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Ptolemaic Finger Ring in the Kanellopoulos Museum, Athens

Il seguente contributo ha come oggetto un anello d'oro d'epoca tolemaica conservato presso il Museo Kanellopoulos di Atene e recante l'immagine eseguita ad intaglio di una figura femminile. L'identificazione è resa difficile sia dal carattere idealizzato del volto, raffigurato in profilo, che dalla presenza di attributi ricorrenti nei ritratti di regine tolemaiche, quali la mitra o la cosiddetta «acconciatura di Iside» consistente in una serie di ricci. Quest'ultimo elemento è tipico nelle raffigurazioni della dea e serviva da modello anche nell'effigie delle regine della dinastia ellenistica già a partire dal tardo III e agli inizi del II sec. a.C. L'autrice si sofferma pertanto sulle varie forme di tale tipo di acconciatura attestate in alcuni ritratti di regine tolemaiche di certa identificazione e sulla loro cronologia.

Sulla base di queste riflessioni viene proposta la datazione dell'effigie raffigurata sull'anello agli inizi del II sec. a.C. e, di conseguenza, l'identificazione della persona in essa ritratta con la regina Cleopatra I.

Infine vengono proposte alcune ipotesi in merito al contesto, ormai perduto, in cui tale anello potrebbe essere stato trovato. L'autrice sottolinea in tal senso come l'effigie del monarca fosse all'epoca abitualmente impiegata da funzionari di alto rango vicini alla casa regnante e come pertanto tale anello avrebbe potuto far parte del corredo funerario di un alto membro dell'amministrazione tolemaica.

The present paper concerns the bronze finger ring bearing the image of a woman in intaglio, exhibited in the Kanellopoulos Museum in Athens. Particular aspects such as the identity of the woman, style and chronology and possibly original finding context and usage form the scope of the discussion.

Fig. 1



The Bronze Finger Ring and its Intaglio image (4,5 x 1)

A bronze finger ring (Inv. X1307, dim. 2.2×1.7 cm) of unknown provenance, though particularly noteworthy for the image it carries, is kept at the Collections of Kanellopoulos Museum in Athens (fig. 1). The ring has an oval nearly round bezel with an almost stirrup-shaped profile, a feature that is considered as typical of the Hellenistic fingerings (fig. 2)¹. The hoop is mostly lost. Also the bezel is little damaged and amended on two spots: just above the forehead and above the back side of the head. But the image has not been affected.

The image in intaglio depicts the bust of a woman in profile turned to left. The seal impression would have produced the usual right profile. The image is attractive because of the idealized features of the young woman and remarkable because of the «Isis coiffure». The woman has a straight and rather big sharp nose with slightly upturned tip and pronounced eye brows that frame the wide-open eyes featuring a circular curved under lid. The lips are full and define a small mouth while the chin is upturned and globular.

The low forehead of the figure is further obscured by the *mitra*. The hair is parted in the middle and formulated in thin corkscrew locks, shorter on the temples and gradually growing longer. The long neck features venus rings. The image is conceived as a bust with an

Fig. 2



elegantly curved bust line. Some engravings on the shoulder stand for the chiton. On the hair above the forehead, there is a fillet tied that appears to split on the back into two strings. The flowing free end of the fillet – not so of a hair lock – is depicted on the back side above the hair locks.

The corkscrew locks indicate Ptolemaic Egypt as the possible milieu that inspired the image of the ring now in the Kanellopoulos Museum; no less the *mitra*, a well-attested attribute of the Ptolemaic royal portraits. Dionysus, Ariadne and members of the Dionysiac *thiasos* have been represented with the *mitra* since the 4th century BC. The association with Dionysus and its cult made the *mitra* a most prominent attribute in the Ptolemaic dynasty. Thus, on the obverse of coins minted in Alexandria at the time of Ptolemy's I satrapy, Alexander sports an elephant's scalp, the aegis, the horns of Ammon Zeus and the *mitra* of Dionysus². Ptolemy I Soter himself is depicted on coins wearing the diadem low above his forehead in a Dionysiac manner and as far as depictions of the same king on medallions and metal reliefs are concerned, the king is actually featuring a *mitra*³.

