

The issues of Berenice II, an iconographic exception¹

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Abstract: In 2016, the National Archaeological Museum (MAN) in Madrid acquired an octodrachm of Berenice II bearing the name of Arsinoe II at a public auction. The primary reason for this acquisition was the coexistence of iconographic and epigraphic references to two distinct personalities on the same coin. This peculiarity in Ptolemaic coinage, in addition to perpetuating an unprecedented iconographic model for representing Ligid queens, presupposes the need for numismatic research to examine its communicative function. Through iconographic analysis, this study seeks to unravel the message conveyed by this coinage. The motives that led Berenice II to portray herself in the manner of Arsinoe are not only related to issues of succession and consolidation of power but also to personal reasons stemming from family conflict. Berenice II preferred to associate herself with her paternal Ptolemaic lineage rather than her maternal Seleucid line—constituting clear evidence of the union of two kingdoms, the Ptolemaic realm and Cyrenaica, into a single state.

Keywords: Berenice II; Cyrenaica; Ptolemaic Kingdom; National Archaeological Museum; Ptolemy III; Arsinoe.

ES Las emisiones de Berenice II, una excepción iconográfica²

Resumen: En 2016 el Museo Arqueológico Nacional (MAN) de Madrid adquirió en subasta pública un octodracma de Berenice II a nombre de Arsinoe II. La razón principal de esta adquisición fue la convivencia de referentes iconográficos y epigráficos de dos personalidades distintas en la misma moneda. Esta peculiaridad monetaria en la acuñación ptolemaica, además de haber contribuido a la perpetuación de un modelo iconográfico sin precedentes en la representación de las reinas lágidas, presupone para la investigación numismática la necesidad de estudiar la función comunicativa de la misma. A través del análisis iconográfico se pretende desgranar el mensaje que se quiso transmitir con esta acuñación. Los motivos que llevaron a Berenice II a representarse a modo de Arsinoe no solamente tienen que ver con cuestiones sucesorias de afianzamiento del poder sino también con razones personales de conflicto familiar de la propia Berenice II quien quiso preferiblemente emparentarse con su línea paterna ptolemaica antes que con su línea materna seleúcida, constituyendo todo ello evidencia de la unión de dos reinos, el ptolemaico y la Cirenaica, en un único Estado.

Palabras clave: Berenice II; Cirenaica; Reino Ptolemaico; Museo Arqueológico Nacional; Ptolomeo III; Arsinoe.

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1. Introduction

In 2016, the National Archaeological Museum (MAN) in Madrid acquired at public auction an octodrachm of Berenice II issued under the name of Arsinoe II. The principal motivation for this acquisition was the coexistence of iconographic and epigraphic

references to two distinct personalities on the same coin. This peculiarity within Ptolemaic coinage presupposes, for numismatic scholarship, the necessity of examining its communicative function, in this case associated with the succession of power among queens.



Figure 1. Gold stater of Nectanebo II, 359–340 BC. 18 mm, 8.19 g. Obverse: Horse galloping to right. Reverse: two hieroglyphs nbw nfr ‘good gold’. Source: Specimen from *Numismatica Ars Classica* 158, lot 164. Zurich, 2025.

The coin as a communicative instrument has been the subject of previous studies³, and the present work seeks to extend the applied knowledge of specific coinage models employed not merely as instruments of commercial exchange but also as vehicles with a pronounced communicative dimension, designed to disseminate messages to those who utilised them. In this particular instance, the head of Berenice II is represented on the obverse, while the reverse bears the name of Arsinoe. This indicates that specific motives led Berenice II, in her earliest coinages, to portray herself as her predecessor Arsinoe II, thereby assuming her dynastic attributes and name.

Through iconographic analysis of the types and their comparison with other coins of Lagid kings and queens, this study explores the communicative function of this coinage. The message conveyed is not solely related to succession and the consolidation of power but also to personal motives arising from familial conflict on the part of Berenice II herself. The coin demonstrates the interest of the Lagid queens in establishing dynastic continuity among themselves, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of power. In this case, such continuity is closely linked to marital union and to the presence of a queen in government. Ultimately, this resulted in the consolidation of an iconography conceived expressly for the Ptolemaic queens, initiated by Arsinoe II—who was the first queen of antiquity for whom a numismatic iconographic image was created—and subsequently reinforced by Berenice II.

2. Coinage in Egypt

Except for a few extraordinary issues produced by certain pharaohs of the XXIX and XXX dynasties, coinage intended for commercial circulation in Egypt was introduced under the Ptolemaic rulers. Prior to this, monetary production had been directed primarily towards the remuneration of Greek mercenaries engaged in campaigns against the Persians. This geopolitical circumstance compelled Pharaonic Egypt to adapt part of its war economy to the monetary practices of the Hellenic world, thereby ensuring the loyalty of the mercenary forces—a practice that was repeatedly employed in the struggle against their common adversary⁴. The earliest attested instance is the coinage of Pharaoh Hakor (Jenemmaatra-Hakor, 393–380 BCE) of the XXIX dynasty, struck to finance the military campaign against Artaxerxes II. As these issues were intended for the payment of Greek mercenaries, they closely imitated Athenian types, particularly the tetradrachm with the owl. A comparable phenomenon occurred under Pharaoh Nectanebo I (Irimaatenra Dyedhor, 362–360 BCE) of the XXX dynasty, who during his brief reign produced copies of Athenian coinage featuring the head of Athena on the obverse and the owl on the reverse. It is perhaps owing to the consolidation of this practice, and the confidence thereby instilled in Greek mercenaries regarding Egyptian payments, that the coinage gradually assumed a more distinctly “Egyptian” character. In the few surviving specimens of Nectanebo II (360–343 BCE), hieroglyphs such as *nbw nfr* (“good gold”) appear on the reverse (fig. 1), signalling the quality of the metal employed. The

