

The political map of the Mediterranean world in the third century BC shows that the Ptolemies controlled an extensive empire. It had been gained by military and diplomatic power and was maintained by a powerful army and navy, the former regularly stocked with African elephants. But it was not easy. Possession of territory in Syria and the Levant was a constant bone of contention and five wars were fought with Seleucid monarchs between 274 and 200 BC. A few years after the end of the Fifth Syrian War (202–200 BC) the Ptolemaic empire outside Egypt had been effectively reduced to Cyprus and Cyrene (though there was perhaps a revival in the Aegean islands in about 165–45 BC). But loss of control of territory in Ionia and the Aegean to Antiochus III in about 197–5 BC was a serious blow to Ptolemaic prestige, perhaps even a threat to the stability of the dynasty.



**18 The Temple of Horus, Apollinopolis Magna (Edfu).** Ptolemy VIII crowned by Buto and Nekhbet, the goddesses symbolising Lower Egypt (red crown, left) and Upper Egypt (white crown, right). The reigning monarch was traditionally regarded as the incarnation of Horus on earth and the important annual Festival of the Coronation took place in this temple. Despite his unsavoury reputation Ptolemy VIII Euergetes Physcon was an important and generous benefactor of Egyptian temples.

So it is perhaps not mere coincidence that at just about this time the royal court introduced a series of grandiloquent titles for its administrative officers, honorific and loosely linked to function:

KINSMAN

OF THE ORDER OF FIRST FRIENDS

LEADER OF THE BODYGUARD

OF THE ORDER OF FRIENDS

OF THE ORDER OF SUCCESSORS

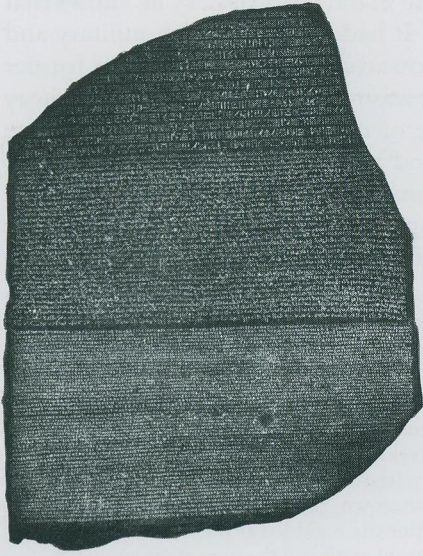
OF THE ORDER OF BODYGUARDS

and later on:

OF RANK EQUIVALENT TO KINSMAN

OF RANK EQUAL TO FIRST FRIEND

**Fig. 2 Ptolemaic overseas possessions.** The Ptolemaic empire was held not in the form of blocks of territory delimited by frontiers but by control of cities. Control for varying periods and in various areas of Thrace, Asia Minor and Syria was a phenomenon of the third century BC, as was that in the Greek Islands with the possibility of a revival *c.* 165–45 BC. Cyprus was a Ptolemaic possession from 312–30 BC except for the period 58–248 BC; Cyrenaica from 322–96 BC.



**19 The Rosetta Stone.** This famous trilingual inscription in black basalt was found in 1798. It records, in hieroglyphic, demotic and Greek, a decree passed by a council of priests at Memphis on the first anniversary of the coronation of Ptolemy V Epiphanes (March 27, 196 BC) bestowing honours on the king in return for his benefits to Egypt.

This must have been a device to reinforce the loyalty of the officers at a difficult time; perhaps also through the use of pseudo-familial titles like Kinsman and Successor to give the impression of strength and numbers in the royal family and to advertise this strength in what was left of the overseas dominions.

The holders of these titles were almost all Greeks, but there are also clear signs of a serious move to conciliate native Egyptian feelings. The inscription on the famous Rosetta stone, issued on March 27, 196 BC, proclaims clearly and for the first time that we know for certain the coronation of the king at Memphis, the traditional Egyptian capital, and decrees measures which will secure the loyalty and support of the native priesthood:

‘Since King Ptolemy, the ever-living, beloved of Ptah, the god Manifest and Beneficent, born of King Ptolemy and Queen Arsinoe, Father-loving gods, has conferred many benefits on the temples and those who dwell in them and on all the subjects in his kingdom, being a god born of a god and goddess – just as Horus son of Isis and Osiris who avenged his father Osiris . . .’

The reference to Horus avenging his father has some point:

‘When he came to Memphis to avenge his father and his own royalty, he punished in a fitting way all the leaders of those who rebelled in his father’s time, who had disturbed the country and done harm to the temples, at the time when he was there for the performance of the appropriate ceremonies for his reception of royalty’.<sup>13</sup>

As we might expect, this is not a full account of the relevant facts. We know of serious revolts, based on the city of Thebes, beginning in 207/6 BC. Two native ‘Pharaohs’ were proclaimed in succession, Haronnophris (or Hurgonaphor) and Chaonnophris, and the disaffection of a large area around Thebes persisted through

the 190s, despite some temporary gain of ground by the government in 199/8 BC. It is usual to regard these revolts as evidence of native Egypt flexing its new-found muscle after the contribution made by larger contingents of native troops to the victory of Ptolemy IV over Antiochus III at the battle of Raphia in 217 BC. But so-called native unrest had caused the recall of Ptolemy III from the Third Syrian War (246–1 BC) and native Egyptian contingents had been used by Ptolemy I as early as the battle of Gaza in 312 BC. Nor did native unrest end with the re-establishment of control in the south under Ptolemy V; further outbreaks are known later in the century and again undermined royal control, particularly in the 160s and 130s BC.