Regarding the female bust on the ring, the *mitra* appears to resemble a diadem. The diadem as a royal *insignium*, is never depicted with its ends flowing free in the examples of the female portraits on Ptolemaic coin issues. Arsinoe II Philadelphus is the first Ptolemaic queen to be portrayed with a diadem and a veil on the back of her head, inaugurating a tradition that was to be followed by her female successors⁴. Furthermore, the female figure on the finger ring stands apart by the broad fillet that is worn by Isis and the queens assimilated into her, in combination with other attributes of Isis appearing on seal impressions of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC⁵ and also with the similarly broad diadem worn by the last of the Ptolemies, Cleopatra VII, with the ends flowing free down her back⁶.

There is another famous parallel, Lycomedes' gem, after the name of the artist that signed it, a work remarkable for its quality and design. It has been proposed that the figure depicts a Ptolemaic queen, most probably Cleopatra I, as Isis⁷.

The possibility of a fillet as head gear for embellishing the coiffure should not be dismissed. There are enough surviving representations of Ptolemaic queens in intaglio and recognized as Berenice II, wearing double fillets, as a means of securing an elegant hair style⁸.

The corkscrew locks, otherwise known as «boucles anglaises», «Isis coiffure» or «Libyan locks» have comprised since the early second century BC a well-attested hair style, connected with Isis as well as with the Ptolemaic queens, that by this time had been assimilated into the goddess⁹. Even though it has been suggested that the hair style is actually a wig¹⁰, one can almost agree on the fact that if ordinary peasant girls are depicted with the «Isis hair style», then this is a portrayal of real hair¹¹. Indeed the earliest representations are to be encountered at Petosiris Grave, where on wall paintings of the late 3rd century BC humble women in a rural setting are depicted with corkscrew locks¹².

As far as sculpture in general is concerned, the Isis coiffure has been attested in combination with the Isis dress both representing either Isis herself or the Ptolemaic queens. There is an ongoing discussion concerning the provenance of the hair style and scholarship is divided between the Egyptian and the Greek alternatives. The fact remains that this type of locks is already attested in the Greek sculpture of the late Classical times. Typical examples include the statue of Eirene of Cephisodotus the Elder¹³ as well as the Isis head found in the Serapeion in Thessaloniki and dated to the second quarter of the 4th century BC.¹⁴ Whereas in those cases the locks comprise only a part or some element of the hairstyle, in Hellenistic Egypt of the late 3rd and early 2nd century BC the locks emerge as a well defined hair style. The coiffure becomes typical for the newly modeled iconography of the Isis and also for the appearance of the Ptolemaic queens, whose cult and iconography is strongly inspired by that of Isis.

The Isis head wreathed with ears of corn on bronze issues of the reigns of Ptolemy V Epiphanes and Ptolemy VI Philometor, offer a useful *terminus ante quem* in reference to the introduction of the hair style in the iconography of Isis¹⁵. There has been tentatively pointed out that the Isis head on the issues of Philometor could in fact have borne the facial features of the queen, in view of the fact that Cleopatra I could have had the authority to mint her own coins with her own types and legends¹⁶.

Cleopatra I, wife of Epiphanes until his death in 180BC and co-regent to her son, Philometor, from 180 until her death in 176BC is certainly the first Ptolemaic queen depicted with the coiffure of Isis. The queen figure from a Ptolemaic oinochoe¹⁷ as well as medallions in faience¹⁸ that have been identified with Cleopatra I testify to this fact.

