

THE DIVINIZATION OF THE PTOLEMIES AND THE GOLD OCTADRACHMS HONORING PTOLEMY III

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ONE OF THE MOST PERPLEXING ASPECTS of Hellenistic kingship is the divine status of the king. Both the Seleucids and the Ptolemies were worshipped as gods by their subjects, but the nature of this divinization and the attitude of the kings themselves and of their subjects varied from reign to reign. The Ptolemaic dynasty underwent a number of stages of divinization, which can be traced through the official documents of their bureaucracy and, in particular, through their coinage. The coins issued by Ptolemy IV in honor of his father Ptolemy III exemplify one aspect of the development of Hellenistic divine kingship.¹ This coin series will be considered with particular reference to divine nomenclature and iconography, with the intention of shedding some light on the nature of Ptolemaic divine kingship.

The gold octadrachms honoring Ptolemy III are among the most remarkable of all the series of Ptolemaic coinage. Whereas scholars are in agreement that these coins portray Ptolemy III, there is uncertainty whether they were issued by Ptolemy III himself or by his son Ptolemy IV.² The inscription on this series is generic, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ, which precludes any closer identification.³ Ptolemy III is portrayed on the obverse bearing a number of divine symbols: the aegis of Zeus, the trident of Poseidon, and the radiate crown of Helios (fig. 1). In this article we will investigate the nature and meaning of this iconography and its relationship to Ptolemaic divine image and titulature.

Scholarly opinion has varied about the nature of this iconography, but it has been generally agreed that these symbols show that Ptolemy III was being portrayed as a god, or as a syncretic version of three gods. According to Head, Ptolemy III "figures in the triple guise of Zeus, Helios, and Poseidon."⁴ Seltman takes this identification one step further:

Euergetes . . . struck in addition some coins in both metals [*sc.* gold and silver] with his own portrait as a pantheistic deity. Around his head is the royal diadem and a crown made of alternating rays and twisted horns, over his shoulder a composite object,

¹ Svoronos 1904: nos. 1117–19.

² Considered as an issue of Ptolemy III: Head 1911: 853; Seltman 1933: 243; as an issue of Ptolemy IV: Mørkholm 1991: 108–109; Smith 1988: 44.

³ All the Ptolemies minted coins with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ, but their *epikleseis* (Soter, Euergetes, Philopator), without divine title (Theos), were also used, and therefore allowed closer identification.

⁴ Head 1911: 853.

scepter-trident with wings, around his neck the aegis; thus he is Helios-Ammon-Zeus in one.⁵

Seltman evidently felt that Euergetes was being depicted as a god, and as a syncretic combination of three gods. This identification of Ptolemy III as a god was followed by Kyrieleis:

Die büstenförmige Bildnis des Königs ist in synkretistisch wirkender Weise mit verschiedenen göttlichen und herrscherlichen Attributen ausgestattet. Zu der chlamysartig getragenen Ägis kommt der Poseiden-Dreizack über der Schulter und die Strahlenkrone des Helios, die sich mit dem Königsdiadem verbindet. Das eine der gefransten Diadem-Enden ist nach vorn über die Schulter gelegt. Die Verschiedenartigkeit der göttlichen Attribute zeigt, dass der Herrscher nicht in Gestalt eines bestimmten Gottes dargestellt ist, sondern die Götterattribute verschiedene Aspekte der Göttlichkeit des Königs symbolisieren. Fast theaterhaft wirkt diese Häufung der Attribute vor allem im Kontrast zu den kleinen und runden Formen des Gesichtes, die mit herkömmlichen griechische Idealen wenig gemeinsam haben.⁶

Kyrieleis, like Seltman, felt that Ptolemy III was depicted as a god with a number of divine attributes, namely the aegis, trident, and radiate crown. But can the iconography be interpreted in this way, and is it in concert with other evidence with respect to the Ptolemaic dynasty's attitude towards its own divinity?

