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Berenice at Rome

By Arthur Keaveney, Canterbury, and John Madden, Galway

Over the last fifty years or so the visit (or visits) Berenice made to Rome and the significance we ought to attach to her presence there have been the subject of some considerable debate¹. Since no consensus appears to have been reached on these matters we would like to make a contribution to the discussion. We propose a threefold division of our investigation. First of all we shall examine the evidence for the number of Berenice's visits and their chronology. Then we shall look at how Berenice's affair with Titus is to be viewed against the background of the history of the period. Finally we shall attempt to draw together the results of these enquiries in order to reach some conclusion however tentative.

I. Berenice's Visits and their Chronology

In essence three sources attest to Berenice's presence in Rome and, at the same time, furnish some notion of when she was there².

Suetonius' *Titus* 7 has Titus dismissing Berenice at the start of his reign³. Unfortunately he does not say what she had been doing prior to this or how long she had been in Rome.

The evidence for two visits to Rome comes from Dio. He says (66.15.3–4) that she came to the city when she was at the height of her powers. Titus, however, eventually dismissed her in the first half of 79, while Vespasian was still in power⁴. But then, sometime after Titus became emperor (on the death of his father on 23rd June, 79), she returned to Rome once more⁵.

As is well known the *Epitome de Caesaribus* largely follows Suetonius except in one instance. In describing the Caecina affair (10.4) he says Titus killed Caecina *ob suspicionem stupratae Berenicis uxoris suae*. This would of course

1 See especially J. A. Crook, "Titus and Berenice", *AJPH* 22 (1951) 162–175; P. M. Rogers, "Titus, Berenice and Mucianus", *Historia* 29 (1980) 86–95; D. Braund, "Berenice in Rome", *Historia* 33 (1984) 120–123; B. W. Jones, *The Emperor Titus* (London 1984) 91–93; U. Wilcken, "Berenike 15", *RE* 3 (1899) 287–289.

2 Quintilian 4.1.19 also has her in Rome but does not say when. For some further remarks on this passage see sect. II below.

3 D. Braund, op. cit. (supra n. 1) 120. Crook's presumption op. cit. (supra n. 1) 168 that Suetonius knew of a double dismissal is unwarranted.

4 On these dates see Crook, op. cit. (supra n. 1) 167 and Rogers, op. cit. (supra n. 1) 91 n. 29, 92 n. 31 where the skepticism about attempts to date the arrival prior to 75 seems justified.

5 There is nothing in the sources to support the speculations of Crook, op. cit. (supra n. 1) 167 or Jones, op. cit. (supra n. 1) 91. See Wilcken, op. cit. (supra n. 1) col. 288–289.

put Berenice in Rome in 79. However, this is contrary to the reason for the murder supplied not only by Suetonius but also by Dio. They both agree Caecina came to grief because he was involved in a conspiracy.

What value, then, is to be placed on the epitomator? Very little, we believe. Of the passage Crook, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 1) 167 n. 27 observes, “this is as likely to be a guess or a catchpenny fiction as to derive from any authority, reputable or otherwise”. Now, while it could be argued that this is a partially subjective view, it must also, we would maintain, be conceded that it has an element of truth in it especially as some other considerations offer support to Crook. To begin with we might claim this represents a well known phenomenon. Once the conception of a character is fixed then it is easy for someone to invent stories which, however incredible, are in harmony with that conception⁶. In the present instance this anecdote fits well with the queen’s unpopularity⁷. Again we have, we believe, to give due weight to what we remarked upon above: better sources tell a different story. Finally, apart from contradicting Suetonius and Dio, the epitomator has committed one definite error. He describes Berenice as an *uxor* when she was not. If he gets an important detail like this wrong then we must ask if the rest of what he says is right. Our conclusion would be to treat this source with great caution, at the very least.

So, in effect, we are left with the seemingly contradictory accounts of Dio and Suetonius. The most usual way for scholars to deal with them is to combine their joint evidence to produce a coherent picture⁸. There are, however, difficulties in the use of such a mode of procedure. We have to bear in mind that Dio and Suetonius do not always seem to be drawing on the same source for a particular incident⁹. We must also remember that research has shown that a mechanical union of Suetonius and another author does not always lead to satisfactory results¹⁰. Maybe, too, we should consider that, although our sources are of modest compass, scholars do not seem to have been able to agree on a version of events.

Thus, we shall examine the remainder of our evidence in the belief that Dio and Suetonius tell differing stories¹¹.

6 See A. Keaveney, “Persian behaviour and misbehaviour – some Herodotean examples”, *Athenaeum* 84 (1996) 30–35 on the “madness” of Xerxes.

7 See Jones, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 1) 93 (with caution). The more modern example of Marie Antoinette is perhaps relevant here. Consult the index (479) in the biography of A. Fraser (London 2001).

8 See, for example, Braund, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 1) 121.

9 Compare, for example, Dio 65.9.3–5 with Suet. *Dom.* 3.1 or Dio 66.26.1 with Suet. *Tit.* 10.1 and observe A. Keaveney, “Vespasian’s Gesture”, *GIF* 39 (1987) 213–216.