Sculptural portraits of the 2nd century BC of Ptolemaic queens demonstrate the Isis coiffure. Only one tier of corkscrew locks feature on the queen from Abuquir¹⁹, the head in Brooklyn²⁰, the statue in Metropolitan Museum, New York²¹, and the expressive marble bust in the Louvre²². It is particularly noteworthy that the small statue of Arsinoe II Philadelphus in New York dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC exhibits a well arranged coiffure of Isis, a hairstyle that did not exist during the queen's lifetime²³. Obviously new trends demanded that the figure of the queen was re-modeled and adapted to the current style of the time.

Two tiers of corkscrew locks are attested in the so called «Vienna Queen», with a harshly unflattering effect²⁴. More tiers of corkscrew locks are known on the queen in Baltimore²⁵ and an exceptional finger ring made of ivory²⁶.

The one-tier variation can be thought as typical of an earlier phase and can be associated with the earlier part of the 2nd century BC and as a result with Cleopatra I. The more elaborate variations with two or more tiers make their appearance a little later. A useful dating is provided by the image of Cleopatra Thea on the Seleucid issues of both her sole²⁷ and joint with Antiochus VIII Grypus (125-121 BC) reign²⁸.

The official portrait of Cleopatra I on the unique known *mnacion* acquired by the British Museum in 1978 bears no trace of the corkscrew locks²⁹. The queen has her hair secured under the *stephane* and the back of her head veiled. Nevertheless, there is a remote but unmistakable similarity: the shallow profile, the slightly upturned nose and the miniature small style in rendering the girlish facial features. Furthermore, the youthful appearance of the woman on the ring may be consistent with the tendency to ascribe the mature looking Ptolemaic portraits to Cleopatra II and Cleopatra III, since both queens reached old age.

On the whole, the image looks rather idealized and lacks individualistic features. As such it can only be regarded as an idealized portrait of a Ptolemaic queen, possibly Cleopatra I. On the other hand, the absence of divine attributes prevents us from identifying the image with Isis. The so typical «Hathor – crown» (solar disc between cow horns), that is often combined with the diadem and other Egyptian attributes are totally missing. The difficulty of distinguishing Ptolemaic queen portraits assimilated into Isis from ideal representations of Isis remains one of the *vexatae quaestiones* of the scholarly debate. The problem lies in the fact that the attributes – Isis coiffure, diadem, crown of Hathor – were interchangeable³⁰. The Hellenistic ideology of kingship perceived the sovereigns as gods and queens³¹.

Close parallels with the Kanellopoulos ring could be the four rings acquired in Smyrna and now at the Louvre, that remain unpublished³²; also, a series of Ptolemaic intaglios that are usually identified with Isis³³. They share the same restraint for the explicit Egyptian attributes of Isis and they are Greek in style.

Context

Portraits of Ptolemaic queens in miniature are best attested in coins. Coinage in particular offers a secure repertoire of portraits from Berenice I to Cleopatra VII, which has proved quite useful for the attribution of portraits in glyptics – gems and fingerings – as well as for seal impressions and of course for portraits on the whole.

Metal intaglios are rare in Hellenistic glyptic art. It has been argued, that they form the link between die cutting and gem engraving. Their technique resembles that of the

die cutters but the themes and concept are similar to glyptics³⁴. In addition to the ring in the Kanellopoulos Museum, there is also the bronze intaglio of queen, at all probability, Berenice II in the J. Paul Getty Museum³⁵. The intaglio portrait of a mature lady on a gold bezel attached to an iron ring found in a tomb in Corfu is also worthy of mentioning. It has been identified with Berenice I, wife of Ptolemy I Soter and mother of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, based on the similarity with the portrait on the gold *mnaeion* where she appears next to Soter³⁶. A tomb in Corfu has been recorded as the gold bezel's provenance. The same might be also applied to the ring at the Kanellopoulos Museum.

Still, the function of the ring could be the one typical to the intaglio technique: sealing. Seals were impressed on soft materials such as wax or clay. They were important for securing property and also for identifying the owner and permitting access. Moreover, seals identified the bearer and could be the source of authority. It was also a common practice to seal correspondence and contracts with them. Additionally, state officials employed the use of seals and rulers had their personal signet devices. Although seals were meant to be private and in a way unique, modern day findings testify that the device could be trivial and common since quite a few of them were in circulation³⁷.