³ Ana Vico Belmonte, José María de Francisco Olmos, Katharina Nothnagel Vivas, Agustín Martínez Peláez, *Una aproximación a la moneda como herramienta de comunicación: propuestas de interpretación*, in V International Convention of Historians and Numismatists (Rio de Janeiro, 2025).

⁴ Sitta Von Reden. *Money in Ptolemaic Egypt: From the Macedonian Conquest to the End of the Third Century B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32.



Figure 2. Artaxerxes III (r. 359 y 338 BCE) Tetradrachm minted around 343 a. C. in Memphis. 17,04 g. Obverse: Head of Athena facing right, wearing an Attic helmet. Reverse: Owl, olive branch, crescent moon, and demotic legend in the name of Artaxerxes. Reference: Lisa Anderson and Peter G. Van Alfen, "A fourth century BCE hoard from the Near East", *American Journal of Numismatics* (1989-), Vol. 20 (2008): 155-198; Peter G. Van Alfen, "Mechanisms for the imitation of Athenian coinage: Dekeleia and mercenaries reconsidered", *Revue Belge de Numismatique et de sigillographie* 157 (2011): 71, fig. 7. Source: Specimen from Mail Bid Sale CNG 27, Lancaster 1993, n.º 799.

obverse of these gold staters retained the Greek-style horse galloping to right.

As these emissions were struck for specific military campaigns, their production was limited, and consequently only a small number circulated. Few specimens survive today so their rarity on the market reflects in high auction values. These coins did not form part of the ordinary commercial exchange of Pharaonic Egypt; rather, they functioned as remuneration for soldiers and, once returned to their homes, as a means of augmenting wealth within the monetised Hellenic economy, in contrast to the non-monetised Egyptian system.

Thus, from the outset, Egyptian coinage was subject to Greek influence—a reality facilitated by geographical proximity and the existence of a common enemy. These early issues therefore fulfilled a specific function, dictated by territorial defence policy, which privileged their utility as instruments of payment over their iconographic content, the latter being relegated to a secondary role and adapted to the cultural expectations of the mercenaries⁵.

During the second Persian domination (343–332 BCE), Athenian types remained unchanged. The tribute system imposed by the Persians encompassed wheat and silver. Under Artaxerxes III, tetradrachms of silver were struck at the Memphis mint following the Athenian model, with the head of Athena on the obverse and the owl on the reverse. Coins were also issued in the name of the satraps of Darius III, Sabaces and Mazaces, distinguishable from Athenian issues by their legends, some even rendered in Egyptian demotic script (fig. 2).

It was only after the conquests of Alexander the Great that coinage was produced on a truly massive scale throughout the territory. The "Alexanders" circulated both during Alexander's lifetime and posthumously, struck also by his successors, and remained in use throughout the third and second centuries BCE. In continuity with this

Alexandrian coinage, Ptolemy I Soter, who succeeded Alexander IV (son of Alexander the Great) in the governance of Egypt and Cyrenaica, established an "imperial" coinage, thereby initiating the transformation of the existing economy into a monetised system. These issues were rigorously controlled and monopolised by the Ptolemaic rulers, who prohibited the circulation of any other coinage and centralised production in the mints. Peripheral regions of the kingdom, such as Cyprus, Syria, and Phoenicia, were denied independent coinage. Production was characterised by the abundant use of Nubian gold, as well as silver and copper from the mines of Cyprus, Syria, and Phoenicia. This constituted a form of "economic autarky"⁶ in which foreign coinage was required to be exchanged upon entry into the kingdom, and where speculation on the value of gold led to its overvaluation at a ratio of 1:12 against silver, in contrast to the 1:10 ratio prevailing outside the Ptolemaic realm.

Ptolemy I Soter reduced the weight of the silver tetradrachm from 17.20 g to 14.25 g, abandoning the traditional Attic standard and adopting the Cyrenean weight. This adjustment was accompanied by a reduction in commodity prices, which stimulated Alexandrian trade. Consequently, emissions were restricted, and gold and silver coins reserved for the use of a wealthy minority. This control over the monetary economy of the Ptolemaic territories was complemented by the development of a distinctive propagandistic iconography of the monarchs, referred to as "public ritual" or "royal self-representation"⁷, designed to foster territorial and cultural unity—a "state coinage", as Von Reden⁸ has argued—in which monetary production and the political autonomy of the Ptolemaic kingdom formed a symbiotic relationship.

⁵ José das Candeias Sales, "Acuñaación Monetaria en Egipto", *Boletín de La Asociación Española de Egiptología*, no. 10 (2010): 37.

⁶ Candeias Sales, "Acuñaación Monetaria en Egipto", 42.