R. R. R. Smith, in his examination of Hellenistic royal portraiture, has made some important observations about the nature of divine iconography.⁷ After examining such attributes as the lion scalp, ram's horns, bull's horns, elephant scalp, aegis, rays, etc., Smith concluded that these attributes associate the monarch with the deities but do not assimilate him to them. On the aegis, Smith states: "The kings borrow it from Athena but adapt it so as to bypass the evocation of the goddess. They give it a new royal form which *associates* (my italics) the king of men with Zeus, king of the gods."⁸ Smith writes of the rays: "These 'radiate diadems' are used so widely by the Ptolemies and Seleucids that it is unlikely that they have very precise meaning—for example, a specific *assimilation* (my italics) to Helios. They probably denoted the godlike brilliance of the king's person and perhaps expressed the ambiguous ideas inherent in the epithet *epiphanes*."⁹ Finally, with explicit reference to the coin series depicting Ptolemy III under discussion, Smith concludes:

⁵Seltman 1933: 243. Mørkholm (1991: 109) is more guarded: "The concentration of such symbols is perhaps intended to show the deceased king as the master of the three elements, heaven, earth and sea."

⁶Kyrieleis 1975: 28–29.

⁷Smith 1988: 32–45.

⁸Smith 1988: 41–42.

⁹Smith 1988: 42.

Nor can complex identification of Ptolemy-Helios-Poseidon-Zeus be intended in Ptolemy III's posthumous coin portraits which show the king with radiate diadem, trident sceptre, and chlamys-shaped aegis. The king retains his own character and features, while the attributes express various divine powers, without the image actually having to define the nature of his relationship with the gods. Here the attributes are most clearly royal-divine, rather than simply divine, because each is formally adapted to its nearest analogue among purely royal insignia: aegis-chlamys, trident-sceptre, radiate crown-diadem.¹⁰

Smith makes the important observation that "the relationship between king and god could be filled in from the viewer's knowledge," and that it is impossible to determine the nature of these attributes, since we are ignorant of their "contextual distinctions," that is, whether a statue was produced by a polis, for a royal cult, or as an honorific portrait.¹¹

Smith's significant observations on the nature of the iconography of this coin issue can be supported by the titulature found on all Ptolemaic coinage and, in general, in all official documents from the reigns of Ptolemies I–IV. Smith argues that association with, and not assimilation to, the divine is at work in coin-portrait iconography. In other words, the Ptolemies wanted to show themselves as god-like in their abilities, but not as gods themselves. But how does this fit in with the divine cults, both royal and dynastic, with which they were honored? Let us first examine the titulature found on this coin issue and on other Ptolemaic coinage, and then turn to the nature of the Ptolemies and their divinity.

The inscription found on the reverse of the gold octadrachms honoring Ptolemy III reads simply ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ. This plain titulature clearly presents Ptolemy III as a king and not a god. On the other hand, in the dynastic cult Ptolemy III and his wife, Berenice II, were worshipped as *Theoi Euergetai*, as attested by numerous papyri and inscriptions from his lifetime.¹² This titulature confirms Smith's supposition that Ptolemy III, depicted on this coinage with a rather mortal face, was a king with god-like abilities, but not a god in the syncretic guise of a number of divinities. But it is possible to take this conclusion one step further.

Divine titulature is utterly lacking in all official sources down to the reign of Ptolemy VI, that is, in royal decrees, letters, dedications, and coins.¹³ This suggests a deliberate policy on the part of the dynasty to avoid direct and official advertisement of their divinity, which was expressed exclusively in the royal and dynastic cults. The coins issued by Ptolemy I–IV contain almost no divine titles. The reigning king is always referred to as simply ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ.¹⁴

¹⁰ Smith 1988: 44.

¹¹ Smith 1988: 44.

¹² For the inception date of the cult of the Θεοὶ Εὐεργέται, see Ijsewijn 1961: 118. The title is first found in *PHib* 171; in addition Ptolemy III and Berenice II are worshipped as Θεοὶ Εὐεργέται in a number of unofficial dedications: *OGIS* 62, 63, 64, and *SB* 585, 586, 4624, 9735.

¹³ See Johnson forthcoming.

¹⁴ The coinage of Ptolemies I–IV does present a number of varieties: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ, ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ, ΑΡΕΙΝΟΗΣ ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ, ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ, but all

The one exception is the famous Θεῶν Ἀδελφῶν coinage of Ptolemy II (fig. 2).¹⁵ This issue has an obverse legend of ΘΕΩΝ above the jugate heads of Ptolemy I and Berenice I (the *Theoi Soteres*), the divinised parents of Ptolemy II, and the title ΑΔΕΛΦΩΝ on the reverse which depicts the jugate heads of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II (the *Theoi Adelphoi*). The suggestion is that the two divided titles should be linked to honor Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II as living gods; that is, it is a coin issued by the *Theoi Adelphoi*. If this were so, then it would be the sole case among all official sources from 305–205 B.C. where a living Ptolemy referred to himself emphatically as a god. However, since this goes entirely against official trends of Ptolemaic titulature used in the third century B.C., another explanation must be offered.

