

The Ptolemaic Sea Empire

Rolf Strootman

Introduction: Empire or “Overseas Possessions”?

In 1982, archaeologists of the State Hermitage Museum excavated a sanctuary at the site of Nymphaion on the eastern shore of the Crimea. The sanctuary had been in use from ca. 325 BCE until its sudden abandonment around 250 BCE.¹ An inscription found *in situ* associates the site with Aphrodite and Apollo, and with a powerful local dynasty, the Spartokids.² Built upon a rocky promontory overlooking the Kimmerian Bosphoros near the port of Pantiropaion (the seat of the Spartokids), the sanctuary clearly was linked to the sea. Most remarkable among the remains were two polychrome plastered walls covered with graffiti depicting more than 80 ships—both war galleys and cargo vessels under sail—of varying size and quality, as well as images of animals and people. The most likely interpretation of the ship images is that they were connected to votive offerings made to Aphrodite (or Apollo) in return for safe voyages.³ Most noticeable among the graffiti is a detailed, ca. 1.15 m. wide drawing of a warship, dated by the excavators to ca. 275–250, and inscribed on its prow with the name “Isis” (ΙΣΙΣ).⁴ The ship is commonly

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- 1 All dates hereafter will be Before Common Era. I am grateful to Christelle Fischer-Bovet’s for her generous and critical comments.
 - 2 *SEG* XXXVIII 752; XXXIX 701; the inscription mentions Pairisades II, King of the Bosphoros (r. 284/3–245), and his brother. Kimmerian Bosphoros is the ancient Greek name for the Channel now known as the Strait of Kerch, and by extension the entire Crimea/Sea of Azov region; see Wallace 2012 with basic bibliography.
 - 3 Both Apollo and Aphrodite were *sôtêres*, savior gods, who protected sailors and ships (Graf 1979; Carbon 2013; Eckert 2016). In the Hellenistic period, the Ptolemaic court promoted throughout the eastern Mediterranean the equation of Isis to Aphrodite, especially in her capacity as the protector of seafarers, and in turn equated *both* deities to the deified Arsinoë II and several subsequent Ptolemaic queens (Gasparro 2007; Plantzos 2011; Bonnet and Briault 2016, 166–174).
 - 4 Basch 1985; Grač 1987; cf. *SEG* XXXIV 756. That the letters ΙΣΙΣ are part of the ship and that “Isis” is the ship’s name is convincingly shown by Murray 2002, 252–253. The claim in *SEG* XLV 997 ad (5) that “the Isis is the Ptolemaic flag-ship which officially visited Bosphoros in 254 B.C.” is sheer fantasy and is to be discarded; cf. Murray 2001, who demonstrates that the ship is a common trireme rather than one of Ptolemy II’s “super galleys”, endorsing the

identified as a Ptolemaic vessel, testifying to the wide reach of Ptolemaic naval power.⁵

The Ptolemies were one of the three Macedonian dynasties that emerged victorious from the succession wars after the death of Alexander the Great in 323. Their empire existed until the death of the last, and best known, monarch, Kleopatra VII, in 30 BCE.⁶ Being an expansionist power, the Ptolemies competed relentlessly with the Seleukids, the powerful Macedonian dynasty that dominated a vast land empire in the interior of Asia. Rival claims to universal hegemony led to a series of violent clashes between the two superpowers, the so-called Syrian Wars, that upset the entire eastern Mediterranean for more than a century. The Ptolemies and Seleukids continuously interacted with each other and a history of the Ptolemaic Empire cannot be written without taking this fundamental entanglement into account.

The Ptolemies are commonly known as the kings and queens of Egypt. In popular culture, the Ptolemies are presented as the pharaohs of an idealized Egypt, a tremendously ancient and unchanging civilization. The image is charged with Orientalistic stereotype, particularly when it comes to imagining Kleopatra, the seductive and deceitful “Queen of the Nile”.⁷ Such views have to a significant degree pervaded scholarship. To uphold the attractive notion of the Ptolemaic kingdom as a “traditional” pharaonic state, modern scholarship has largely ignored the non-Egyptian, imperial aspects of the Ptolemaic polity, while at the same time underestimating ethnic, cultural and political diversity

excavator's first impression (Grač 1987, 90–95; *pace* Basch 1985; Vinogradov 1999); Murray 2002 does however endorse Vinogradov's postulation that the Isis brought an “Egyptian” embassy to the Kingdom of the Bosphoros, with the specific intend of introducing there the cult of Isis and other Egyptian deities (*contra* this view, see the cautious remarks by Marquaille 2008, 51 n. 52). The Crimea was again within the Ptolemaic sphere of influence when Antony and Kleopatra proclaimed a “New Era”, and coins celebrating this event crossed the Black Sea (Schrapel 1996, 209–223; spread of coins as a method and indication of empire: Bagnall 1976, 176–212).

- 5 The identification of the ship as Ptolemaic is based not only on its name, but also on its overall structure and form (Höckmann 1999, 307–308), as well as the type of ram attached to its bow (Murray 2001, 253–254). The Ptolemaic connection is rejected by Morrison 1996, 209.
- 6 The world of the Ptolemies has attracted much scholarly attention, among other things because of the relative abundance of sources in the form of papyri. The past decades saw the publication of several ground-breaking monograph-length studies, including Manning 2003; Stephens 2003; Véisse 2004; Mueller 2006; Moyer 2011a; Török 2011; and Fischer-Bovet 2014.
- 7 For the image of Kleopatra in modern European painting, see Hughes-Hallett 1990; the Orientalistic image of the queen in Western cinema is discussed e.g. by Fössmeier 2001; Llewellyn-Jones 2002; and Wenzel 2005.

within Egypt itself,⁸ treating Egypt as if it were a kind of modern nation state. It is hard not to become allergic to the worn-out cliché that Ptolemaic kingship was “double-faced”, *i.e.* that the Ptolemies were both “traditional” pharaohs and Greek *basileis* (kings) for the sake of respectively their Egyptian and their Greek “subjects”.⁹ The pharaonic side of the Ptolemaic Janus head in fact was not so traditional at all. It rather was the product of a dynamic process of selecting and manipulating pre-existing cultural models—partly imposed top-down and partly a mediation between the interests of the dynasty and those of multifarious local elites. There may be some truth in the Janus head model *in* Egypt, where indeed we simultaneously find Egyptian and Greek (and “mixed”) styles, for instance in royal portraiture.¹⁰ But the image is entirely incorrect *outside* of Egypt, where we do not find this pharaonic representation.¹¹ And the alleged “Greek” monarchical representation was in fact an innovative pan-Hellenism aimed not only at Greeks (themselves an ethnically and culturally diverse category) but also at Nabateans, Judeans, Idumeans, Phoenicians, Syrians, Cypriots, Pamphylia, Lykians, Karians, Macedonians, Thracians, Libyans, Nubians, and others. There is, to be sure, no reason to assume that the “Greek” propaganda could not be directed at Egyptians as well. The Greek “face” in other words, was not so much Greek as it was *imperial*.¹²

8 So e.g. Mooren 1975, 4: “unlike the Seleukids, the Ptolemies had to reckon with (not counting the Cypriots) only one native people, the Egyptians.” The Ptolemaic Empire in fact was hardly less “multicultural” than the Seleukid Empire, as we will see.

