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Archein and/or Arcesthai – Exploring the Vocabulary of Female Power

The title of my talk today is, as many of you know, taken from Aristotle's formulation of the duties of the citizen in book 3 of his *politics*:

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Another point is that we praise the ability to rule and to be ruled, and it is doubtless held that the goodness of a citizen consists in ability both to rule and to be ruled well. 3 1277'20 (1277a)

This combination of the active and the passive, of governing and being governed, of ruling and being ruled, lies at the core of Aristotle's philosophy of an ideal civic community – a point to which we shall return in the conclusion.

But to us in this distributed conference who are interested in tackling the concept of the power of Hellenistic royal women head-on, there is some insight to be had in Aristotle's ideal of a balance between active and passive agency.

What follows, *caveant lectores*, is not a finished or polished argument, but I do hope to bring up some questions of methodology and terminology that might give us some insight in one form or another.

Following on from Sheila's discussion of approaches to an concepts of female royal power, I want to shift our focus back to the ancient sources and how they conceived of and articulated the sort of royal female influence that has increasingly been of interest over the past decades. How did they, rather than we, understand female power, and what was the vocabulary with which they described it?

SLIDE My argument today emerges from a brilliant observation by Gilliam Ramsey in her contribution to Beth Carney and Sabine Mueller's recently published *Companion to women and monarchy in the ancient Mediterranean*. Discussing the use of the increasingly common use of title *basilissa* for royal women early in the period she writes:

'If the new dynasties came to require the title as a sign of respect, they probably got the idea from the cities and thought it fit nicely with their aspirations. The traditional language of the polis provided a lexicon for new monarchical power and dominance.' 189

I think she is certainly right, and I want to keep pulling at this idea by arguing that the language and vocabulary of monarchical power and dominance continued to be rooted in the traditional lexicon of the Greek *polis* well beyond the early generations of the Hellenistic dynasties.

SLIDE To develop this, we'll examine how female influence is articulated in a sample of epigraphic testimonia and then literary accounts of royal women from various authors before putting forward some conclusions about how we can understand the vocabulary of Hellenistic queens.

Before this, though, I want to make a few methodological observations to situate this talk in ever-expanding body of research on royal women such as these.

I. Methodology

SLIDE Thanks in large part to many of you who are here today, we have seen a vast proliferation of approaches to and perspectives on the role and influence of women in Antiquity more generally and in the Hellenistic Period in particular. Much of this work has been predicated on trying to better understand the institutional place of the queen in the system of Hellenistic royalty; in other words we have tried to understand the institution of queenship through exemplary queens.

SLIDE Just this year, though, the edited volume of Ed Anson, Monica D'Agostini, and Frances Pownall in honour of Beth Carney has made a very compelling call to shift our focus towards the personal bonds and relationships that drove the Period. In this pre-modern context we are, at the end of the day, dealing with a royal system that was comprised of personal bonds of loyalty and relationships among individuals rather than a really 'abstract' system of power.

In the context of my argument today, one of their observations I think is particularly poignant: 'Because of the very personal nature of the exercise of power, the Argead courts of Philip and Alexander can be seen as analogous to the *oikos*, or the household, the building block of ancient Greek society'

They then go on to elaborate that 'Although the courts of Philip and Alexander operated necessarily on a much larger scale than the *oikos* of the Classical Greek *polis*, the basic structure was the same.'

The basic structure was certainly the same, and as Omar Coloru has shown this is true of later courts such as the Seleucids as well as the Argeads. In addition to the same basic structure, as I hope to show the vocabulary of the *oikos* was the same as the vocabulary of the court and its female members.

SLIDE My second comment relates to our own scholarly terminology. The fact has been well established that Hellenistic elite women were powerful and influential, but what does that really mean in practice? This reminds me of the scholarship of the ethnic and cultural turn of the 1990s and 2000s, by the end of which ethnicity, culture, and identity had each taken on such broad meaning that it became difficult to distinguish one from the other. The same risk is perhaps present in how the terms power, influence, and agency have become interchangeable.