As Smith noted in the case of iconography above, ambiguity and association play a large role in iconography and imagery. Ptolemy II, by placing the title ΘΕΩΝ above the heads of his deceased parents and not above his own head, suggests that his parents are gods, but that he and Arsinoe are simply *Adelphoi*, without direct divine association. He, therefore, avoids direct criticism of self-aggrandizement. However, anyone who handled the coin could by indirect association link the titles together and read it as a coin of the *Theoi Adelphoi*. This kind of divinisation by indirect association is paralleled in the patronymic of the same king, who referred to himself as King Ptolemy, son of Ptolemy *Theos Soter*. He thus saw himself not as a god, but as the son of a god.¹⁶ It is only in the reign of Ptolemy V that the simple *epiklesis* appears again on Ptolemaic coinage,¹⁷ and Ptolemy VI is the first to mint coins with the full divine *epiklesis*: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΜΗΤΟΡΟΣ.¹⁸

lack the divine titles Θεοῖ and Θεός. It should be noted, however, that coins bearing legends with these *epikleseis* honor deceased royalty. Thus, Ptolemy II–IV issued coins honoring Ptolemy I (ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ), Ptolemy II issued coins honoring the dead Arsinoe II (ΑΡΣΙΝΟΗΣ ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΟΥ), and Ptolemy V honored his dead father Ptolemy IV with another series (ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ; fig. 3).

¹⁵ Svoronos 1904: nos. 613–621.

¹⁶ Ptolemy II uses the patronymic “son of (Ptolemy) Soter” in his dating formulae: Βασιλεύοντος Πτολεμαίου τοῦ Σωτήρος; *Rev. Papyr.* 1 (259/8 B.C.); Βασιλεύοντος Πτολεμαίου τοῦ Πτολεμαίου Σωτήρος; *PCairoZen* 36 (285/4 B.C.); *PPetr* III 20 b (275/4 B.C.); *PHib* 94 (258/7 B.C.); *PPetr* III 37 a; *PHib* 95 (257/6 B.C.); *PSI* 336, 337, 338, 339, 506, 507, 560; *PCairoZen* 23; *PSI* 509 (256/5 B.C.); *PPetr* II 26 (253/2 B.C.); *PHib* 98 (252/1 B.C.); *PSI* 358; *PSI* 515 (251/50 B.C.); *PCairoZen* 46; *PPetr* I 22 (250/49 B.C.); *PPetr* III 71 (249/8 B.C.); *PSI* 521 (248/7 B.C.); *PCairoZen* 53 (247/6 B.C.). This list is derived from Preisigke and Kiessling 1925–58: 3.33; cf. Mørkholm 1991: 104.

¹⁷ As Mørkholm (1991: 110) observes, Ptolemy V issued a series of silver tetradrachms with the legend ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ (*SNG* 527, Copenhagen), “the first appearance of an honorary epithet used during a king’s lifetime except for the *Theoi Adelphoi* series.” For an explanation of Ptolemy V’s use of his *epiklesis* in official sources, see Johnson forthcoming.

¹⁸ Ptolemy VI calls himself a Theos Philometor in his dedication to the god Antaios and the Synnaoi gods from Antaiopolis (*OGIS* 109). He and his queen Cleopatra II are worshipped as Theoi Philometores in numerous unofficial dedications: *OGIS* 103, 106, 107, 111, 112, 114, 115, 121, 122, 123; *SEG* II 871; VIII 535; XVI 794; XVIII 656, 700; XX 142, 641, 646, 697, 871; *SB* 1164, 4526, 4629, 6157, 6158. See Svoronos 1904: nos. 1415–18.

Titulature use, therefore, supports Smith's observations on the iconography of the coin issue honoring Ptolemy III. Ptolemy III was associated with divinity by being given divine attributes, but he was not called a god on this coinage. But how does this lack of representation of the kings as gods in official sources relate to the promotion of their divinity in the divine cults honoring the Ptolemies, and how can this discrepancy be accounted for? How did the Ptolemies view their divinity, and why did they eschew the divine titles and iconography they might have employed in light of the divine honors given to them?

