

# A PTOLEMAIC QUEEN IN THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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*It is with great pleasure that I offer this paper in honour of Emily Teeter, whose expertise extends to virtually all aspects of Egyptian art and civilisation, and whose generosity and willingness to share that expertise have been an inspiration to me.*

In 2016, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (hereafter MFA) acquired a marble head listed by the dealer, Charles Ede, as ‘Head of a Queen in the Guise of Isis’ (fig. 1). Its provenance can be traced back to a 1969 sale in Basel (Münzen und Medaillen auction no. 40: Kunstwerke der Antike). Thus, it had demonstrably left Egypt prior to the 1970 UNESCO Convention prohibiting the trafficking of undocumented antiquities, enabling the MFA to pursue the purchase. The head is of a type known from the Ptolemaic era, portraying a queen in Classical style. Several publications have addressed the topic of differing styles of Ptolemaic sculpture, including Egyptian style, Greek style, and ‘mixed’ style.<sup>1</sup> This paper will not attempt to summarize the various theories. Because the MFA lacked a similar example, it would fill an important gap in the collection. However, it displayed enough peculiarities that when it arrived in Boston and was being considered for purchase, some of the curators expressed doubts about its authenticity. Furthermore, it had not appeared in the most comprehensive recent publications on Ptolemaic sculpture,<sup>2</sup> and when it was sold at auction at Christie’s as recently as 2013 it had gone unnoticed by any of the MFA’s curators of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art.

The head, made of cream-coloured marble, is 32.5 cm tall and shows a queen looking straight ahead and slightly downward, wearing corkscrew curls

1 Ashton 2001a; Bianchi 1988; Bothmer 1960; Plantzos 2011; Smith 1988; Stanwick 2002.

2 For example, Ashton 2001; Bianchi 1988; Walker and Higgs 2001; Stanwick 2002; Spier, Potts, and Cole 2018.



FIG. 1: Head of a queen in the guise of Isis, 200–100 B.C. Marble. Florence E. and Horace L. Mayer Fund and Marilyn M. Simpson Fund. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

bound by a diadem with a hole for the insertion of an additional element of the headdress. It is complete only down to the clavicle and would have been inserted into a body made of another material, as is often the case with Ptolemaic royal heads.<sup>3</sup> The hair and headdress are unfinished, having once been completed in stucco, significant amounts of which remain. The ears are pierced, the eyes are narrow and slightly downturned, and the lips, now damaged, are pursed. The face and neck, while somewhat fleshy, are less so than in many other sculptures of Ptolemaic queens.<sup>4</sup> ‘Venus rings’ on the neck are only slightly indicated. There is no evidence of a back pillar. These features will now be addressed in more detail.

<sup>3</sup> Ashton 2003: 74.

<sup>4</sup> Ashton 2003: 74; Walker and Higgs 2001: 52–53, 160–66.

First, there is a likely explanation for the statue's failure to register with either experts in Ptolemaic sculpture or the MFA's curators. At some point, probably in the 1970s, it was sold by Royal Athena Galleries in New York to an American collector, after which it spent time in private collections in Illinois and California before being consigned to Christie's in 2013. Consultation of the last sale catalogue in which it appears (Christie's New York sale 2709, 6 June 2013, lot 608) shows that while in private hands it had undergone an unfortunate restoration. The nose and lips were restored and the face and hair overpainted, rendering the overall appearance dubious. Only after conservation performed at some point between 2013 and 2016 did it have any semblance of authenticity.

Corkscrew curls first appear on coins minted in Kyrene and featuring the image of the Greek goddess Libya, the daughter of the Egyptian king Epaphus, himself a son of Zeus.<sup>5</sup> They are therefore of Classical origin and do not have local Egyptian precedents. The coiffure came to be associated with both Isis and Hathor, as it appears on figures wearing horned solar disks. Numerous parallels exist for sculptures of Ptolemaic queens with hairstyles and headgear similar to that of the Boston head, which were also intended for insertion into statues made of different materials. These examples include a head of Berenike II from Tell Timai, now in the Egyptian Museum (JE 39517), dating to the second half of the 3rd century BCE<sup>6</sup> and a 2nd century BCE head of Cleopatra II or III now in the Louvre (MA 3546).<sup>7</sup> In both of these cases, especially the latter, however, the head is turned upward and to the side, unlike the Boston queen.