⁷ Sitta von Reden, "The politics of Monetization in third-century Egypt", *Money and Its Uses in the Ancient Greek World*. Edited by Andrew Meadows and Kirstly Shipton, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65-76.

⁸ Von Reden, *Money in Ptolemaic Egypt: From the Macedonian Conquest to the End of the Third Century B.C.*, 32.



Figure 3. Ptolemy I Soter, as satrap, 323–305 BCE. Silver tetradrachm (26 mm, 17.20 g, 6 h), in the name and types of Alexander III. Minted in Memphis between 322 and 321 BCE. Obverse: Head of Heracles wearing lion skin. Reverse: ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ with Zeus seated on a throne holding an eagle in his right hand and a scepter in his left. Below and to the right of the throne, ΔΙ-^ς. Source: Specimen from Nomos AG, 37 (2025), lot 191.



Figure 4. Ptolemy I Soter, king between 305 and 283 BCE. Gold triobol (*tetarte*) after 294 BCE, Alexandria. Obverse: Bust with diadem. Reverse: Eagle on thunderbolt, letter Α to the left. 12 h, 1.78 g. From the König Collection, Saarbrücken (c. 1950–2002). Source: Specimen from Dr. Busso Peus Nachfolger Auction, 443 (2025), lot 360.

3. The succession of power in the Ptolemaic coinage

One of the most evident features in Ptolemaic coinage is the perpetuation of monetary types and the minting of coins in the name of predecessors to guarantee the succession of power within the same family. The strengthening of the new “pharaonic” authority was accompanied by the need to establish a firm dynastic line that would prevent fragmentation of power.

Coins minted by Ptolemy I Soter included some struck in the name of Alexander, depicting his head as Heracles on the obverse and the figure of Zeus seated with an eagle in his hand alongside the legend ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ on the reverse (fig. 3).

This representation of Alexander as the son of Zeus allowed Ptolemy I Soter to mint coins with variations in types, placing his own diademed head on the obverse while retaining Zeus’s eagle on a thunderbolt on the reverse (fig. 4). In this way, Ptolemy I Soter reinforced his authority as the legitimate

heir to the Lagid region from the hands of its conqueror, who had consolidated his power as the son of Ammon-Zeus. The Romance of Alexander by Pseudo-Callisthenes⁹, drawing on earlier classical sources such as Diodorus Siculus, Curtius Rufus, and Plutarch, recounts that Alexander was recognized as “son of Jupiter-Ammon” at the oracle temple in the Siwa Oasis—a strategy to legitimize his power in the newly conquered territory.

Another sign of Alexander’s legacy was the diadem, *taenia*. Both Plutarch¹⁰ and Arrian¹¹ affirm that after Alexander’s victory over the Medes in Asia, he adopted the attire of Persian kings, including the diadem of Darius III. During the reign of Ptolemy II,

⁹ Pseudo Calístenes, “Prólogo”. *Vida y Hazañas de Alejandro de Macedonia*, translated by Carlos García Gual. Biblioteca Clásica, vol. 1 (Madrid: Editorial GREDOS, S.A.U., 1977), 45.

¹⁰ Plutarco, *Vidas paralelas VI, Alejandro y César*, (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 2007), 67.

¹¹ Flavio Arriano, *Anábasis de Alejandro IV* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1982), 23.



Figure 5. Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE). Tetradrachm, 274 BCE, Sidon. Obverse: Head of Ptolemy I diademed. Reverse: ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ and eagle on thunderbolt. In front, ΣΙ. CPE 505a; Svoronos 713; SNG Cop. 506; Meydancikkale 4511. 13.36 g. Source: Specimen from Jean Elsen & ses Fils S.A., 163 (2025), lot 175.



Figure 6. Ptolemy III, 246–222 BCE. Silver tetradrachm, 246/222 BCE, Alexandria; 14.25 g. Obverse: Head of Ptolemy I to the right with diadem. Reverse: Eagle on thunderbolt to the left, cornucopia to the left. CPE 732; SNG Cop. 167 f.; Svoronos 1001. Source: Specimen from Leu Numismatik AG Auction 65, Zurich 1996, lot 271.



Figure 7. Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE). Octodrachm of Arsinoe II, 316–270 BCE, minted in Alexandria (posthumous). Obverse: Head of Arsinoe II diademed. Reverse: Double cornucopia with legend ΑΡΣΙΝΟΗΣ ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ. 27.5 mm; 27.72 g; 11 h. Source: Specimen from Emporium Hamburg, 109 (2025), lot 76.

coinage continued to employ iconographic types associated with Alexander's dynastic heritage, featuring the diademed head and Zeus's eagle on a thunderbolt on the reverse. Tetradrachms were still produced in Ptolemy II's time bearing the head of his father, Ptolemy I (fig. 5), and even under Ptolemy III (fig. 6), the image of his grandfather persisted.

In their effort to perpetuate the dynastic line, monetary types were not only inherited but also reproduced in honour of preceding monarchs. However, we observe an iconographic change in the tetradrachm of Ptolemy III, where a cornucopia appears before Zeus's eagle on the reverse. This cornucopia had already been used as the principal reverse type



Figure 8. Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II. Alexandria. Tetradrachm (post 265 BCE). Obverse: Busts of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II, shield behind; legend ΑΔΕΛΦΩΝ. Reverse: Busts of Ptolemy I and Berenice I; legend ΘΕΩΝ. AR 13.8 g, 20.9 mm. Source: Specimen from Jesús Vico S.A. Auction 177, Madrid (2025), lot 1131.

on commemorative octodrachms minted by Ptolemy II in honour of his deceased wife and sister Arsinoe II (fig. 7) after her death in 270 BCE¹².

