whitehorne 1994, 60; Carney 2021b, 329; cf. Granier 1931, 77–78, who assumed that Olympias rose to power because she embodied the dynasty and the idea of unity.

97 Macurdy 1932, 48; cf. 232–233.

of course links up perfectly with the wars fought by the Illyrian queen Teuta between 231 and 228. But how 'Illyrian' exactly was Kynnane, the daughter of the Macedonian king Philip II?

A more likely model than the presumed warrior traditions of the barbaric Balkans were the queens of the Hekatomnid dynasty that ruled Karia in the fourth century.⁹⁸ The Argeads participated in a wider *koine* of satraps and kings in the Achaemenid Aegean, and female royal power was well established not only in Macedonia but also in Karia and Lykia. 'Foreign' influences (also from Epeiros) were especially strong in the fourth century because of the rapidly changing nature of the expanding Argead monarchy.⁹⁹ The Argeads counted among their peers the Hekatomnids, whose monarchy prefigured several aspects of what we call today Hellenistic kingship, particularly in their empire-city relations and monarchy, which included ruler cult, patronage of sanctuaries, and sibling marriage.¹⁰⁰ Apart from the well-known (but for the present purpose too early) example of Artemisia I—in command of her own fleet in the Battle of Salamis—there is Ada I, who negotiated sole rulership of Karia with Alexander in 334 BCE, and is described by Strabo as a *military* ally of the Macedonians.¹⁰¹

In the end, the acceptance and normalisation of women's military roles in the Hellenistic monarchies may have had a far simpler cause: it was part of their roles as monarchs, and their embodiment of the dynasty.¹⁰² Being figureheads of dynasties necessarily also implied being military figureheads. Hellenistic monarchy was at heart a military institution without a developed administrative apparatus. The warrior skills ascribed to Kynnane and Adeia, as well as the horsemanship of Ptolemaic princesses, likely were part of a public, ritual role they had to play. A recent comparative study of premodern dynasties has shown that volatile, martial dynasties such as the Argeads and Seleucids have a tendency to not rigidly structure succession, but leave much space for individual qualities and military fortunes; the repeated phases of conflict and disorder that accompanied succession were not necessarily disadvantageous, as they tended to bring to power vigorous, capable figures with a strong support base among military leaders.¹⁰³ The early Hellenistic period shows that such figures could include women if capable male contestants were lacking.

98 Sebillote Cuchel 2015, 244; on Karian queenship, see Ruzicka 2021.

99 Carney 1993, 321–323.

100 See Strootman and Williamson 2020. On Hekatomnid brother-sister marriages, see Carney 2005; Carney argues that these marriages were meant to create a strong dynastic image rather than secure the succession.

101 Sebillote Cuchel 2015, 236–237 on Strabo 14.2.17; cf. Arr. *Anab.* 1.23.7.

102 Also see Carney 1995; Müller 2013.

103 Duindam 2016, 128.

7 Conclusion

In her classic book *Hellenistic Queens*, Grace Harriet Macurdy asks if prominent Macedonian queens really were politically influential; she concluded that they were not:

The great majority of queens in Macedonia and in Seleucid Syria, though possessing wealth and prestige, had no share in the kingship. The power of the Hellenistic queens is often represented as much greater than it actually ever was except among the later Ptolemies, and exaggerated statements are made which are based on the occasional appearance of a woman in war or in politics, rather than on a consideration of the real status of the queens.¹⁰⁴

The “real status” Macurdy refers to, however, is an illusionary (but in her time widely spread) notion that there existed in the Hellenistic world an ‘internationally’ accepted form of *Staatsrecht*, and that kingship was a legally defined ‘state’ institution. Unsurprisingly, she was unable to find any legal definition of Hellenistic queenship.

Hellenistic royal women may not have had ‘official’ functions in ‘state’ administration, as such things hardly existed in the Hellenistic world above the level of the city state. But the informal agency women had at the royal courts was a structural aspect of the exercise of power.¹⁰⁵ In addition, as central figures within their households and families, royal women had cardinal representative roles to play in the public arena—that too is what made them *royal* women. Rulership is as much a ritual as a political role. Battlefield leadership, too, is highly ritualised—also for male rulers. The presence of royal women on the battlefield therefore should not come as a surprise; it follows directly from these women’s pivotal roles within military dynasties in the war-torn Hellenistic world.

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104 Macurdy 1932, 232.

105 Strootman 2021, 333–334.

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