9 But see Manning 2009, 3, rightly stating that the Ptolemaic polity in the interior of Egypt was “neither an *Egyptian*, nor a *Greek* state” but a new creation combining “elements of pharaonic, Persian, Macedonian, and Greek practice, with new modes of production and taxation”.

10 Brophy 2015, who emphasizes however that these portraits are found in distinct contexts. There may exist yet another instance of the Ptolemaic emperor roleplaying as indigenous king: a series of small silver coins from Judea depicting the head of Ptolemy I on the obverse, and on the reverse an image of an eagle—symbol of the “imperial” deity Zeus but in this context perhaps *also* symbolizing Yahweh—with paleo-Hebraic inscription *yhd* (Yehud = Judea); a second coin type, carrying the same inscription, has on its reverse the head of Queen Berenike I; for both coin types see Lykke 2010, 80–81 with figs. 12 and 14, and further bibliography. The now more widely accepted idea that the religious reverse images on Hellenistic royal coinages were deliberately ambiguous to render them multi-interpretable, was first explored by Erickson 2011.

11 See Winter 2011 for the absence of Egyptian or Egyptianizing artefacts in the Ptolemaic settlements of the Aegean; and Palagia 2013 for the Greek style of royal portraiture spread all over Greece from central production centers such as Kos.

12 Or “cosmopolitan”; for references, see below, n. 38. The highest levels of the Ptolemaic court and army were dominated by ethnic Macedonians and Greek-speaking individuals from the Aegean, Alexandria and Cyrenaica; non-Greeks (Egyptians, Judeans) reached the top as “favorites”, that is, outsiders favored by the king to challenge the power of

The imperial aspects of the Ptolemaic polity, however, have been consistently played down by the use of such terms as “foreign policy” or “overseas possessions”.¹³ For instance H. Braunert in an influential article published in 1964 transplanted the then current interpretations of modern European colonialism to the Ancient World by theorizing that Ptolemaic imperialism was motivated by the wish to secure raw materials for the “motherland”.¹⁴ A conscious policy of “defensive imperialism” has also been attributed to the Ptolemies.¹⁵ As Sheila Ager dryly noted, “for a state that was interested primarily in security rather than aggrandisement, the Ptolemaic regime was extraordinarily active outside its own borders.”¹⁶ We may add that for a polity whose territorial ambitions allegedly were limited, the Ptolemaic dynasty propagated a remarkably universalistic ideology.¹⁷ A notable critic of perceived views is Céline Marquaille, who wrote that “the interests of the Ptolemies outside Egypt are often observed and analysed as separate from their activities in Egypt [...]. The administrations of Syria or Cyprus are seldom considered as part of a Ptolemaic state, and are instead often included in the study of Ptolemaic foreign policy”.¹⁸

A related approach has been to view Egypt itself as a colonized country.¹⁹ But the image of native Egyptians suppressed by malicious Greeks seems to have been inspired rather directly by the modern colonial experience, too.²⁰

established elites (Strootman 2017b). The early Ptolemies likely saw themselves not as Greeks but as Macedonians. On the court as a center for the production of “imperial culture”, see Strootman 2014d and 2017a.

13 E.g. Peremans and Van ‘t Dack 1956; Bagnall 1976; Beyer-Rothhoff 1993.

14 Braunert 1964, 91–94; a similar argument is made by Beyer-Rothhoff 1993, 206–207.

15 Most influential in this respect have been Rostovtzeff 1941, 334, and Will 1979, 153–208; still Vandorpe 2014, 169–171.

16 Ager 2003, 38.

17 I refer the reader to my earlier publications on the universalistic pretensions of the Ptolemaic and Seleukid empires: Strootman 2007, 353–357 and *passim*; 2010a; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a, 115–146. Also see now Petrovic 2014; Burstein 2016.

18 Marquaille 2008, 39.

19 E.g. Will 1984, 41–42.

20 See e.g. Will 1986. Against this view notably Bagnall 1997, criticizing the conceptualization of Egypt as a colonized country; Bagnall’s view is defended by Manning 2009, who cautions not to “[analyze] Ptolemaic state formation through the lens of the nineteenth-century nation state’s colonial experience or twentieth-century postcolonial reactions to colonization” (p. 36). See more recently the excellent treatment of Greco-Egyptian relations by Fischer-Bovet 2016, showing that Ptolemaic elite culture in Egypt was not exclusive but “cumulative”: in addition to local identities, elite members gained prestige through their association with the monarchy and the court, as expressed by their participation in specific dynastic festivals and rituals.

Thus, the model of the bounded European nation state has profoundly informed modern interpretations of Ptolemaic history.²¹

In this chapter, I approach the Ptolemaic polity as an organization of the imperial type—not as a country *with* an empire. The view of premodern empire in recent literature has become less and less state-like; instead, fluidity and plurality are believed to be characteristic of empire.²² The empire paradigm has the benefit that it encompasses a wide variety of forms of control, negotiation, exploitation, and cooperation.

I furthermore argue that Ptolemaic imperialism was seaborne: its main routes of communication were maritime, and its imperial policy aimed first of all at securing sea routes through the control of harbors. This does not imply that the Ptolemies did not control territory in Egypt, Asia Minor and Syria; but as with most premodern imperial leaders, their main concern was with the control of people and resources rather than with territory per se.

My focus will be on the heyday of the empire in the third century, under its first four rulers, Ptolemy I Soter (323–282), Ptolemy II Philadelphos (282–246), Ptolemy III Euergetes (246–222), and Ptolemy IV Philopator (222–204). In the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes (204–180), Ptolemaic naval dominance collapsed when Seleukid armies overwhelmed the coastal cities of Asia Minor and the Levant between 202 and 195 BCE. The Ptolemies survived this crisis partly because of a timely Roman intervention in the Aegean, but their empire was now limited to Cyrenaica, Egypt and Cyprus. A generation later, the Seleukids attacked also the remaining territories in Egypt and Cyprus, and again Roman intervention saved the Ptolemaic dynasty. However, when the Seleukid Empire itself started to fall apart after ca. 150, the Ptolemies immediately attempted to reclaim their place as a great power (though now in a world increasingly dominated by two new imperial powers: the Romans and the Parthians).

The Origins of Ptolemaic Manpower

The Ptolemaic polity in the third century was not a territorially defined state because the dynasty, and not territory, was central to its functioning and ideology. The dynasty sat on top of aspects of Egyptian society, and many other societies as well. If we define the Ptolemaic polity not as a territorial state but as an organization aiming at creating routine access to resources, then Egypt

21 There was exploitation, to be sure, but the exploited and exploiting were not neatly divided into two ethnic groups.

22 See the Introduction to this volume.

certainly was not the only province of importance. Egypt's high agricultural production of course was proverbial, and fundamental to Ptolemaic rule was also the distribution of Egyptian farmland among the followers of the dynasty in order to secure their loyalty.²³ But the Nile Valley was not a source of metals, nor of gold and silver, nor timber for ship building. All that had to be obtained elsewhere: in Nubia, the Red Sea region, Libya, and the Levant—not for the benefit of Egypt, but for the benefit of the dynasty and its entourage. For while it is undeniable that Egypt lacks metals, wood, and other raw materials, and it is very likely that the Ptolemies therefore obtained these elsewhere, there exists to my knowledge no evidence for the common assumption that the Ptolemies systematically brought such goods in large quantities into Egypt proper. As a source of military manpower, Egypt was important (and probably well before the Battle of Raphia in 217). But other regions were important too. While troops were also raised in Libya and the southern Levant, in the third century the Ptolemies' principal source for personnel of all sorts was the Aegean.