These coins minted after Arsinoe II, struck in gold and of great value—indeed also issued in the double *mnaieion*, the highest-denomination coin minted by the Ptolemies up to that time¹³—have been the subject of recent study. Olivier and Lorber conclude that the function of these gold issues was not only to distribute them to specific individuals but also to stimulate the international trade upon which the Ptolemies were heavily dependent. More specifically, this coinage issued in the name of Arsinoe II, although its original purpose remains uncertain, has been shown to have been used in payments to the military, as evidenced by a peak in minting following the Second Syrian War¹⁴. On the obverse of this coin, Arsinoe appears deified, veiled, and identified with the goddesses Hera and Dione¹⁵, wearing the Ptolemaic diadem to signify dynastic affiliation. The reverse features a double cornucopia—a duplication of an iconographic element from Greek mythology: the horn of Amalthea's goat, which Zeus filled with fruits and riches, symbolizing abundance, fertility, and divine prosperity.

This duplication may be interpreted through a linguistic and cultural lens. In ancient Egyptian, as in Middle and Late Egyptian, hieroglyphic signs were duplicated to indicate the dual, a grammatical feature not unfamiliar to the Greeks, who also had this category in their language. The duplication of the sign thus signified “double abundance,” further

emphasized by the binding ribbon. The strong influence of hieroglyphic writing in religious and courtly contexts may have inspired the duplication of a Greek iconographic element, demonstrating adaptation to local tradition. Even if linguistic influence were absent, the motif undoubtedly represented the prosperous union of king and queen and the abundance their joint reign brought to Lagid Egypt.

This representation of the double cornucopia speaks not only of the queen's power but of the combined authority of both monarchs. It implies that the queen's role—traditionally complementary to the king's through marriage—now had greater prominence, her influence in governance equal in “abundance” to that of her husband, both centralized in a single joint reign.

In the aforementioned coin of Ptolemy III (fig. 6), the cornucopia reappears after the commemorative issues in honour of Arsinoe II, but this time singly, alongside Zeus's eagle—perhaps reaffirming the hypothesis of individual prosperity brought by the monarch's rule and signalling his inheritance from both Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II. The cornucopia, introduced under Ptolemy II, ultimately became a characteristic symbol—at least in the Alexandrian bronze coinage of Ptolemy III.¹⁶

This idea of dynastic union and joint governance was also represented by Ptolemy II in a series of tetradrachms (fig. 8) where the obverse depicts the heads of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II, and the reverse shows Ptolemy I and Berenice I. Berenice I appears in no other coinage, suggesting that the concept of marital regency was introduced by Ptolemy II, who portrayed himself alongside his wife as heirs and children of Ptolemy I Soter and Berenice I of Egypt¹⁷.

As Clayman notes, it was under the *Philadelphoi* that the concept of the royal couple, or “power couple,” first emerged through this numismatic iconography, in which, as the author suggests, their power “is eloquently expressed on their coins with jugate

¹² David R. Sear, *Greek Coins and Their Values II* (London: Seaby, 1979), 734.

¹³ Catharine Lorber, *Coins of the Ptolemaic Empire, Part 1, Volumes 1 and 2 (Precious Metal and Bronze)*, (New York: American Numismatic Society, 2018), 394.

¹⁴ Julien Olivier and Catharine Lorber, “Three gold coinages of third-century ptolemaic Egypt”, *Revue belge de Numismatique* 159 (2013): 49-150.

¹⁵ Notwithstanding her evocation of the Greek maritime Aphrodite and her Egyptian equivalent Isis: Laurent Bricault, “Isis, Dame Des Flots”, *Aegyptiaca Leodiensia*, 7 (1994): 30-36; Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, *L'Aphrodite grecque*, Liege: Kernos, 1994: 434-347.

¹⁶ Lorber, *Coins of the Ptolemaic Empire*, 393.

¹⁷ Christopher Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 65.



Figure 9. Ptolemy IV (221–205 BCE). Silver tetradrachm (219/218 BCE), Ascalon; 13.78 g. Obverse: Draped busts of Zeus Sarapis with laurel crown and Osiris crown, and Isis with crown of ears of grain, facing right. Reverse: Eagle on thunderbolt to the left, head turned backward, with cornucopia. CPE 941; Landvatter 102 b (this specimen); SNG Cop. Suppl. 1287; Svoronos 1188. S Source: specimen from Hess/Leu Auction 28, Lucerne 1965, no. 316, and Leu Numismatik AG Auction 65, Zurich 1996, no. 272.