Added to this was the disconnect that Jeremy McInerney mentioned between what we mean by ethnicity and what the Greeks understood as ethnicity – in some ways perhaps we're falling into the same trap with royal women. Hopefully better understanding how female power was articulated by the ancients will better inform our own discussion.

SLIDE My third comment is about how we interact with our sources. Take, for example, these two passages from Appian's *Syriaka*. The first concerns the marriage alliances of Antiochus III, in which women are a) just the direct objects of verbs and b) one of them is just identified unhelpfully as 'thn loiphn' – the leftover one.

The second is Appian's discussion of why Kleopatra Thea killed her son Seleukos, which he says was 'either because she was afraid for having murdered his father' or 'because she had a manic loathing for all people.' It's clear in these cases that Appian doesn't really have a clue what he's talking about, so our challenge as historians is to get to the bottom of what we often view as mangled or confusing testimonia.

SLIDE The challenge, then, as we have typically addressed it has been how to see through the eidolon – the phantom or image – of women in our sources and try to work through them (or against them) to recreate an image of the *gynh* or the basilissa herself.

In other words, we often treat the sources for the ancient women we study as a problem, a riddle, or a puzzle to be solved; we often work against them and try to work out what they *really* mean or say. Today, though, I want to lean into the eidolon, to the depiction, the phantom of how these women appear and focus on that.

SLIDE With all of that as prelude, how then do royal women appear in our epigraphic sources? Again this is only a very selective sample taken from across the dynasties, but nevertheless the vocabulary of royal women is striking.

In 299/298, the Ionian city of Miletus, at the instigation of the courtier Demodamas, passed this decree in honour of Apama, wife of Seleukos I. Apama is honoured for having displayed *pollhn eunoian kai prothumian* towards the Milesians who were in Seleukos' army, and had speedily responded to an embassy sent to Seleukos regarding the temple of Apollo at Didyma. Eunoia – the goodwill a citizen cultivates between themselves and another, the ready generosity and eagerness that is *prothumia*, the zeal and diligence of *spoudh*, all of these are honoured in the Queen – and all are taken almost right out of Aristotelian ethics of citizenship.

It's noteworthy that there is a sister decree to this that honours Antiochos I for almost precisely the same virtues, so here we see the city of Miletus interacting with Seleucids not as an overlord, but as a city speaking to an *oikos* marked by homophrosynh – likeness of thought, a common agenda.

SLIDE We get a glimpse of the internal harmony of the royal *oikos* from the other direction in the letter of Laodike III to Iasos in Caria, dated to 196/195. After praising her 'brother's' goodwill and help to the city and its allies in restoring its *nomoi* and *eleutheria*, she then writes that she is motivated by this same *spoudh* and *ekteneia*, diligence, and zeal, to make a benefaction on the city (*euergesia*) to the common benefit (*euxrestian koinhn*) of all the city. Again, here we have an *oikos* interacting with a city.

SLIDE The same private and civic sensibility appears in this decree of Attalus III honouring his mother queen Stratonike – 'the most pious of all women' *eusebestate* and the one who showed *filostorgia* – tender love and affection to her family. She then takes this into the civic realm with her piety to Zeus Sazabius, whom she introduced as a god *eis thn patrída hmwn* – to our ancestral homeland.

SLIDE The titles of the queens themselves likewise testify to this language of civic sensibility: Berenike II and her husband are always identified as the *theoi euergetai* in the epigraphic dossier, and again this is predicated on exchange between the royal family and the cities of the realm. The Ptolemies of course almost always depict themselves as a pair of rulers rather than just one – In SEG 36.1218 Ptolemy III only speaks of themselves in the first person singular – always we, not me.

SLIDE and then much later in the period we have an attestation of Kleopatra Thea's titles *thea eueteria*, both in her coinage and in this inscription from 130 BCE. A dedication at the temple of Zeus in Ptolemais-Ake by the archigrammateus of the army is made on behalf of the royal family, including *basilissa kleopatra thea eueteria*. Thea – goddess – speaks for itself, but Eueteria is a bit more enigmatic.