Under the Ptolemies, Egypt became a locus for pan-Mediterranean migration. Volume x of the *Prosopographia Ptolemaica*, concerned with foreign ethnonyms in Egypt, reveals a bewildering array of ethnicities and places of origin that defies modern ideas about ancient state boundaries (and modern ideas about ethnicity as well).²⁴ Most strongly represented among the attested migrant peoples are individuals self-identifying as Macedonian (Μακεδών/Μακέτα) or “of Macedonian descent” (Μακεδών τῆς ἐπιγονῆς); as Thracian (Θράιξ and Θράιξ τῆς ἐπιγονῆς); Greek (“Ἕλλην, *Hellēn*);²⁵ Cretan,²⁶ Cyrenian;²⁷ Arab and Judean.²⁸ The precise meaning of these ethnics is not always clear; *Hellēn* for instance is used primarily as a fiscal category in administrative texts and does not necessarily refer to actual migrants from the Aegean.²⁹ We are on firmer ground, however, with those residents in Egypt who identified themselves by their cities of origin: the majority of these associated themselves with

23 The Macedonians and Greeks who were given allotments of land in Egypt often did not work these lands themselves, and the actual farmers remained predominantly Egyptians (Bingen 2007, 104–121; on land tenure in Ptolemaic Egypt in general consult Manning 2003).

24 La'da 2002; on the place of minorities in Egyptian societies, see Thompson 2011.

25 Also as Demotic *Wynn.w/H3w-nbw.t*, and the interesting variant “Hellenomemphite” (La'da 2002, 48–70); on Greek settlers in Egypt, see Bingen 2007, 94–103.

26 Κρής; Κρήσσα; Κρητικός and Κρής τῆς ἐπιγονῆς.

27 Κυρηναίος, Κυρηναία; and Dem. *Gmvs*.

28 La'da 2002, *ad loc*.

29 Clarysse 1985; cf. Clarysse and Thompson 2006 (I am grateful to Christelle Fischer-Bovet for these references).

cities in the Aegean region, particularly (and perhaps surprisingly) mainland Greece. The city that is mentioned most often in the papyri, is Athens, followed by Miletos and Kos.³⁰ Cities in the Levant, Sicily, Italy, and the Black Sea region are also well represented. Among the migrant populations of Egypt we furthermore find representatives of most of the peoples of Asia Minor and the Balkans, as well as peoples from African countries south of Egypt, to wit Nubia, Kush, Blemmye, and Ethiopia.³¹

The relative abundance of evidence from Egypt—most of all papyri—should not lead to the conclusion that Egypt was the sole target of migratory movements. Apart from Alexandria, the country may not even have been the principal recipient of migrants in the third century. There was only one major city foundation in Egypt proper, Ptolemais in the Thebaid, which had a more or less Greek identity (in contrast to nearby Thebes). By contrast, numerous settlements were established by the Ptolemies and their agents in southern Asia Minor, on Cyprus, and on the Red Sea coast;³² and military garrisons were installed in existing cities particularly in Asia Minor and on the Aegean islands.

Similarly, the Ptolemaic army was not a national, but a multi-ethnic, imperial one.³³ The majority of the infantry of the line, the phalanx, in the campaigning armies that were sent to Palestine to fight the Seleukids, seems to have been recruited among “native” Egyptians and Greco-Macedonian settlers in Egypt, perhaps with the addition of Aegean “mercenaries”. But often units were identified by other ethnic denominators, in particular cavalry hipparchies. In the third century, soldiers stationed in Egypt could be identified as Macedonians, Greeks, Thessalians, Arabs, Judeans, Thracians, Cretans, Galatians, Libyans and Mysians.³⁴ However, ethnic units were never ethnically “pure”, as they were

30 La’da 2002 *ad loc.*; cf. Table 7.1 in Stefanou 2013.

31 La’da 2002, 11, 297, and 307–311.

32 Mueller 2006; cf. Cohen 1995 and 2006.

33 For the Battle of Raphia—a massive confrontation between Ptolemaic and Seleukid armies, fought in southern Palestine in 217—Polybios (5.80.3–13) lists as part of the Ptolemaic field army 25,000 Macedonians, more than 20,000 Egyptians, 3,000 Libyans, 6,000 Thracians and Galatians, 3,000 Cretans and 10,000 mercenary troops freshly recruited in the Aegean, plus more than 3,000 regulars serving in various royal guard units. On the Ptolemaic army, see recently Scheuble-Reiter 2012; Fischer-Bovet 2014; Véisse and Wackenier 2014.

34 Fischer-Bovet 2014, 191–195 with tables 5.3 and 5.4 on p. 178–183. A special category were the *Makedones* and *Persai*: although perhaps originally real ethnic indicators—the latter are often attested as *Persēs tēs epigonēs* (“of Persian descent”)—these terms in the second century came to designate entirely non-ethnic privileged tax classes connected to military service (Fischer-Bovet 2014, 178–191).

open to members of other groups.³⁵ But neither can it be assumed that these ethnics denoted no more than a specific type of armament or tactics: service in the military was a major incentive for migration movements across the entire eastern Mediterranean, and such units were likely composed for a large part of (descendants of) migrants.³⁶ But the ethnics attested on the papyri concern only troops stationed in Egypt; far less is known about the ethnic compositions of Ptolemaic garrisons and governor's armies in the Levant and Asia Minor.

The royal court and the higher levels of the naval and military administration were filled mainly from cities and tribes in the Aegean region.³⁷ These people often identified as "Greek". In the Hellenistic period, Greekness became in certain contexts a non-ethnic, supra-local identity that could also to some extent be adopted by non-Greek elite persons beyond the Aegean, e.g. Judeans or, in the Seleukid Empire, Babylonians.³⁸ Greek identity in the Hellenistic world thus often denoted an association with empire and court. This imperial "Hellenism", in its various local forms, connected culturally and linguistically diverse elites horizontally while at the same time distancing them vertically from their local rivals and inferiors. The royal court at Alexandria, through the patronage of art and literature, was instrumental in the creation of this cosmopolitan culture that was neither Greek nor Egyptian but "Ptolemaic".³⁹

A Seaborne Network Empire

The Ptolemaic empire was basically a dynamic and varied patchwork of friends, allied cities, friendly kings, fortified strongholds held by garrisons, and more. Sometimes larger regions were more or less brought under direct military control, for instance Cyprus, Palestine, Lykia and Karia. But even in the

35 Clarysse and Fischer-Bovet 2012, 27–28; cf. Stefanou 2013, 131. Comparison with the Seleukid practice of ethnic regiments suggests that what most of all created *esprit de corps* was a shared commitment to a specific deity and cult associated with the specific ethnic identity (Houle 2015).

36 Stefanou 2013.

37 O'Neil 2006; Strootman 2007, 124–129. Although the Ptolemies co-opted Egyptian elites to access local resources, native Egyptians only rarely entered the higher echelons of the court and the army (Rowlandson 2008; Moyer 2011b; Strootman 2017b).

38 Strootman 2007, 21–22, 214–216, 354–356, and 2010b; cf. *id.* 2014d, 9–11, 163–164; accepted by Bang 2012, and followed by Haubold 2016. Also see Fischer-Bovet 2016, emphasizing not the "Greekness" of translocal elite culture, but participation in rituals connected to the monarchy (cf. above, n. 20).