Figure 10. Romanos II with Constantine VII, 959–963 CE. Gold solidus (19.5 mm, 4.38 g, 6 h), Constantinople. Obverse: Frontal bust of Christ Pantocrator, raising right hand in blessing and holding the Gospel book. Reverse: Crowned bust of Constantine, wearing loros, and to the right, crowned and draped bust of Romanos, holding a patriarchal cross between them. Source: Specimen from Nomos AG Auction 37 (2025), lot 304.

heads on the obverse so closely overlapping that they appear to be attached to one body"¹⁸. Kallixenos of Rhodes, in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*, described a festival celebrated every four years in honor of Ptolemy I Soter and Berenice, inaugurated by Ptolemy II as a kind of "dynastic festival"¹⁹. This coin thus constitutes evidence of Ptolemy II's explicit intention to perpetuate power, which permeated multiple aspects of public life, with coinage serving as one of its principal instruments.

Additionally, in Greek coinage it was traditionally only the images of gods that were placed on the obverse; therefore, as Clayman suggests, there may also have been an intention to establish an identification or analogy with divinity, an idea likewise reflected in their designation as the *Theoi Evergetai*, or "Beneficent Gods"²⁰.

Since it is one of the few examples in which the queen's regency is represented alongside the king's, this coin provides evidence of joint rule—a model that would be fully embraced by her successor, Berenice II. Perhaps with the intention of preserving her Spartan lineage from those who had settled in Cyrenaica, she claimed this origin iconographically in some of her issues through the symbol of two stars or two laurel crowns (fig. 15) alluding to the Dioscuri—a myth that justified Spartan diarchy and which she may have invoked to legitimize her coregency with her husband²¹. It should be noted, however, that in the double *mnaieion* issues of Ptolemy II for his wife Arsinoe II, this reference to the Dioscuri also appears on the obverse²².

A similar example, though more aligned with earlier issues, is a coin of Ptolemy IV depicting the busts of Zeus Sarapis and Isis—a divine marriage—through which the Ptolemaic pharaoh reaffirmed his power

¹⁸ Dee L. Clayman, *Berenice II and the golden age of Ptolemaic Egypt*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 121.

¹⁹ von Reden, "The politics of Monetization in third-century Egypt", 65-76.

²⁰ Clayman, *Berenice II and the golden age of Ptolemaic Egypt*, 121.

²¹ Clayman, *Berenice II and the golden age of Ptolemaic Egypt*, 129-130.

²² Lorber, *Coins of the Ptolemaic Empire*, 394.



Figure 11. Octodrachm of Berenice II in the name of Arsinoe II. Ptolemy III, 246–221 BCE. 26.75 mm, 27.75 g. Obverse: Berenice II wearing veil and *stephane*. Reverse: Double cornucopia tied with a diadem and inscription «ARSINOES-FILADELFOU» in Greek. Source: Specimen from Martí Hervera-Soler y Llach Auction, Barcelona, February 2016, No. 22A.



Figure 12. Kingdom of Thrace, Lysimachus (306–281 BCE), AR tetradrachm, 297–282 BCE. Obverse: Diademed profile head of Alexander the Great with Ammon's horn. Reverse: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΥΣΙΜΑΧΟΥ. Athena seated, resting on a shield. A small Nike. 17.20 g. Source: Specimen from Jean Elsen & ses Fils S.A., 163 (2025), lot 36.

alongside the queen (fig. 9). Here again, we observe the inclusion of a double cornucopia, reinforcing the hypothesis that it symbolized the rich fruits and prosperity brought by the joint reign. The importance of displaying dynastic co-regency was such that it was intentionally divinized through analogical representation with syncretic deities of Ptolemaic Egypt. The issuance of this type of coinage—tetradrachms that circulated widely among the population—conveyed a clear message of dynastic, divine, and familial consolidation between sibling-spouses.

The inclusion of members of the same family in coinage was also practiced in the Byzantine Empire during the sixth and seventh centuries as a means of imposing a new system of dynastic succession²³. Moreover, this dynastic principle relied equally on both the king and the queen, with each playing a fundamental role in shaping the family lineage and

in establishing analogies with divinities. While the Ptolemies drew on Zeus Sarapis and Isis as their iconographic models (fig. 9), in the Byzantine Empire Christianity transformed these references, maintaining the same iconographic strategy but replacing them with Christ and the Virgin²⁴. Just as in the coinage of Ptolemy II (fig. 8), where children and parents appeared on both sides, Byzantine coins likewise portrayed kings and queens alongside their descendants, seeking to guarantee the throne for their heirs even before the moment of succession following their death. An example of this is the solidus of Constantine VII and Romanos II, exchanging the patriarchal cross from father to son (fig. 10) as a sign of the perpetuation of power.

In Ptolemaic coinage, similarly to what would later occur in Byzantine coinage, the types chosen for coins depicting queens—whether in joint portraits or individually, and often deified on high-value

²³ José María de Francisco Olmos, “Los inicios de la moneda dinástica en el Imperio Bizantino. La Casa de Justino y los Heráclidas”, *Documenta & Instrumenta* 7, n° enero (2007): 123-47. <https://doi.org/10.5209/eiko.73273>

²⁴ José María de Francisco Olmos, “Las mujeres y el poder supremo en Bizancio, siglos V-XI”, *Mirabilia. Electronic Journal of Antiquity, Middle & Modern Ages*, no. 17 (2013): 188-218.