Findings such as the archives discovered in Edfu, Egypt, in Nea Paphos, Cyprus and in Kallipolis, Aetolia have shed more light on the question of seal usage. All three are hoards of clay sealings with a large proportion of Ptolemaic royal portraits. They have been variously interpreted as either part of state or private archives or transactions documents or correspondence, yet all three have one thing in common: they contain a large proportion of Ptolemaic royal portraits³⁸. The nature and dating of the archives as well as their origin clearly indicate in all three cases that the users of these signets were somehow linked to the Ptolemaic empire, most probably as state officials. Indeed, both literary evidence and the few cases of papyri preserved along with their sealing suggest likewise; that the persons in question enjoyed relations with the Ptolemaic court, as for example priests of the ruler cult or state officials that acted in the name of the sovereign and under his command and who declared by carrying and using the signet the fact that they belonged to the sovereign's entourage, thus defining themselves as the sovereign's supporters and followers³⁹.

Conclusions

The bronze ring in Kanellopoulos Museum bears a representation of a female figure with the Isis coiffure, *mitra* and diadem. It can be regarded as an idealized representation of a Ptolemaic queen, at all probability Cleopatra I in the guise of Isis. The ring is particularly noteworthy since exact parallels do not exist and the metal intaglios are rare. Its original context remains unknown but it can be assumed that it once belonged to a person associated with the Ptolemaic state as an official, a priest or a supporter.

ABBREVIATIONS

ALBERSMEIER 2002 = S. ALBERSMEIER, *Untersuchungen zu den Frauenstatuen des Ptolemäischen Ägypten*, Mainz am Rhein 2002.

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MILNE 1916 = J.G. MILNE, *Ptolemaic Seal Impressions*, «JHS» 36, 1916, 87-101.

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FOOTNOTES

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1 PLANTZOS 1999, 36-37 Type IIB; BOARDMAN 2001, 213-214 Type XVII.

2 SNG Cop Alexandria 11-30 (319-315BC).

3 SVENSON 1995, 30, 277-278 Cat. no. 263, pl. 16; 30, 278 Cat. no. 264, pl. 16.

4 RITTER 1965, 114-124. FRANKE – HIRMER 1964, fig. 802V (Arsinoe II), fig. 805V and pl. XX (Berenice II), fig. 807 (Arsinoe III). Cf. the commentary of KYRIELEIS 1987, 535.

5 KYRIELEIS 1977, 114-117 Pl. 100.3 und 4 from Edfu; KYRIELEIS 1987, 535. Cf. KYRIELEIS 2015, 128 nos. Q17-Q18 Pl. 74 (from Paphos).

6 FLEISCHER 1996, 238-240 pl. 41, 3-6; WALKER – HIGGS 2001, 177-178 cat. nos. 177-186; 234 cat. nos. 219-222; 235 cat. nos. 223, 227, 230.

7 Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 27.711; PLANTZOS 1999, 52, 115 cat. no. 48, pl. 9.

8 PLANTZOS 1999, 47-49, 114 cat. nos. 28, 39-42, 50-51, pls. 5, 7-8.

9 FRASER 1972, 246-276.

10 BOTHMER 1973, 146.

11 ALBERSMEIER 2002, 67 fn. 403.

12 LEFEBVRE, 1923-1924, pls. 13 lower register, 35 upper and lower register, pl. 46 middle and lower register, pl. 49 up, as well as color pls. 14, 36, 47.