39 On the creation and emanation of imperial culture at the Ptolemaic court, see now Strootman 2017a.

core province of Egypt, such control was always for a large part indirect, based on self-government left to indigenous elites in return for revenue and support.⁴⁰ The empire was created more through the agency of individuals than by means of formalized institutions.⁴¹ Cohesion to some extent was achieved by the empire-wide promotion of dynastic cult and by the consistent use of dynastic and religious symbols on imperial coinages.

Katja Mueller in her important study of Ptolemaic settlements described the empire as “a conglomerate of regions”.⁴² Hierarchized groupings of settlements of varying sizes interacted to form more or less coherent regions.⁴³ These multiple Ptolemaic spheres of influence were tied together through a closely guarded web of sea routes. It could be maintained that the Ptolemies needed a strong fleet to guard the many cities under their protection. But this would make the Ptolemies look more peaceful than they actually were. Considering their preference for bringing harbor cities into their orbit, it likely was the other way around. The creation and consolidation of a high-density maritime infrastructure was vital for the expansionist Ptolemaic imperial project.⁴⁴ Control of harbors was required for acquiring the naval strength needed to claim imperial supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean. Getzel Cohen rightly noted that,

If we can say [...] that the Seleucids built many of their colonies to reinforce their major roadways, then we can point out that the Ptolemies founded or refounded a large number of harbor towns to serve the needs of their fleet and to secure coastal communications.⁴⁵

Based on a detailed inventory cited by Athenaios, it is generally accepted that the main war fleet of Ptolemy II was considerable, comprising about 250 standard oared attack ships (penteres, triremes and smaller ships) and about 100 heavier vessels, including a number of those legendary Hellenistic “super galleys” (“twenties” and “thirties” for instance).⁴⁶ Athenaios furthermore claims

40 Clarysse 1999; Huß 1999; Gorre 2009; Pfeiffer 2010; Weber 2012.

41 Strootman 2007; 2014d.

42 Mueller 2006, 83.

43 *Ibid.* 41–55.

44 The term “high-density maritime infrastructure” was borrowed from Arnaud 2014, 161–162.

45 Cohen 1983, 63.

46 Ath. 5.303d (5.36.11–21); cf. Murray 2012, 188–191. With reference to a personal communication of John Grainger, Murray (p. 188 n. 51) adds that Athenaios’ 17 *penteres* (“fives”, perhaps better known by their Latin name as *quinquiremes*; I included them in the total of ca. 250 “standard” galleys) should be higher because this type of ship had

that at least another 4,000 ships were scattered over naval bases throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The latter figure seems rather high but may include transport ships or merchant vessels (but even then, the number is rather high). There also was without doubt a war fleet in the Red Sea but nothing is known about its strength. All this means that in the third century, maintaining a fleet of warships was one of the main expenses of the imperial household, and that the Ptolemaic polity was in fact far more militarized than is commonly assumed.⁴⁷

The idea, put forward most influentially by Lionel Casson,⁴⁸ that in the Ancient Mediterranean seafaring was not possible during the Winter season (mid-November to early March), and considerably reduced in the Fall and Spring, is no longer tenable. The seas of the Mediterranean, though certainly dangerous, offered relatively good opportunities for communication and exchange the year round.⁴⁹ As Pascal Arnaud pointed out, ancient seafaring was not just coastal, or “tramping”; ships regularly crossed the open sea.⁵⁰ Most of all, sea travel was a *fast* way to travel. The Ptolemies’ preoccupation with maritime networks is apparent from their encouragement of the study of world geography at the Mouseion of Alexandria, and the exploration of sea routes in the Indian Ocean.⁵¹

There were roughly three ways in which the Ptolemies tried to bring sea routes under their control: (1) by negotiating alliances with coastal cities; (2) by taking coastal cities by force; and (3) through the establishment of settlements in coastal regions and the construction of new harbors. The *philoï* (royal “friends”, courtiers) in charge of these foundations seem to have acted

become the standard “workhorse” of the major fleets of that time, perhaps approximately 300. The term “super galley” was coined by Casson 1969. On Ptolemaic naval strength in the third century, see also Erskine 2013, 83 with further bibliography in nn. 4–6. For the Egyptian contribution to the Ptolemaic fleet see Van ‘t Dack and Hauben 1978.

47 On the costs of the fleet, see below. As Christelle Fischer-Bovet pointed out to me, it is in fact difficult—if not impossible—to distinguish between land and naval forces as separate organizational units in any of the Hellenistic empires.

48 E.g. Casson 1971.

49 Morton 2001; Arnaud 2005; Beresford 2013.

50 Arnaud 2011.

51 Habicht 2013. In the first half of the third century, the Ptolemaic admiral Timosthenes of Rhodes circumnavigated the Mediterranean and put his findings in a work of ten books entitled *On Harbors*; see Prontera 2013, 208, also showing how the geographic and cartographic studies of “court scholars” such as Eratosthenes closely reflected Ptolemaic geopolitical interests (but see now also Rathmann 2016, showing that for ancient geographers the Mediterranean was not a specific field of interest; instead, they aimed at describing the world in its entirety).

as private entrepreneurs empowered by the dynasty rather than as officials carrying out orders, and there probably were significant benefits for them in organizing colonization.⁵²

In her study of Ptolemaic expansion in the time of Ptolemy III, Brigitte Beyer-Rotthoff identifies around forty autonomous Mediterranean ports that served as bases for the Ptolemaic fleet.⁵³ Most of these were located in the Levant and the Aegean. There were for instance Ptolemaic garrisons for longer or shorter periods of time at strategic locations such as Gaza, Sidon, Tyre, Thera, Halikarnassos, Xanthos, and Methana. In addition to these, the Ptolemies and their agents created new settlements along the southern coast of Asia Minor to consolidate their control of the sea route between Cyprus and Rhodes. Literary sources have recorded 28 settlements with the Ptolemaic dynastic names Arsinoe, Berenike, Philadelphia, and Ptolemais.⁵⁴ All in all, the Ptolemies in the third century controlled a total of ca. 75 harbors throughout the eastern Mediterranean, about 30 of which were garrisoned.⁵⁵ This widespread distribution of naval stations covered an enormous area, stretching from Berenike in present-day Libya to Maroneia near the Hellespont and another Berenike near the mouth of the Red Sea.

The central hub in this imperial network was the port city Alexandria, with its two large harbors, a commercial and a military one. The Ancient qualification of this city as Alexandria-*by*-Egypt (not *in* Egypt) is apt.⁵⁶ The principal dynastic and religious center of Ptolemaic Egypt was Memphis.⁵⁷ Ancient writers report that under favorable weather conditions it could be a mere 4.5 days

52 See e.g. below, n. 97. Another, notorious, form of imperial entrepreneurship, tax farming, was widespread, too: cf. e.g. *P.Cair. Zen.* 1 59037 (Karia, 258/7 BCE); *P.Hib.* 1 66 (Egypt, 228 BCE); *P.Tebt.* 1 40 (Egypt, 117 BCE); and the illuminating account given by Josephus of the mafia practices of a tax farmer in Idumea (*AJ* 12.167–185, cf. Zayadine 2005; Pfeiffer 2010; the episode is very difficult to date, see e.g. Schwartz 1998). On private entrepreneurs as agents of empire, see also Van den Eijnde and Antunes in this volume.

53 Beyer-Rotthoff 1993, 214–222; for a short overview see Peremans and Van 't Dack 1956, 14–16, and comprehensively Bagnall 1976.