Figure 13. Silver tetradrachm struck c. 306–300 BCE during the reign of Ptolemy I Soter (323–283 BCE) at the Alexandria mint. Obverse: Head of Alexander the Great to the right, wearing Ammon's horn and elephant scalp. Reverse: Legend ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ to the left, Athena Alkidemos in the center, brandishing spear and shield. To the left, Δ; to the right, helmet, eagle on thunderbolt, and erased monogram. CPE 71; Svoronos 179; Zervos (1974), series 30; Zervos 95. 15.69 g. Source: Specimen from Jean Elsen & ses Fils S.A., 163 (2025), lot 174.



Figure 14. Ptolemy III. 246–221 BCE. AE drachm, 41 mm. Obverse: Diademed head of Zeus-Ammon to the right. Reverse: ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ, eagle standing left on thunderbolt, cornucopia tied with a ribbon in front, monogram PX between legs. Source: Specimen from Savoca Numismatik GmbH & Co. KG, Herakles Auction 3 (2025), lot 87.

issues—reflect the significance of the queen's role in consolidating pharaonic authority and in the co-regency of a marriage that legitimized dynastic succession among family members, frequently between siblings.

In any case, in Hellenistic coinage, the portrait was the most commonly employed representation, whereas other political events were rarely depicted. As a central element of Ptolemaic numismatic iconography, the portrait sought to legitimize the rulers politically—both queen and king—by emphasizing their Hellenic origin, as heirs of Alexander and leaders of the Panhellenic cause²⁵. This concern, inherent to Ptolemaic *basileia*, was represented by both monarchs in their coinage²⁶. Evidence of this is also the octodrachm of Berenice II named as Arsinoe II.

4. The octodrachm of Berenice II at the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid

On February 25, 2016, the Spanish Ministry of Culture, following a report by the Board for the Classification, Valuation, and Export of Cultural Assets (*Junta de Clasificación, Valoración y Exportación de Bienes Culturales*) and at the proposal of the National Archaeological Museum, exercised its right of pre-emption at an auction held by Martí Hervera-Soler y Llach in Barcelona for lot 22A (fig. 11)²⁷. The lot consisted of an octodrachm minted by Ptolemy III in the name of Arsinoe II, depicting on the obverse Queen Berenice II, wife of Ptolemy III. After its pur-

²⁵ Howgego, *Ancient History from Coins*, 65.

²⁶ Agnieszka Fulińska, "Iconography of the ptolemaic queens on coins. Greek Style. Egyptian ideas?", *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 14 (2010): 73–92.

²⁷ We are grateful for the information provided by the Numismatics Department of the National Archaeological Museum regarding the acquisition of this piece, as well as for the details from: Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, *Catálogo de adquisiciones de bienes culturales* (Madrid: Secretaría General Técnica, 2016), 36. Open access at: https://libreria.cultura.gob.es/libro/adquisiciones-de-bienes-culturales-2016_11985/ (Accessed: 29-10-2025).

chase, the coin was incorporated into the Museum's collection²⁸, which until then lacked Ptolemaic coins struck under Ptolemy III.

The obverse shows the head of Berenice II facing right, wearing a veil and a tiara or *stephane*, with a ram's horn around her ear. The reverse bears the Greek legend ΑΡΣΙΝΟΗΣ ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ ("Philadelphus", or "brother-loving") encircling a double cornucopia tied with a diadem and adorned with grape clusters. As noted earlier, coins bearing Arsinoe II's name and portrait were minted posthumously by Ptolemy II to exalt his wife and sister and elevate her to divine status. These coins were issued in Egypt for decades, and consequently, Arsinoe's portrait circulated widely, making her a venerated queen.

The dissemination of this coinage throughout the Mediterranean ultimately established Arsinoe's image as a model for representing other queens or powerful women. Such was the case with Berenice II, who closely followed the iconographic elements surrounding Arsinoe's portrait (fig. 7) —her aunt and predecessor—, as seen in octodrachms minted in Berytus (fig. 11). Berenice appears veiled and crowned like a deity, with two cornucopias bound by the royal diadem and the legend in Arsinoe's name. These dynastic elements reveal not only the intention to portray herself as her predecessor but also the symbolism of co-regency through the double cornucopia and the ram's horn.

The ram's horn encircling the ear was first associated with Alexander the Great after his conquest of Egypt in 331 BCE. Ammon, identified with Zeus in Hellenistic religious syncretism, was represented with ram's horns on his temples, as the ram was sacred to Ammon's cult. However, coins struck during Alexander's reign did not incorporate this emblem until after his death, when his successors, such as Lysimachus (fig. 12) or Ptolemy I Soter (fig. 13), minted coins divinizing Alexander's image by adding Ammon's horns to his temples. This served not only to honor the memory of their king and supreme commander but also to legitimize their authority over the territories divided among them.

This iconographic tradition extended to Ptolemy III (fig. 14), Berenice II's husband and cousin, who minted coins depicting Zeus-Ammon diademed, with the ram's horn, and on the reverse, Zeus's eagle and the cornucopia. In this case, the ram's horn appears directly on the head of Zeus-Ammon, with whom the Ptolemaic king is identified, and the diadem—adopted by Alexander from the Persian kings after his conquest—establishes the analogical link between the Greco-Egyptian deity and Ptolemaic authority.