10 See A. Keaveney, “Sulla augur: coins and curiate law”, *AJAH* 7 (1982) 152–153.

11 For a very tentative reconciliation see n. 18.

II. Berenice and History

Arguably the most comprehensive attempt to fit Berenice into the period is that of Crook, *op. cit.* (supra n. 1). His argument is detailed but in essence reaches the conclusion that she was a player in a power struggle between Titus and Mucianus. Although Crook's thesis is ingenious and skillfully argued it is, in the final analysis, not based on the sources. It therefore follows that the criticisms of Rogers, *op. cit.* (supra n. 1) 86–94 are justified. Most other reconstructions, however, tend to be variants on Crook's¹². We believe that Braund alone has seen that the key element is Berenice's unpopularity in Rome. His thesis needs deepening and elaboration, however.

If we look at Suetonius' *Life* we find one theme emerging with a certain regularity: Titus was unpopular before becoming emperor but then became universally loved. This point is first made in Chapter 1. It occurs again in Chapter 6 where we are told that the murder of Caecina and other harsh acts made him unpopular. Once he became emperor, however, Titus became a noble character (Chap. 7). He indulged his subjects at beast shows and even shared the public baths with the common people (Chap. 8).

It is into this picture that Suetonius inserts Berenice. She is plainly one of the causes of his unpopularity and is bracketed with his boys. In other words, Titus, bent on improving his image, got rid of Berenice because she was not pleasing to the people¹³.

Whatever the differences about the number of visits Berenice made and their timing between Suetonius and Dio, there is one point on which both of them agree: she was got rid of because she was making Titus unpopular. Dio, as we saw above, says she came to Rome at the height of her power. In 79 she was sent away and Dio states the reason. The Romans resented her powers (65.15.3–4). She came back when Titus became emperor. This is mentioned in the context of Titus' self-reform upon becoming emperor. Nothing, however, is said of what happened next to Berenice (66.18.1–3).

Thus it would appear that our sources are in agreement as to why Berenice was rid of. They say she was making Titus unpopular and we would point out that they say no more than that.

Now, it may very well be urged that this considerably diminishes Berenice's importance. After all many scholars, as we know, have tried to involve the queen in high politics and low intrigue. We would argue, however, that we offer a juster estimate of her standing and one which is based on the plausible story

12 Rogers, *op. cit.* (supra n. 1) 95; Jones, *op. cit.* (supra n. 1) 91–93.

13 If we accept as true Suetonius' famous *invitus invitam* (chap. 7) then personal happiness may have been sacrificed for affairs of state. The same source would also seem to dispose of Wilcken's ungallant guess *op. cit.* (supra n. 1) 288–289.

we find in the ancients rather than a theoretical reconstruction. This, of course, does not mean we reject the splendid glimpse of her prominence afforded us by Quintilian¹⁴. Nor do we have difficulty with Dio's account which has not only, as we saw, Berenice arriving at the height of her powers but also expecting to marry Titus¹⁵. What we would note, however, is that, while Berenice's position may have been exalted, it rested on a flimsy foundation. She owed everything to the grace and favour of Titus and, as the sources make clear, once that was withdrawn she ceased to be of any consequence. Later scholars have found attractive Mommsen's description of her as "Kleopatra im kleinen"¹⁶. Perhaps a comparison with the wives of Henry VIII might, in some respects, be more appropriate.

III. Conclusion

It is time now to draw some general conclusions. As we have attempted to demonstrate, Berenice was obliged to leave Rome for one simple reason. She was a contributory factor to Titus' unpopularity. Unfortunately there is no agreement on when the expulsion occurred. Dio has it in 79 while Vespasian was still alive, whereas Suetonius places it at the time of Titus' succession (after Vespasian's death on 23 June)¹⁷. We have also argued (Section I) that it might be unwise to solve this problem by combining the evidence of the two authors¹⁸. Indeed we would now go further and suggest we should try to choose between the two. This may be done by asking the question: when was Titus most likely to want to get rid of Berenice? Surely when he became emperor. Then he took active steps to clean up his image in order, from being an unpopular crown prince, to become a beloved emperor. Before that he had shown himself to be indifferent to public opinion. Therefore we conclude that Suetonius has most likely got it right. He, rather than Dio, places the expulsion where it is most likely and if we reject Dio's dating of the expulsion there would seem to be no reason to accept its corollary, Berenice's return to Rome. One depends on the other and when the first is removed the second collapses.

14 4.1.19 with the explanation of Crook, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 1) 169–170.

15 65.15.3–4.

16 Rogers, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 1) 91 n. 28 and Wilcken, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 1) 289 with the curious observation: "Sie hatte nur das Unglück, dass Titus kein Antonius war."

17 If we invoked the epitome we might, perhaps, achieve greater precision since it appears to have Berenice in Rome in 79. However, as we indicated in section I above, we do not believe this source can be trusted.

18 Though we would suggest, without very great confidence, that if due weight were given to the two great silences in our sources a certain reconstruction might be possible. We speak of Dio's silence as to what happened to Berenice after she returned to Rome and Suetonius' silence as to how long she had been there before the expulsion he narrates. Acknowledging this we would have an expulsion in the first half of 79, narrated by Dio, followed by a return sometime after Vespasian's death on June 23, 79 and Titus' accession and then the expulsion mentioned by Suetonius. However, in what follows we shall utilize what we feel is a sounder approach.

So, our conclusion is that there was one expulsion occasioned by Titus' desire for rehabilitation upon becoming emperor.

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