54 Winter 2011.

55 Listed in Table 6.3 in Murray 2012, 195–196, based on data provided by Bagnall 1976 and Grainger 2010; the list omits inland communities and harbors created or dominated in East Africa. There is now new evidence for a Ptolemaic garrison at Xanthos (Baker and Thériault 2013; cf. Cavaliers and Des Courtils 2013).

56 Gr. Ἀλεξάνδρεια ἢ πρὸς Ἀιγύπτῳ; Lat. *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*. The designation “Alexandria *in* Egypt” encountered less frequently in Greek and Latin texts of the Roman period (instances gathered and discussed in Bell 1946) may be associated with the fact that Alexandria became the administrative center of the Roman province of Egypt (for Rome by that time had taken over Alexandria's status as capital of the world).

57 Thompson 1988.

sailing from Alexandria to Ephesos, and less than 4 days to Rhodes; even with unfavorable winds, the journey from Alexandria to Cyprus along the Levantine coast could be made within 7 days.⁵⁸ These travel times probably were recorded because they were records of sorts; but the probable *average* speed, as estimated by Casson on the basis of these and other sources, still suggest that in terms of travel time Asia Minor was closer to Alexandria than Upper Egypt (ca. 7 days to Cyprus; 7–10 days to Rhodes).⁵⁹ To rephrase that slightly more rhetorically: from Alexandria, Thebes in Greece could easier be reached than Thebes in Egypt.⁶⁰

Alexandria has been deemed a purely “Greek” city in the past. This image emerges notably from P. M. Fraser’s monumental three-volume *Ptolemaic Alexandria*.⁶¹ But at least since the turn of the millennium, it has also become a commonplace to present Alexandria as an “Egyptian” city,⁶² or at least as a city that is culturally located “between Greece and Egypt”.⁶³ Such views do no justice to the cultural and ethnic complexities of imperial Alexandria. The Ptolemies themselves consciously shaped the city through monuments, institutions and public rituals as the symbolic center of the earth—a cosmopolis where

58 Ach. Tat., 5.15.1, 17.1; Diod. 3.33. Luc., *Nav.* 7. Rhodes was the Ptolemies’ gateway to Asia Minor and the Aegean. Rather than following the coast, ships sailing between Alexandria and Rhodes took a direct route straight across the open sea—a voyage of 7 to 10 days on average and one of the “golden sea routes of the Mediterranean” (Casson 1971, 287; cf. Gabrielsen 2013, 69–70; for the travel time, see above). As Gabrielsen reminds us, emblematic of the nearness of Rhodes to Alexandria “is perhaps the fact that the small island right before the entrance to Alexandria’s artificial harbour carried the name of Antirrhodos” (Gabrielsen 2013, 69; the name is attested in Strabo 17.1.9). The Ptolemies also controlled a number of harbors on Crete (Bagnall 1976, 117–123).

59 Casson 1951, 145; the average speed of seagoing vessels in Antiquity, as calculated by Casson, was 75–100 nautical miles per day (ca. 140–185 km).

60 The distance between Alexandria and Egyptian Thebes (= Waset, now Luxor) is around 530 miles (ca. 850 km) following the Nile, that is, a foot journey of approximately 30 days (Google Maps gives a total of ca. 175 walking hours for this route). The journey could also be made by river boat; a quick round of traveler’s blogs on the Internet learned me that sailing the Nile *downstream* on a felucca from Thebes to Memphis (still some 140 miles away from Alexandria) would take approximately two weeks during inundation season when the water level is highest but longer in the dryer seasons.

61 Fraser 1972.

62 E.g. Pfrommer 1999 locates Alexandria “im Schatten der Pyramiden” (“in the Shadow of the Pyramids”) and shows on its cover an image, not of Alexandria, but of the Pyramids of Giza, ca. 125 miles away (the content of the book is more nuanced). Bowman’s characterization of Alexandria as “Queen of the Mediterranean” probably would have pleased the Ptolemies (1996, 203).

63 Harris and Ruffini 2004.

the world converged.⁶⁴ Centuries later, Dio Chrysostom (32.36) still echoed Ptolemaic propaganda when he wrote that Alexandria “is situated, as it were, at the uniting center of the whole earth, of even its most far away nations, as if the whole city is an *agora*, bringing together all men into one place, displaying them to one another and, as far as possible, making them one people.”

From the Red Sea to the Black Sea: the Empire in Its Heyday

In a much-debated passage, the Greek historian Polybios (second century BCE) outlined the Ptolemaic Empire at its greatest extent under Ptolemy III:

[The Ptolemies], far from taking little interest in foreign affairs, had generally given them precedence over those of Egypt itself. For being masters of Koile Syria and Cyprus, they were a constant threat to the kings of Syria (*sc.* the Seleukids), both by land and sea; and they were also in a commanding position regarding the princes of Asia [Minor], as well as the islands, through their possession of the most splendid cities, strongholds, and harbors all along the seacoast from Pamphylia to the Hellespont and the district round Lysimacheia. Moreover they were favorably placed for an attack upon Thrace and Macedonia from their possession of Ainos, Maroneia, and more distant cities still.⁶⁵

This passage is sometimes quoted in support of a formal disconnection of “Egypt” from its “overseas possessions”. But Polybios’ claim that the dynasty neglected the latter after the death of Ptolemy III in 222 is a false one.⁶⁶ Polybios, whose Mediterranean bias also gave rise to his distorted image of the Seleukids as “kings of Syria”,⁶⁷ notoriously omits not only Cyrenaica (the coast of present-day Libya) but moreover fails to mention Ptolemaic activities in the Red Sea and towards the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, Polybios’ statement that the Ptolemies dominated the coasts from Pamphylia to the Hellespont is corroborated by epigraphic evidence attesting Ptolemaic military presence in Pamphylia, Pisidia, Lykia, and Karia.⁶⁸ The best way to see this passage then, is

64 Buraselis 1993, 259; Strootman 2007, 213–214; 2011b.

65 Polyb. 5.34.2–9 (Loeb translation with minor adjustments). On this passage, see e.g. Peremans and Van ‘t Dack 1956; Marquaille 2008, 40–41; Erskine 2013.

66 Erskine 2013.

67 Strootman 2019a.

68 Bagnall 1976, 80–116. The evidence for Ptolemaic rule in Pamphylia was recently re-evaluated by Meadows and Thonemann 2013, 223. On the basis of two inscriptions,

as a description of Ptolemaic imperialism in specifically the Aegean, the region that Polybios was interested in most of all.

With his incomplete list of subject lands, Polybios selectively reflects Ptolemaic self-presentation. In the seventeenth *Idyll* of the court poet Theokritos—an encomium to Ptolemy II, in which the king is described as a heroic warrior who creates universal peace and prosperity through his victories with divine support—the Mediterranean empire is described:

He has taken a share of Phoenicia, Arabia,
Of Syria, Libya and the dark Ethiopians;
he has the command of the whole of Pamphylia,
of Kilikia, Lykia, and Karia's troops;
he even has charge of the isles of the Cyclades,
thanks to his navy's control of the sea.
The entire ocean and all the land with its rushing rivers
all bow to King Ptolemy's supreme rule.
Great armies of horsemen are clustered around him,
great hosts of foot-soldiers in burnished bronze arms.⁶⁹

The Aegean was vitally important to the imperial endeavors of successive Ptolemaic rulers. This was the region where during the third century the Ptolemies likely threw most of their military and financial resources at. But they were not the only ones: the Seleukids and Antigonids were active in this region as well. We will return to the contested Aegean and overlapping imperial networks in the next section, after a brief overview of the extent of the Ptolemaic thalassocracy (Figure. 5.1).