A different expression of such feelings can surely be seen in demotic Egyptian 'nationalist' or 'propagandist' literature. In about the middle of the third century the *Demotic Chronicle* was composed; this was a collection of romantic tales of earlier Pharaohs which clearly emphasises the pre-Ptolemaic native tradition.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, one of the significant things about it is the fact that it was compiled and circulated in the early Ptolemaic period. Again, from the period between about 130 and 115 BC we have an apocalyptic piece called the *Oracle of the Potter*, which is known only from Greek versions still in circulation in the second and third centuries AD:

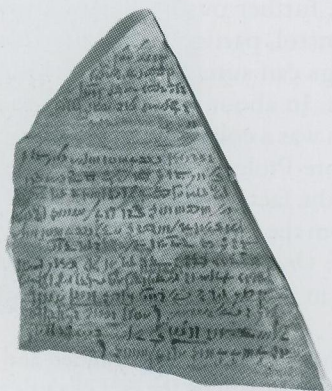
'And then the Guardian Spirit will desert the city which they founded and will go to god-bearing Memphis and it will be deserted . . . That will be the end of our evils when Egypt shall see the foreigners fall like leaves from the branch. The city by the sea will be a drying-place for the fishermen's catch because the Guardian Spirit has gone to Memphis, so that passers-by will say, "This was the all-nurturing city in which all the races of mankind live."<sup>15</sup>

The message is clear: the foreigners are the Macedonian rulers, their city is Alexandria, Memphis will rise again.

Thus the preservation of the native traditions of kingship found verbal expression in a very lively demotic literary tradition which was probably pervasive, outside Alexandria, and necessarily focused its attention on the Egyptian religious establishment. It found a different and more forceful expression, from time to time, in native revolt, though it must be borne in mind that little is known of the practical effects of such revolts beyond the proclamation of native Pharaohs. The Rosetta stone inscription, in the Greek, hieroglyphic and demotic languages, shows Ptolemy V looking inwards, trying to appease the native Egyptian tradition at a time when it was particularly threatening to the stability of the royal house and when Ptolemaic power and prestige outside Egypt was in the process of virtual annihilation.

Twenty-five years later Egypt had to face the presence of an invader from outside, for the first time since Perdikkas. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV invaded twice in the reign of Ptolemy VI, first in late 170 BC when he established a 'protectorate' over the young king and a second time in 168 BC when, more ominously, he left a Seleucid governor at Memphis after accepting coronation in the traditional Egyptian fashion. In the summer of 168 BC a Roman ambassador, Popillius Laenas, arrived in Egypt, met Antiochus at Eleusis near Alexandria and staged a spine-chilling display of Roman power, vividly described by Polybius.<sup>16</sup> He ordered Antiochus to withdraw from Egypt. Antiochus asked for time to consult his advisers. Laenas drew a circle around the king with his stick and told him to give an answer before

he stepped out of the circle. Only one answer was possible; by the end of July Antiochus had left Egypt. A month later, on August 29, a scribe and priest named Ḥor of Sebennytos had an audience at Alexandria in which he described, in the form of a prophetic dream, his earlier premonition of the salvation of Alexandria. A remarkable archive of documents, found at Saqqara preserves his account, written in demotic:



**20 Demotic ostrakon.** This belongs to the archive of the priest Ḥor of Sebennytos, who was involved in the administration of the ibis-cult at Memphis, and records Ḥor's dream prophesying the departure of the invading Seleucid king Antiochus IV in 168 BC.

'The dream which was told to me of the safety of Alexandria and the journeyings of Antiochus, namely that he would go by sail from Egypt by year 2, Payni, final day. I reported the said matter to Eirenaios who was strategos in year 2, Payni, day 11 . . . From Ḥor, the man of the town of Isis, lady of the cavern, the great goddess in the nome of Sebennytos. Eirenaios sent within the hour (?). Account of a letter: I gave it to the Pharaohs in the great Serapeum which is in Alexandria . . . I read out the salvation of Alexandria and every man who was within it which happened through the good disposition of the Pharaohs.'<sup>17</sup>

A native priest might, then, use his own language and tradition (in which the interpretation of dreams and oracles is a strong feature) in the service of Greek Alexandria as well as Egyptian Memphis.

The episode showed how much the power of Rome was to be reckoned with. A century earlier Ptolemy II Philadelphus had taken the initiative in sending an embassy to Rome. In 211 or 210 BC the Romans had requested grain supplies from Ptolemy IV. In 201 BC a Roman embassy had mediated in the Fifth Syrian War. Such exchanges had been conducted in the polite diplomatic language of friendship and alliance. After 168 BC the language did not change but the reality did. For the rest of the Ptolemaic period Egypt's independence was exercised, in effect, at Rome's discretion and under her protection. The first of the hellenistic kings to plan to bequeath his kingdom to Rome was Ptolemy VIII Euergetes Physcon, as king of Cyrene where he was installed by Rome after his struggles with his brother Philometor – the statement of intent was provoked by an alleged attempt upon his life in 155 BC and refers to his sincere preservation of the 'friendship and alliance' with Rome.<sup>18</sup>

The last century of Ptolemaic rule is usually depicted as a rather gloomy stalemate, a period of decline in which the kings were merely puppets of Rome. This is an