The closest parallels for queens with a diadem over "Libyan" curls come from coins, gems, and intaglios. A very similar hairstyle appears on the bezel of an unprovenanced late 2nd century BCE gold ring in the British Museum (GR 1917.5-1.96), in which case the diadem supports a vulture headdress.<sup>8</sup> They also appear frequently on coins, such as a bronze coin from Naukratis struck by Ptolemy VIII (146–117 BCE) and now in Boston (86.852) (fig. 2). A sardonyx intaglio said to be from Cyrenaica and now in the British Museum (gem 1196) shows an early 2nd century queen with similar curls but a double diadem.<sup>9</sup> A mid-2nd century gem from the Tyszkiewicz collections and also in Boston (27.711) likewise portrays a queen or goddess with this hairstyle.<sup>10</sup> Phoebe Segal has postulated that it might represent Cleopatra II, and that the presence of a solar disc and cows' horns associate her with Isis.<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey

5 Plantzos 2011: 395, 397.

6 Walker and Higgs 2001: 49.

7 Walker and Higgs 2001: 59.

8 Walker and Higgs 2001: 67.

9 Ashton 2001d: 66.

10 Zwierlein-Diehl 2012: fig. 255; Segal 2016, 212.

11 Segal 2016: 212.



FIG. 2: Coin of Kingdom of Egypt with head of Isis (?), struck under Ptolemy VIII, 146–117 B.C. Bronze. Egypt Exploration Fund by subscription. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

Spier supports this interpretation.<sup>12</sup> There has been some debate about whether sculptures of queens with corkscrew locks but without the horned sun disc should also be interpreted as representations of the queen in the guise of Isis. Sally-Ann Ashton has argued that Isis does not appear with corkscrew curls before the Roman period and that, instead, the coiffure indicates a deified queen.<sup>13</sup>

Frontality is a feature of Egyptian style rather than Greek style sculpture during the Ptolemaic period,<sup>14</sup> and the forward-facing posture and facial features of the MFA queen are more closely paralleled by sculptures of queens in Egyptian style or wearing Egyptian style wigs. The face bears some similarity to a head believed to be Arsinoe II and now in the Kunstmuseum

<sup>12</sup> Spier 2018a: 192.

<sup>13</sup> Ashton 2003: 8; 88.

<sup>14</sup> Bianchi 2018: 141.

der Universität, Bonn (B 284),<sup>15</sup> but corkscrew curls are not attested as early as Arsinoe's reign.<sup>16</sup> The head of an unidentified queen or goddess found in Rome and now in the Musei Capitolini (inv. 1154) features soft facial features in Hellenistic style with a frontal head and Egyptian style tripartite wig and vulture headdress.<sup>17</sup> While the statue was once believed to represent Berenike II, Ashton has pointed out that the facial features are indicative of a 1st century BCE date,<sup>18</sup> while Jeffrey Spier believes that it may be as late as the 1st century CE.<sup>19</sup>

The most unusual feature of the Boston queen's face is the treatment of the eyes, which are narrow, with heavy lids. Typically, Ptolemaic sculptures have wide open eyes.<sup>20</sup> It was the eyes more than anything else that raised suspicion about the sculpture's authenticity. Pierced ears are also uncommon; in fact, in most statues of queens with the corkscrew coiffure the ears are not even visible. However, because there is great variability amongst the surviving examples, neither feature would in itself preclude the statue from being ancient.

In order to help determine the authenticity of the sculpture, the MFA consulted Ariel Hermann, a specialist in Ptolemaic sculpture, who saw no reason to doubt its authenticity. Further evidence in support of its antiquity came when C. Mei-An Tsu, an Associate Conservator in the MFA's Department of Objects Conservation, examined it. While the face has been chemically cleaned and covered with a thick coating of glossy wax, traces of burial accretions remained in the nostrils, around the ears, and where the curls meet the neck. The nature of the drill marks in the earlobes and nostrils suggest that they were made using ancient tools. Most importantly, examination using Visible Induced Luminescence (VIL) and X-ray Fluorescence (XRF) identified small traces of Egyptian blue pigment (calcium copper silicate) in the hair. Their presence was confirmed by a visual examination using a stereomicroscope. Because the use of Egyptian blue ceased after the Roman period and its composition was long forgotten, the likelihood that a forger would place microscopic grains on a modern creation is highly unlikely.

It is notoriously difficult to identify individual images of Ptolemaic queens in the absence of inscriptional evidence.<sup>21</sup> This is in part because the statues are not portraits, but idealized images, and in part by the fact the bodies into which marble heads were once inserted are now missing, along with any identifying inscriptions.<sup>22</sup> This paper will therefore not attempt to name the queen depicted in the MFA's statue. While the facial features are

15 Kyrieleis 1975: 179–80; Bianchi, 1988: 168; Ashton 2001a: 10.

16 Ashton 2003: 88.

17 Ashton 2001b: 216–17; Ashton 2001a: 118–119.

18 Ashton 2001a: 118–19.

19 Spier 2018b: 271.

20 Bianchi 2018: 143.

21 Ashton 2001a: 8; Ashton 2003: 74.

22 Ashton 2003: 75; Bianchi 2018: 141.



unusual, the hairstyle is best paralleled by images from the 2nd century BCE, so a tentative date to this century has been proposed. Further research, including analysis of the marble to determine its source, may shed more light on the place and date of manufacture. <sup>1</sup>

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