

Classical scholarship often tends tacitly to assume the city-state as the norm and to define political power in terms of holding public office, despite the fact that monarchies were common in the ancient world and hardly limited to the frontiers. The Call for Papers for this WCC panel on “Women, Power and Leadership in the Ancient World” reflects the conflict between the presumed norm and the fact of monarchy. On the one hand, it asserts that “Greek and Roman social formations excluded women from the exercise of political or military power almost entirely,” and on the other it recognizes that a political/military role for women was not infrequently “sanctioned.” Clearly the first assertion best applies to various city-state governments and the second is most true of monarchies (and, to some degree, oligarchies).

This paper will deal only with monarchy, specifically monarchy in the Macedonian tradition, and with only one issue: the role of royal women as succession advocates. It will center on five women: Eurydice, mother of Philip II, Olympias, mother of Alexander III and grandmother of Alexander IV, Thessalonice, wife of Cassander, Berenice I, mother of Ptolemy II, and Arsinoe, during the period of her marriages to Lysimachus and Ptolemy Ceraunus. This mix of examples includes women who successfully championed a son/sons/grandson as successor, women who failed, and women who did both. Some examples involve women whose advocacy was public and direct, even military, whereas others deal with women who appear to have acted more privately and indirectly. In one case (Thessalonice) it is not even certain that she did play succession politics, but we do know that she was killed because one of her sons believed that she was favoring his brother.

This analysis of the role of succession advocate will focus on two concerns: determining the factors that contributed to the success or failure of the royal women’s aims and attempting to establish what the normative role for women in respect to this issue, at least in these monarchies, really was. The latter is a particularly difficult task because of the nature of our sources. Our literary sources (typically written long after these events) are often extremely hostile to royal women in this role: an apparently false tradition turned Eurydice into an adulterous murderer (Mortensen 1992), Olympias is transformed into a political caricature (Carney 1993); and Arsinoe becomes a lustful Phaedra-like sex kitten (Lund 1994). Nonetheless, it is often possible to use contemporary, largely non-literary sources to point to something like a contemporary norm in terms of these women’s actions. While each of these women has received some individual attention in recent scholarship, only Ogden (1999) has addressed the question in a general way. Though many of his arguments are compelling, his insistence that polygamy is the cause of virtually all succession conflicts is somewhat mechanistic and, in any case, not focused on what the expectations of appropriate behavior really were.