The word is usually translated as 'bountiful' or 'plentiful' in a bucolic sense, but if we dig a bit deeper the word is almost always used with regards to the provisioning and wellbeing of a civic community. In Plato, Eueteria is the product of orderly Eros mixing the elements in harmony to produce abundance and health, euetherian and hygieian. In Xenophon, Demosthenes, and Aristotle, Eueteria always refers to the abundance of a city's harvest and provisions, and Aristotle discusses how this relates to the success or failure of various types of government.

SLIDE This clearly civic titulary combined with Thea's recurrent identification with Tyche in her coinage makes it clear that her public image across various media is deeply grounded in the vocabulary of civic culture and its general wellbeing. As we've seen, she was certainly not the first queen to be identified with an *oikos* and a civic community.

Epigraphy is one medium, but how are royal women identified and described in literary sources? Again this overview has to be brief, but it is particularly interesting when we view what follows in relation to the general assumption that ancient authors were inherently misogynistic and viewed female power as being inherently transgressive. On closer inspection, this is not always the case – and the following are general impressions from a review of principal authors.

SLIDE We can find what seems to be the guiding principle when it comes to elite women in the eyes of our literary sources – at least on the surface – in these two snippets of Appian that we have seen earlier.

If, like Antiochis and 'the leftover daughter', women are passive figures in the designs of their male relatives, then all is well – in this case both are the direct object of the actions of their father Antiochus III. This passive side of female power is usually taken to be acceptable to male authors like Appian.

If, however, like Kleopatra Thea, women become more active – if they *archein* – and take the initiative, then they are dangerous, transgressive, and their actions go against the social order – in this case leading to Appian accusing Thea of having a manic loathing for all people.

It is easy to fall into this trap of assuming that ancient authors viewed the passive and active actions of royal women as being good and bad, respectively, but doing so ultimately takes women out of the broader thematic context of each author and their work.

I suspect I'm telling all of you what you already know, but depictions of women in our literary sources are almost never about the women themselves, rather how they reflect the character of the men in their lives and the households of which they are a part.

SLIDE this slide is a profound oversimplification, but I hope it captures something of the framework of each author. In the *syriaka*, for instance, Appian conceived of Seleucid history on the whole as being a succession of kings – good, bad, or mediocre – who leave their mark on the kingdom which is understood as a sort of extended household. Women in this narrative thus only appear inasmuch as they relate to or impact men in the kingdom – such as Stratonike and Antiochus I, and Laodike and Antiochus II.

Appian's account of the influence of Kleopatra Thea follows what he describes as a period of anarchy during the reign of Demetrius II.

Following the work of Kenneth Sacks in 1990, Diodorus for his part understands his history as a series of illustrative examples that relate to overarching themes – morality, fortune, progress, philanthropy, and perhaps above all what is appropriate and inappropriate government.

Women, in Diodorus, are a critical constituent part of the social whole who can act as litmus tests for the health of their society and its government. His description of Thais at the destruction of Persepolis forms part of his criticism of Alexander the Great's descent into luxury; he praises Lucretia's suicide for defusing any chance of shame being brought on her husband and family. She becomes symbolic of the vice of the reign of Tarquinius Superbus and the virtue of the Roman aristocracy.

Elsewhere he highlights the perils of men marrying a second time after being widowed, not because of the intrinsic bad character of the woman, but because of her potential to cause discord and disharmony in the *oikos*.

In Plutarch's biographies, women act as tropes for the conduct of the men in their lives: Demetrius' infidelity to the virtuous Phila indicates his lack of self-restraint and earns him 'the worst reputation of all kings of his time', while of course Cleopatra's manipulations bring to light the worst in the character of Antony.

The often scathing vocabulary used to describe royal women in these sources thus is almost never modifies the women themselves in a grammatical sense, but rather the man whom they represent. Elsewhere, even in Justin and Appian, it's striking how often women are described doing the same things as men – sending legates, receiving embassies, appointing successors – with the same verbs as their male counterparts, and often without comment.