Let us begin with the westernmost part of the empire: Cyrenaica, a cluster of cities on the coast of present-day Libya.⁷⁰ The area was controlled for some time by a vassal king, Magas, a rather unruly chap who came under Seleukid

one from Xanthos and one from Alexandria (*TAM* II 263 = *OGIS* 91 and *IAlex.Ptol.* 27 = *OGIS* 99), Bagnall 1976, 110, plausibly argues that after the conquests of Antiochos III in western Asia Minor in 197, Lykian communities retained links with the court at Alexandria; cf. Lanciers 2017, who is doubtful that these documents prove the existence of diplomatic ties.

69 Theokritos, *Idyll* 17.95–104 (transl. Hunter); on this poem, see Hunter 2003; Heerink 2010; Strootman 2017a, 123–125. A now lost victory inscription from Adulis on the Red Sea lists lands under the suzerainty of Ptolemy III: Egypt, Libya, Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Lykia, Karia, the Cyclades, Kilikia, Pamphylia, Ionia, the Hellespont, and Thrace (*OGIS* 54; cf. Fauvelle-Aymard 2009).

70 Bagnall 1976, 25–37.



FIGURE 5.1 The Ptolemaic World

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influence and turned against his half-brother Ptolemy II.⁷¹ But the area was soon pacified and a Lybiarch, or military governor of Libya, is attested for the year 203.⁷² In the Western Desert, the Ptolemies brought under their control

71 Hölbl 2001, 38–40. On the dynastic intricacies of this conflict see van Oppen 2015a; McAuley 2016.

72 Marquaille 2008, 44. This is corroborated by epigraphic evidence from Libya for the presence of a *stratēgos*, Philon, between 185 and 180 (*SEG* IX 55).

five major oases (Siwa, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhleh and Kharga) and thereby controlled the Saharan trade networks running through them.⁷³ With the acquisition of Cyrenaica and the Western Desert the early Ptolemies expanded the area of Macedonian domination beyond the original conquests of Alexander the Great.

The same can be said about the region to the south of Egypt. It was most of all Stanley Burstein who insisted that the Middle Nile Region in modern Sudan (Ancient Nubia and Meroë) should be treated as part of the “globalizing” Hellenistic World.⁷⁴ The region held much of strategic and economic interest for the Ptolemies. Items to be traded or captured there included gold, ivory, elephants, and slaves. Ptolemy I may have campaigned south of the First Cataract (Aswan) when he was still satrap of Egypt.⁷⁵ Under his son, Ptolemy II, a more concerted effort was made to expand into the region of Lower Nubia.⁷⁶ The region was lost again during the so-called Great Revolt in the Thebaid (206/5–186),⁷⁷ but in the reigns of Ptolemy VI and VIII (180–145 and 154–116), Lower Nubia was again firmly in Ptolemaic hands;⁷⁸ Kleopatra VII (51–30) still claimed suzerainty over Nubia and the entire Red Sea.⁷⁹

The northern Red Sea coasts were incorporated by diplomatic and military means,⁸⁰ and by the establishment of harbors.⁸¹ The best known and perhaps most important settlement was Berenike.⁸² Farther to the south,

73 Gill 2016.

74 Burstein 1993; 2008. For the region's history, see Török 1997; for artistic developments resulting from interactions with the Ptolemaic, and later Roman north Török 2011. Fundamental for the sources on Ptolemaic relations with the south is still Préaux 1952.

75 Burstein 2014 and 2015; Manning 2011, 310, is more cautious. On the Ptolemies' southern frontier Locher 1999.

76 Hölbl 2001, 55–58; cf. Manning 2011, 310–311, pointing out that Ptolemy II's major campaign of ca. 175/4 “established a ‘small world’ network that re-linked what we might call the Egypto-Nubian “interaction sphere” via new Ptolemaic nodes” (p. 310; for the date Török 1997, 395 n. 284).

77 Hölbl 2001, 153–159; on this and other indigenous revolts against the Ptolemies, see Véisse 2004.

78 Mueller 2006, 162.

79 As may be surmised from the list of languages allegedly spoken by the queen at ceremonial occasions (Plut., *Ant.* 27.3–4; for the ideological implications, see Strootman 2010a).

80 Including actions against Nabataean “pirates” who likewise sought to control Red Sea trade routes (Durand 2012).

81 Sidebotham 2012, 1042. Cohen 2006, 305–343, identifies 17 Ptolemaic settlements in the Red Sea basin.

82 Sidebotham 2011.

contacts were established with the kingdoms of southwest Arabia and the Horn of Africa, regions notable for the production of expensive aromatics.⁸³ Captains working under Ptolemaic flag explored sea routes to India and Ceylon, and loose diplomatic contacts were established with local princes on the west coast of the Indian subcontinent.⁸⁴ Several written sources claim there was a Ptolemaic settlement on the island Socotra (Dioskorides) in the Indian Ocean,⁸⁵ and the at least Ptolemy II Philadelphos maintained diplomatic contacts with Maurya India.⁸⁶ To be sure, the Indian Ocean trade system of the Hellenistic period—now often seen as an early form of globalization—was not created by the Ptolemies; it predated them and was run by local merchants.⁸⁷ But agents of the Ptolemies did try to tap into this rapidly expanding system of interaction, and tried to monopolize the spice trade to Egypt and the Mediterranean.⁸⁸ In doing so, they encouraged the further development of connectivity in this region. This likely incited clashes with the Seleukids, whose political and commercial interests extended through the Persian Gulf to southern Arabia as well.⁸⁹

One of the aims of Ptolemaic seaborne activities to the Horn of Africa was obtaining war elephants to fight the Seleukids in Syria and Palestine.⁹⁰ This was facilitated by the foundation of stations, sometimes fortified, on the coast of present-day Sudan and Eritrea by imperial officials or freelance entrepreneurs.⁹¹ Colonizing activities have been recorded by Strabo for the reigns of Ptolemy II, III, and IV.⁹² The elephant hunting expeditions for obvious reasons

83 Kitchen 2001; on the so-called spice routes in Antiquity, see Keay 2006.

84 Sidebotham 2012, 1042–1043; Habicht 2013.

85 Cohen 2006, 325–326.

86 Rock Edicts of Aśoka 13.27; Solinus 52.3 records the name (Dionysios) of Philadelphos' representative in India.

87 Seland 2016.

88 *P.Tebt.* 1 35 267. On the overland route to Egypt and the Mediterranean, see Catanzeriti 2008.

89 Salles 2005.

90 Scullard 1974, 126–133; Burstein 2008. This, by the way, is an interesting example of the processes of proto-globalization associated with the Hellenistic period, for the Seleukids on their part brought elephants from India to the Mediterranean to fight the Ptolemies.

91 Strabo 16.4.5. For the settlements and their connection to the elephant hunt, see Mueller 2006, 151–157. Few of these settlements has been excavated or even precisely located (Sidebotham 2012, 1042; for a comprehensive discussion of the written sources consult Cohen 2006, 305–343). The expeditions likely involved the participation of local elephant hunters (Manning 2011, 310–311).