As I have suggested elsewhere, the discrepancy must lie in the desire of the Ptolemies to present themselves in a manner inoffensive to their fellow Greeks and to their various subject populations.¹⁹ P. M. Fraser suggested in the case of Ptolemy I that his motives for not personally promoting his own divine status were twofold: he did not wish to detract from the cult of the dead Alexander through worship of himself and it was not in his character to promote posthumous self-aggrandizement.²⁰ But political and social exigencies must also have influenced the Ptolemies in their policy of not promoting their own divinity. More properly, the promotion of the king's divinity belonged to his subjects. It would have been absurd for a god to promote his own divinity or—in effect—to make sacrifices to himself. Furthermore, the Ptolemies had to be aware of the religious sensibilities of the individuals and peoples who made up their empire. Although many Greeks would have had no problem in worshipping a man as a god (the trend had begun as early as the late fifth century B.C.), others would have found the idea repugnant.²¹ Native Egyptians, accustomed to the idea of the Pharaoh god-king, would not have been troubled by the Ptolemies proclaiming themselves gods, but the Jews of Egypt, like those in Asia under the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, might have rebelled if forced to worship any but their own god. Participation in the royal cults and use of divine titulature were optional, and it was up to the individual subject to choose the terms in which he might interpret the king.²² The title βασιλεύς, and all that implied, was the only necessary expression of loyalty, unlike the practice of imperial cult in the Roman Empire. To give room for this liberty of expression, the official policy of royal representation of the king had to be very open. Thus, when the Ptolemies struck their coins, which

¹⁹ Johnson forthcoming.

²⁰ Fraser 1972: 2.218.

²¹ On divine kingship and reactions to it, see Habicht 1970; Cerfaux and Tondriau 1957; Préaux 1978: 238–271.

²² This is seen in the variety of non-official titulature styles from the reign of Ptolemy I on. Ptolemy I is referred to as βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος (*OGIS* 17, 18; *SEG* XX 389), βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος Σωτήρ (*OGIS* 21), βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος καὶ Βασίλισσα Βερενίκη Θεοὶ Σωτήρες (*OGIS* 19), Πτολεμαῖος Σωτήρ (in Rubensohn 1908: no. 3) in dedications honoring him. Ptolemy II is called βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος (*OGIS* 24; *SEG* XX 300), βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος Βασιλέως καὶ Σωτήρος Πτολεμαίου (*SG*³ 390), βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος Βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου καὶ Βασίλισσης Βερενίκης (*OGIS* 26), βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος Πτολεμαίου Σωτήρος (*OGIS* 25), βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος Σωτήρων (*SEG* XVIII 636).

were used by all of their subjects, these coins bore but one title, the title of king, Βασιλεύς.

This modesty in self-presentation was to end in the second century B.C., when as a result of political pressures Ptolemy V and then Ptolemy VI began to employ their divine titles officially. It is important to note that the nature of Hellenistic divine kingship was unique to each monarch and to each reign, and the king's self-perception was guided by tradition, by the character of the ruler, and also by external factors. The Ptolemies were no different. The highly idiosyncratic gold octadrachms honoring Ptolemy III stand out among Ptolemaic coinage. The iconography seems to warrant a special interpretation based on the notion of the syncretism of divinities, along the lines of Sarapis.²³ Yet, put into the context of the general nature of Ptolemaic kingship and divinity, this series in fact reinforces attitudes towards divinity shared by all the Ptolemies of the third century B.C. The Ptolemies themselves refrained from a direct advertisement of their divine nature, preferring to leave this to their Greek subjects and the Pharaonic priesthood. As a result, divine titulature is absent from all official documents, but common in unofficial documents, and the two categories of materials should not be confused.

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²³ For the syncretism behind Sarapis, see Fraser 1967; Welles 1962: 273-274.

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Fig. 1. Gold octadrachm issued by Ptolemy IV. Obverse: Bust of Ptolemy III with radiate crown, aegis, and trident. Reverse: Cornucopia with diadem surmounted by a radiate crown; ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ. Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 2. Gold octadrachm issued by Ptolemy II. Obverse: Jugate busts of Ptolemy I and Berenice I; ΘΕΩΝ. Reverse: Jugate busts of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II; ΑΔΕΛΦΩΝ. Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 3. Gold octadrachm issued by Ptolemy V. Obverse: Diademed bust of Ptolemy IV. Reverse: Eagle standing r. on thunderbolt; ΠΤΟΛΕΜΑΙΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ. Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

THE DIVINIZATION OF THE PTOLEMIES



Fig. 1. Gold octadrachm issued by Ptolemy IV
(Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 2. Gold octadrachm issued by Ptolemy II
(Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 3. Gold octadrachm issued by Ptolemy V
(Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)