On Berenice II's coin (fig. 11), her portrayal with Arsinoe II's chosen attributes, the ram's horn, and the Alexandrian diadem not only legitimizes her position as the new queen and heir to her predecessor but

also firmly situates her within the Ptolemaic dynastic line.

This coin has been dated to the early reign of Ptolemy III, between 246 and 221 BCE, likely because Berenice sought to present herself as the successor to the prestige and legitimacy of her predecessor, who was also her aunt. It should also be noted that this coin circulated during Berenice II's lifetime, unlike the issues of her predecessor, whose deified image circulated only after her death, as previously mentioned. Berenice II thus embraced this identification with divinity already during her lifetime²⁹.

The communicative function of these coins was tied to a specific temporal framework in which the intended message—that society recognize her as Arsinoe's successor—needed to be fulfilled. Consequently, the number of issues was probably smaller than that of other Lagid queens, and fewer specimens survive today. Its singularity makes its appearance on the market rare and its prices significantly higher than those of coins bearing Berenice II's own name, which are traded more frequently.

Once the purpose of this coin was achieved, Ptolemy III minted coins for Berenice II bearing her own name in the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ – ΒΕΡΕΝΙΚΗΣ ("Queen Berenice"). These issues represent a transitional step in consolidating her authority as a successor queen who, like Arsinoe, wielded effective power. This strategy allowed her to legitimize her dynastic rights to the Ptolemaic throne by associating herself not only with Arsinoe's prestige³⁰ but also by adopting Ptolemaic attributes inherited primarily from Alexander.

Berenice belonged to the Ptolemies through her father, Magas of Cyrene, and to the Seleucids through her mother, Apama II, granddaughter of Seleucus I Nicator, founder of the Seleucid dynasty. Her father, Magas—son of Berenice I of Egypt, the first Ptolemaic queen through marriage to Ptolemy I Soter—ruled Cyrene independently. However, being only Berenice's son and not Ptolemy's, he did not inherit the Ptolemaic kingdom, only the Cyrenaica region. The maternal half-brother of Magas was Ptolemy II Theos, also a grandson of Seleucus and brother of Apama II, Berenice's mother. Thus, political and familial tensions arose from the marriage between Magas of Cyrene and Apama II, who had gained the throne of Cyrene through her union with Magas. Upon Magas's death, Apama II sought to marry her daughter Berenice to Demetrius the Fair, preferring to avoid ties with the Ptolemies, with whom her family had long-standing conflicts. When Berenice II discovered her mother's affair with Demetrius, she ordered his assassination and later married her cousin Ptolemy III, thereby reuniting the kingdoms of Cyrene and Egypt. This ultimately constituted a true marriage of reconciliation in which Berenice reaffirmed her loyalty to the Ptolemies.

²⁸ Inventory number: 2016/31/1, with references in Lorber, *Coins of the Ptolemaic Empire*, n° 810 (mint uncertain 33); Hyla A. Troxell, *The Coinage of the Macedonian Kings of the Argead Dynasty*, (New York: SNA, 1983), 64-66, lám. 10-G; Dorothy Burr Thompson, *Ptolemaic Oinochoai and Portraits in Faience. Aspects of the Ruler Cult*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 31-34. The detailed catalog entry can be consulted at <https://ceres.mcu.es/>

²⁹ Clayman, *Berenice II and the golden age of Ptolemaic Egypt*, 129.

³⁰ As stated by Otto Mørkholm, *Early Hellenistic Coinage from the Accession of Alexander to the Peace of Apamea (336-188 B.C.)*, edited by Westermarck, Ulla and Philip Grierson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 108.



Figure 15. Ptolemy III Euergetes, (246–222 BCE). In the name of Berenice. Pentakaidecadrachm, Alexandria, c. 245 BCE, AR 44 mm, 52.76 g. Obverse: Bust of Berenice with veil and drapery to the right. Dotted border. Reverse: ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ – ΒΕΡΕΝΙΚΗΣ cornucopia filled with fruits and tied with fillets between the laurel crowns of the Dioscuri. Svoronos 988 y pl. XXXV, 2. Vagi, Ptolemaic, 5–10. Hazard 1052 (12 drachms). CPE 734; Zhuyuetang 125 (this coin). Source: Ex M&M Auction 85, 1997, lot 150.

This union of neighbouring powers, where Berenice II held titular authority over Cyrene, was reflected in the character of the coins she later issued (fig. 15), which attest to the public image of power attained by Ptolemaic queens³¹. It is understandable that Berenice sought to associate herself iconographically as the heir of her Ptolemaic predecessor, distancing herself entirely not only from her mother's betrayal but also from a branch of Alexander's former empire with which the Ptolemies were in constant conflict.

An example of this tension is the Third Syrian War (also known as the Laodicean War), which began shortly after the death of the Seleucid king Antiochus II in 246 BCE. He left several heirs from two different marriages—one to Laodice (a Seleucid) and another to Berenice Syra (a prominent Ptolemaic princess and sister of Ptolemy III). Berenice Syra and her son, heir to the throne alongside Laodice's children, were assassinated in 246 BCE, thwarting Ptolemy III's opportunity to influence the Seleucid throne. In 241 BCE, Ptolemy III signed peace with Seleucus II. Shortly after the tragic events involving Berenice Syra and her son and during the Third Syrian War, Ptolemy III married Berenice II, who governed Egypt during this period while her husband was away at war.