92 Strabo 16.4.7–15, corroborated by contemporaneous papyri and inscriptions; see the useful overview in Mueller 2006, 154–155 (Table 4.1).

have attracted much scholarly interest. But as Mueller reminds us, the ca. twenty larger and smaller settlements (including small sanctuaries) cannot have been merely by-products of elephant hunting.⁹³ They were instruments of imperial expansion. Colonization of the southern coasts meant also the establishment or appropriation of a network of inland roads connecting these coastal ports with the Nile.⁹⁴ Though often understood as commercial roads, the costs involved in maintaining and protecting the desert routes must have been very high.⁹⁵

Moving north to the Levant, the first Ptolemaic stronghold we encounter is the fortified border town of Gaza in southern Palestine. The many ports along the coast of Palestine, Phoenicia and Kilikia, wrested from the Antigonids and later the Seleukids, were important bases for the fleet, as well as centers for the construction of ships.⁹⁶ The importance of these coastal regions—which the Ptolemies and Seleukids frequently fought over—is revealed by the presence of military governors with substantial armed forces at their disposal. The Levantine region was divided into several military districts.⁹⁷ Constantly threatened by the Seleukids, Ptolemaic hegemony in the southern Levant extended for strategic reasons to the inland as well, to Idumea, Judea and Transjordan.⁹⁸

The center of this part of the empire surely was Cyprus. The island had been a crossroads of sea routes since time immemorial,⁹⁹ and it was of huge

93 Mueller 2006, 151. The complex motivations, and development through time, of the Ptolemaic colonization of the south is still poorly understood and warrants more research (and, I would suggest, the notions of private entrepreneurship and local participation could be helpful to look at the sources afresh).

94 Gates-Foster 2006.

95 Henning 2003.

96 For the incorporation of the Phoenician cities into the Ptolemaic imperial system, see now Aliquot and Bonnet 2015. Grainger 1991 gives an overview of the cities and their historical evolution in Hellenistic times. The sources are discussed in Bagnall 1976, 11–24. The bibliography on Ptolemaic rule in Palestine, Judea and the Transjordan region is vast; see recently e.g. Gera 1997; Grabbe 2011; Pfeiffer 2011; Gorre and Honigman 2013.

97 For the Ptolemaic organization of Syria and Phoenicia, see Bagnall 1976, 11–24. A governor (*stratēgos*) of Kilikia, Thraseas, is attested in a decree of Arsinoe-in-Kilikia honoring his father, the *stratēgos* Aētōs of Aspendos, who had founded the settlement between 278 and 253 (*SEG xxxix* 1426; Habicht and Jones 1989); cf. Bagnall 1976, 114–116. The same Thraseas became governor of Syria and Phoenicia sometime after 217 (*SEG xxxix* 1596b), later to be succeeded by his own son, Ptolemaios. On this dynasty of *philoī*, see Gera 1997, 28–34.

98 Bringmann 2005, 76–77.

99 See Michaelides, Kassianidou, Merillees 2009, tracing the exchanges between Cyprus and Egypt from the Third Millennium BCE to Late Antiquity.

geostrategic significance for the empire since the Ptolemaic conquest in 313.¹⁰⁰ This is apparent from the high rank of the Ptolemaic courtiers who were active on the island after 217, when the first *stratēgos* of Cyprus, Pelops son of Pelops, appears in our sources.¹⁰¹ Before that time, the Ptolemies exerted authority indirectly through local client rulers,¹⁰² some of whom may have been bound to the imperial house by kinship ties.¹⁰³ On Cyprus, no less than in Egypt, the Ptolemies conducted an active “religious policy”, introducing dynastic cults and promoting the association of local deities with imperial ones, especially the threefold syncretism of Aphrodite, Isis and Ptolemaic queens.¹⁰⁴ Ptolemy II regularly visited the island together with his entourage of *philoï*, and later rulers are also known to have stayed there. Cyprus was a base for the fleet, and Marquaille may be right in boldly stating that the island was “a royal domain [...] on a scale similar to Egypt.”¹⁰⁵

The Contested Aegean

It has in the past been assumed that the Hellenistic world saw a consciously maintained “balance of power” between three “kingdoms” that in modern scholarship are often made to resemble European states. The creation of this

100 The island was lost to the Antigonids in 306 but reincorporated into the Ptolemaic Empire in 295/4. On the Ptolemaic administration and military Bagnall 1976, 38–79.

101 Bagnall 1976, 252–253. Kallikles, son of Kallikles of Alexandria, was ἀρχισωματοφύλαξ (“archbodyguard”, i.e. a person close to the king) and Secretary of the Household Cavalry; he is honored with a statue by the *politai* of Kourion (*SEG* LVIII 1744, ll. 1–3; 163–154 BCE) but may have acted on behalf of that *polis* at court in Alexandria. Certainly present on the island was Theodoros, commander in chief of the Ptolemaic forces on Cyprus, who was “archpriest of the island” (ἀ[ρχι]ερέως τῶν κατὰ τὴν νῆσον; i.e. overseer of the royal cults) and bore the title of Kinsman of the King (συνγενοῦς τοῦ βασιλέως) (*OGIS* 155, ll. 2–5; 140–131 BCE); one of his predecessors as governor, Seleukos son of Bithys, also was a Relative of the King and like Theodoros “general and admiral” as well as “archpriest of the island” (*I.Kourion* 45, ll. 1–3; 142–131 BCE; I owe these references to Benjamin Wieland). For a complete overview of governors of Cyprus from 217 to 40, see Bagnall 1976, 252–262.

102 On the persistence of city kingship on Cyprus in the third century, see Fourrier 2015.

103 This at least was the case with the royal house of Soli; see van Oppen 2015b.

104 Papantoniou 2009; cf. *id.* 2012 (*n.v.*), and Fulińska 2012. Also see Dumke and Pfeijffer 2014, discussing how the religious center of Ptolemaic Cyprus, the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Palaioaphos, served as contact zone between members of the imperial court and representatives of local elites; cf. Barbantani 2005 on the assimilation of Arsinoe II and Aphrodite on Cyprus. On the assimilation of Aphrodite, Isis, and the Queen see above, n. 3.

105 Marquaille 2008, 45.

type of state is usually ascribed to Ptolemy I Soter. The founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, it was said, had been a separatist since the death of Alexander in 323 and had made Egypt into a bounded, well-defensible kingdom based on ancient pharaonic traditions.¹⁰⁶ The eminent British historian William Tarn famously said of Ptolemy I that “alone of the kings of his time he was no warrior”.¹⁰⁷ This view is no longer acceptable.¹⁰⁸ The historian Appian, a first-century CE native of Alexandria, called Ptolemy “the most formidable of the [Macedonian] rulers” after Alexander, praising his “preparedness for war [...] and the magnificence of his undertakings”.¹⁰⁹ This included campaigns in Syria and an extensive naval campaign in the Aegean.¹¹⁰ Ptolemy often personally commanded his fleet during naval engagements.¹¹¹

An unwarlike Ptolemy would in any case be quite exceptional among the first Hellenistic kings. He would not have survived long. The Hellenistic Age was a particularly tumultuous and violent period, at least as far as the Mediterranean is concerned. The preceding Achaemenid period (ca. 550–330) had been relatively peaceful because political hegemony in this period was claimed by a single “hyperpower”, the Persian Empire of the Achaemenid Dynasty, whose political and military supremacy was never seriously challenged until the invasion of Alexander the Great. The Hellenistic world by contrast was characterized by continuous, tremendously violent conflicts between several competing superpowers. Using Realist international-relations theory, Arthur Eckstein has analyzed the “Hellenistic world of war” as a multipolar interstate anarchy.¹¹² But there was a hierarchy. After the seemingly unbridled warfare among Alexander’s Successors, the core conflict of the Hellenistic world consistently was the antagonism between the Ptolemies and the Seleukids.¹¹³ Between 274 and 168, the two imperial powers confronted each other

106 For bibliography, see extensively Meeus 2014, 263 n. 2; cf. Marquaille 2008, 45, with references to modern views of Ptolemy I as peaceful in n. 27.