13 München, Glyptothek 219, H 2.06 m; VIERNISEL-SCHLÖRB 1979, 255-273, cat. no. 25, figs. 119-127.

14 DESPINIS – STEFANIDOU-TIVERIOU – BOUTYRAS 1997, 46 cat. no. 27, figs. 54-57.

15 Ptolemy V Epiphanes: SVORONOS 1904, p. τλγ´-τλϵ´, nos. 1232-1238, 1240, pl. 40, 7-12, 14-15, 18. Ptolemy VI Philometor: SVORONOS

1904, 225-226, nos. 1382, 1384, pl. 47, 11, 15.

16 Hölbl 1994, 128.

17 Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1909.347, PH 14.4 cm: THOMPSON 1973, 93, 166, cat. no. 123, pl. 43.

18 THOMPSON 1973, 92-93, 200-201, cat. nos. 274-276, pl. 65.

19 Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum Inv. 28107, H 24.2 cm: ALBERSMEIER 2002, 289-290 cat. no. 18, pl. 31b: 1st half 2nd century BC. But KYRIELEIS 1975, 119, cat. no. M9, pl. 103, 3 thinks of it as belonging to the 1st century BC.

20 Brooklyn, N. Y., The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Inv. 71.12, H 13.7 cm: ALBERSMEIER 2002, 202-203, cat. no. 38, pl. 30 c-d. Ashton 2001, 116-117, cat. no. 64 thinks on the contrary Cleopatra VII.

21 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. 89.2.660, H 61, 8: BOTHMER 1973, 145-147, cat. no. 113; ALBERSMEIER 2002, 204-25, cat. no. 105, pl. 31a.

22 Louvre Ma 3546, H 37 cm: KYRIELEIS 1975, 185, cat. no. M 12, pl. 104, 1-2; SMITH 1988, 166-167, cat. no. 56, pl. 38, 3-4; HAMIAUX 1998, 88-89, cat. no. 90.

23 New York Metropolitan Museum Inv. 20.2.21, H 38.1 cm Arsinoe II (named by inscription): ALBERSMEIER 2002, 350-352, cat. no. 106, pls. 3a, 33a-b 2.; KYRIELEIS 1975, 82, 178, cat. no. J1, pl. 71; WALKER – HIGGS 2001, 166-167, cat. no. 166.

24 Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. AS I 406, H 32.5 cm: ALBERSMEIER 2002, 212-213, cat. no. 142, pl. 34d, 35 a-b; ASHTON 2001, 106-107, cat. no. 47; SMITH 1993, 208-209; SMITH 1988, 170 cat. no. 74, pl. 48, 1-2.

25 Baltimore, Walters Art Museum 22.407: ALBERSMEIER 2002, 210-211 cat. no. 33, pl. 34 a-b-c.

26 Nicosia, Cyprus Museum Inv. J.745: MARANGOU 1971, 164, cat. no. 8, pl. 81, 4.

27 MEYER 1992-1993, 117-119 fig. 13 a-c; HOUGHTON – LORBER – HOOVER 2008, 465-466.

28 MEYER 1992-1993, 119-123 figs. 14-20; HOUGHTON – LORBER – HOOVER 2008, nos. 2259-2262, 2265, 2267-2273, 2276-2277.

29 BM 1978, 1021.1: PINCOCK 2010, 60-62.

30 KYRIELEIS 2015, 46.

31 Some general thoughts: CHANKOWKI 2011, 2-9.

32 DE RIDDER 1924, nos. 1395-1395bis, 1397-1399.

33 PLANTZOS 1999, 115 cat. nos. 51-69.

34 PLANTZOS 2002, 73.

35 Malibu, The J. Paul Getty Museum 81.AN.76.207: SPIER 1992, 50, cat. no. 92.

36 PLANTZOS 1999, 47, Pl. 88.1

37 PLANTZOS 1999, 18-22.

38 MILNE 1916, 98-101; KYRIELEIS 1975, 70-71; PANTOS 1985, 427-460; PLANTZOS 2011, 396-405; KYRIELEIS 2015, 34-50. Overview in PLANTZOS 1999, 26-28, 29, 31-32.

39 KYRIELEIS 2015, 53-55.