

DIVAE POTENTES CYPRI?
REMARKS ON THE CULT OF THE PTOLEMAIC QUEENS
AS APHRODITE

by

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Κύπριδος ἄδ' εἰκῶν· φέρ' ἰδῶμεθα μὴ Βερενίκας·
διστάζω ποτέρᾳ φῆ τις ὁμοιοτέραν.
(*Anth. Plan.* XVI 68)

The Hellenistic rule over Cyprus shifted over the three hundred years from the Antigonids to the Ptolemies and Romans, and was also actively sought by the Seleucids (HÖLBL 2001: 17 f.), but it was the Lagid dynasty that held power for most of the time here, and left the strongest imprint on the island. Also the presence of royal women of this family dates to very early time; according to Athenaios (XIII 576e), among the children that the hetaera Thais bore to Ptolemy Soter was “a daughter, Eirene, who was married to Eunostos, king of the Cypriot city of Soli”, the latter identified with the ruler of that name testified by one coin issue attributed to him (*BMC Cyprus*, pp. CXVI–CXVIII, Pl. XXV 2, cf. BAGNALL 1976: 187; the coin has the head of Aphrodite crowned with myrtle on its reverse, and Apollo on the obverse). The material in Athenaios is largely anecdotic, and we do not really know what was the status of Thais and her children, even though the verb used in the context (ἐγαμήθε) would suggest marriage; possibly research into local epigraphic sources or new finds connected with Eirene’s marriage could reveal more about this claim. It is certain, though, that Cleopatra III, one of the most influential 2nd century queens, spent her years of exile from Alexandria here (WHITEHORNE 1994: 117), and it was during her stay in Cyprus that she was proclaimed the living incarnation of Isis (Ἴσις μεγάλη μήτηρ θεῶν¹), and bestowed with an honour that none of her predecessors had ever achieved: her divine cult was performed by a male priest

¹ DUNAND 1973 a: 42 and n. 2, observes that the epithet “mother of gods” was not originally present in the cult descriptions of Isis, and might therefore point at the assimilation with Cybele, for which Cyprus would be a natural intermediary.