SLIDE To bring these two epigraphic and literary strands together by means of conclusion, all roads lead to Pergamon with the fascinating case of queen Apollonis, the wife of Attalus I of Pergamon, perhaps the only Hellenistic queen for whom we have both epigraphic and literary evidence that are so congruent.

SLIDE First: the epigraphic queen. An inscription from Hierapolis dated to between 167-159 BC after the queen's death is downright glowing in its praise for her – and again this is all couched in the language of the *oikos* as a microcosm of the kingdom.

The opening lines identify her as 'the pious', Eusebes, and through this piety along with her reverence for her family, her life with her husband, the *omonoia* of her family with children, she has displayed in a fitting and glorious way among men her 'idia areth', her own glory

The document goes on to conclude that 'having displayed in her life everything that relates to honour and glory – τιμη and δόξα, she has lived a distinguished and fitting life.' This idea of *omonoia*, of harmony, of accord, and of unity within the family dominates the rest of the inscription.

SLIDE Polybius' description of this women in his eulogy, as it were, for Apollonis praises the queen for precisely the same characteristics, though with a bit of added nuance that speaks to a broader understanding of female power.

The beginning of the passage is fascinating: Apollonias, the wife **γαμετή** of Attalus, father of King Eumenes, was a woman of Kyzikos, and a woman who for many reasons is worthy of memory and praise **αίτίας άξία μνήμης και παρασημασίας**

Her claims upon a favourable recollection are that, though born a citizen, she became a queen **δημότις ύπάρχουσα βασίλισσα έγγόνει**

and protected that pre-eminence to the end of her life - **και ταύτην διεφύλαξε την ύπεροχήν μέχρι τής τελευταίας**

not exhibiting the persuasiveness of a courtesan, but by always exhibiting the gravity and excellence of a woman strict in her life and courteous in her demeanour. **σωφρονικήν δέ και πολιτικήν σεμνότητα και καλοκαγαθίαν**

The terminology used by Polybius here is fascinating: in Apollonis we find the fulfilment of an ideal sense of civic femininity matched with what Polybius describes as the pre-eminence or dignity of a

queen. The status (*ueroxh*) of the queen, to Polybius, is something that a good queen must protect and uphold – his use of *διεφύλαξε* is equal parts striking and deliberate.

There is, then, in Polybius an abstract ideal of queenship and royal femininity, one that is rooted not in the customs of the court or courtesans, but in the common sensibility of the Greek *oikos* and the Greek civic community – and I hope to have shown that Polybius is not unique in this respect.

SLIDE And so, then, a few thoughts to close this first session of our distributed conference. From our perspective we are inclined to view – perhaps dismiss – Apollonis as the ideal of the passive royal woman devoted to family, and praised by men for having conformed faithfully to these gender ideals.

In that sense we are inclined to put her firmly in the passive *archesthai* category – the good wife who didn't rock the boat. But as we have in many recent studies, it was precisely her place as wife, mother, and queen that would allow an elite woman like her to cultivate the personal bonds through which she could exert her own influence – and thus be in the active *archein* category.

We tend to privilege the latter over the former, but the position of royal women is in no small part derived from precisely those roles that we identify as passive, as conforming to social expectations. The passive and the active, *archesthai* and *archein*, thus feed into one another in a cycle that creates the possibility – the potential – for female influence. To fully grasp it we need to be awake to both side of this cycle.

SLIDE Finally, I think that Gilliam Ramsey was quite right to say that the traditional language of the polis provided a lexicon for new monarchical power and dominance, and it is through this lexicon that our ancient sources try to formulate and express what we identify as female influence.

In the process of examining this we gain greater understanding of the eidolon, the phantom, of female power in the ancient tradition. While it may not align neatly with our own preferences of vocabulary and terminology for female influence, it nevertheless allows us to understand how *they* conceived of female influence. And that, at the very least, gives us a solid starting point for trying to find the historical women beneath this linguistic phantom in our sessions to come.

SLIDE Thank you