In coins minted in Berenice's own name, we observe a fundamental change in the choice of types and symbols: the tradition of adorning heads with the tiara and ram's horn disappears, while on the reverse, the cornucopias are reduced from two to one, flanked by the Dioscuri's distinctive caps, similar to the *pileus* but crowned in this case.

The most striking feature is the use of a single cornucopia: the double cornucopia had always appeared on reverses of coins depicting both monarchs or a queen alone, symbolizing her role as the king's wife and their joint regency. In this case, however, it is the first time the queen is represented with only one cornucopia—a motif more typical of kings—thus

underscoring Berenice II's regent authority, as she effectively governed Egypt almost alone while her husband fought Seleucus II.

A fragment of an oinochoe preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York depicts a Ptolemaic queen, presumably Berenice II, holding a cornucopia, which would support the hypothesis of this object as a distinctive iconographic attribute of Berenice II. The scholar Sarah Pomeroy also argues in favor of the effective power Berenice may have wielded. She cites documentary evidence from demotic papyri in which Berenice is referred to as “the female Pharaoh” and is frequently depicted alongside her husband wearing the same ceremonial attire as him³². The sources are clearer regarding the actual authority of Berenice II than of Arsinoe II, whose power remains more debated³³. One argument in support of Arsinoe's influence is that, before marrying her brother Ptolemy II, she had been married to Lysimachus, and upon returning to Egypt from Macedonia, she may have exercised a political influence akin to that of the Macedonian court, specifically shaped by the Argead tradition³⁴, thereby reinforcing her institutional role.

In addition, Pomeroy draws on both Greek and Egyptian sources to explain that Arsinoe was indeed depicted as pharaoh, or “Queen of Upper and Lower Egypt,” after her death. This practice found greater acceptance in Ptolemaic Egypt than in Hellenistic Greece, as Egypt was historically more accustomed to female regency, having previously had women serve as pharaohs³⁵. This cultural tradition helps explain the relative ease with which Ptolemaic queens

³¹ These coins minted during the reign of Ptolemy III in the name of Berenice II are numerous and complex to interpret, although studies on the subject do exist: Damián R. Salgado, “Monedas de Ptolomeo III a nombre de la Reina Berenice”, *Revista Numismática Hécate*, no. 3 (2016): 12–26.

³² Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 23.

³³ Elizabeth Carney explains that the scarcity of sources from the period of her reign alongside Ptolemy II has led scholarship to debate the extent of her power, with interpretations ranging from hypotheses that strongly emphasize her influential authority to others that argue the opposite: Elizabeth D. Carney, *Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

³⁴ It has also been considered plausible that Arsinoe inherited the religious traditions and activities associated with the Argead women. Carney, *Women and Monarchy in Macedonia*, 34.

³⁵ Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 19.

as Berenice II assumed a greater role in governance, supported by a reinforced political image. The transformation of female regency in the Ptolemaic kingdom was thus accompanied by visual representation. This allowed, by the early 2nd century BCE, for the arts to more freely reflect the ruling power of queens, whose depictions replaced the *stephane* associated with Aphrodite with the male *tainia* of Ptolemaic kings, as occurred with the Cleopatras³⁶.

5. Conclusions

The coinage issued by Ptolemy III in the name of Berenice is abundant and follows similar types, seeking not to deviate excessively from the traditional Ptolemaic attributes that had been established in numismatic iconography since Ptolemy I Soter. Nevertheless, the substitution of the double cornucopia for a single one is particularly striking and underscores the reality of Berenice's effective regency over Egypt.

Moreover, this series of coins makes the specimen under study even more distinctive, as it represents an intermediate step taken by Berenice to consolidate her power in the Ptolemaic kingdom—a power that could have been compromised by several factors: her previous marriage to Demetrius the Fair, arranged through Seleucid intervention; and her mother's Seleucid origin. Berenice thus embraced the dynastic legacy of her father, Magas of Cyrene, which connected her to Berenice I of Egypt, the first Ptolemaic queen.

The coins of this unique series issued in Arsinoe II's name bear witness to this strategy. Through them, Berenice sought to convey a message of power via a coin that enjoyed great popularity, granting the queen a venerable and divine image. This message through monetary media proved an effective resource for ancient monarchs. The original purposes of the minting of this octodrachm are unknown, although we can venture to suggest that it was issued to promote international trade as well as wealth accumulation by the upper classes. It was, therefore, a message directed at this social stratum and at neighbouring powers, perhaps intended to secure Ptolemaic support in light of Berenice's need to be recognized as a legitimate member of their lineage.

The message conveyed by Berenice through this coin was unequivocal: she was Arsinoe II's successor, a Ptolemaic queen, and her power was justified by dynastic and divine lineage—all encapsulated in a rare and distinctive coin that also reflects the representational and iconographic conventions employed by the Ptolemies to reinforce among the population the succession of their relatively new authority over Ptolemaic Egypt.

Undoubtedly, this piece highlights the propagandistic nature of coinage in antiquity—a practice later perfected by Roman culture. Even within a society with limited monetary tradition, such as Egypt, coinage was perceived as a functional instrument by the Hellenistic power for disseminating information, demonstrating its continuous and consolidated use as both a means of payment and communication.

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³⁶ Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt*, 24.

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