107 Tarn 1913, 216.

108 Most recently Hauben 2014; Meeus 2014; Strootman 2014b.

109 App., *Praef.* 10.

110 Hauben 2014.

111 For instance, at a combined expedition in Syria, Ptolemy commanded the fleet while the army was commanded by a general, Nikanor (Diod. 18.43; App., *Syr.* 52; cf. Hauben 1975); Ptolemy furthermore was present at naval expeditions in 309 (Diod. 20.27) and 308 (Diod. 20.37.1–2; Suda s.v. “Demetrios”) and in the naval battle off Salamis against Demetrios I (Diod. 20.49.1–2, 50.5–6, 51.6, 52.3; Plut., *Demetr.* 15.2; 16.1; Polyæn. 4.7.7).

112 Eckstein 2006, 79–117.

113 Strootman 2007, 26–30, using Charles Tilly’s model of competitive state formation (Tilly 1990).

directly in six major wars.¹¹⁴ These are collectively known as the Syrian Wars because they were supposed to have resulted from rival claims to the southern Levant, known in this period as Koile Syria (“Hollow Syria”). In fact, much more was at stake than merely the possession of that specific region. As Chester Starr already pointed out,

If there were six Syrian wars between the Ptolemies and Seleucids the causes were in part personal pride and desire for glory, but also the advantages to be gained from controlling the Mediterranean ports to which the luxuries of India and Arabia largely flowed.¹¹⁵

Historians today would probably no longer assume so lightheartedly a deeper lying economic cause for these wars, but Starr’s observation that the Ptolemies and Seleukids fought over Mediterranean ports is basically correct. Various smaller and bigger wars in the eastern Mediterranean moreover were interwoven with the Seleukid-Ptolemaic antagonism, involving many other polities, most of all the Antigonid kingdom in Macedonia and the Attalid kingdom in western Asia Minor. Eventually, also Rome was drawn into the fray.¹¹⁶

An important arena where Ptolemaic interests clashed with those of the Seleukids and their principal allies, the Antigonids, was the Aegean. The Aegean was in fact a more contested area than Koile Syria. Koile Syria was a frontier. In the Aegean by contrast, imperial spheres of influence were not clearly delineated. At issue here was the goodwill and support of the city states, the *poleis*. Among various reasons why these cities were so important to the empires two to my mind stand out. First, the *poleis* and their hinterlands were significant sources of manpower for both empires.¹¹⁷ Second, the *poleis*, being markets where surpluses were collected, constituted important sources of capital.¹¹⁸ The already high costs of large-scale warfare increased exponentially in the third century due to the development of ever bigger battle ships and the growing importance of fortifications and siege warfare (which in turn was the result

114 See Grainger 2010 for a comprehensive narrative of prolonged Seleukid-Ptolemaic warfare until the end of the second century; good overviews of Ptolemaic-Seleukid warfare are also provided by Hölbl 2001, *passim*, and Fischer-Bovet 2014, 52–105.

115 Starr 1989, 53.

116 For the Roman involvement, see Eckstein 2008.

117 See Stefanou 2013; it is noteworthy that the largest percentage of Ptolemaic cleruchs (military settlers) after the Macedonians came from mainland Greece, an area not directly controlled by the Ptolemies. As late as 190 a Ptolemaic official, Aristonikos, traveled to Greece to recruit new troops (Polyb. 22.17).

118 Strootman 2019b.

of the increased importance of cities for empires).¹¹⁹ Fischer-Bovet calculated that the annual costs of the Mediterranean fleet under Ptolemy II could easily have exceeded 4,000 silver talents, depending of the length of the campaigning season.¹²⁰ The fleet however was financed not only from the dynasty's own coffers, as ships were sometimes paid for by wealthy *philoi*.¹²¹ In addition, ships could be provided by allied cities.¹²² Some Aegean middle powers possessed considerable navies, for instance Byzantion and most of all Rhodes, an ally of the early Ptolemies.¹²³ The rapid monetization of the Egyptian economy, introduced centrally by the dynasty,¹²⁴ is indicative of the Ptolemies' need to obtain through taxation cash for their high military expenditures outside of Egypt.¹²⁵

Ptolemaic warfare in the Aegean went back to the Diadoch Wars, when a Ptolemaic fleet sailed north in response to the Antigonid appropriation of control of the newly founded League of the Islanders (314), which threatened to give them naval supremacy.¹²⁶ This brief, and unsuccessful, campaign was soon followed up by a combined land and sea offensive in western Asia Minor and Greece, led by Ptolemy I personally (309–306).¹²⁷ Ptolemy spent most of his career as satrap and king fighting the Antigonids. His successor, Ptolemy II, fought both the Antigonids and the Seleukids. Direct warfare with the Seleukids began in 274, or perhaps already in 280. Until 195 the Ptolemies and

119 On the costly naval “arms-race” between the Hellenistic kings, see Murray 2012; cf. Beyer-Rothhoff 1993, 248–249, pointing out that the Ptolemaic war fleet was active mainly in the Aegean.

120 Fischer-Bovet 2014, 72; she also adds a maximum of ca. 5,600–6,700 talents using a different method of calculation, and a minimum of ca. 2,500–3,700 silver talents in case in “peacetime” only one-third of the fleet's personnel was paid for nine months only (but refrains from speculating about a Red Sea fleet). Murray 2012, 190, points out the significant additional costs of maintaining shipyards, foundries for the production of rams, workshops and arsenals for the construction and storage of catapults, and ship sheds to store the vessels in during winter season.

121 Hauben 1990.

122 Hauben 1990, 129 and 132; Fischer-Bovet 2014, 71.

123 Kah 2016; Gabrielsen 1997; Wiemer 2002.

124 von Reden 2010.

125 On the development of taxation in Ptolemaic Egypt, see Gorre and Honigman 2013.

126 Diod. 20.27. Ptolemaic intervention in the later Chremonidean War likely was provoked by Antigonid naval expansion (O'Neil 2008).

127 On this campaign, see most recently Hauben 2014. Ptolemaic garrisons held Sikyon and Corinth from 308 to 303 (Bagnall 1976, 135). No later Ptolemaic kings commanded personally in the Aegean theater; several princes of royal blood however were active as commanders in Asia Minor during the Second and Third Syrian Wars (Coşkun 2015). A good example of the type of individual that built the Ptolemaic thalassocracy in the Aegean is Kallikrates of Samos; on his extraordinary career, see Hauben 1970; 2013.

Seleukids fought each other in the Aegean, both directly and by proxy. They also fought each other in Palestine and Syria. After 195, they fought each other in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. In these wars, the Ptolemies relied on their fleet for transportation and support of their troops. With one notable exception—Ptolemy III's campaign in Babylonia (245)—Ptolemaic armies never ventured far from the coast.¹²⁸

In recent historical research, empires are often seen as essentially negotiated enterprises involving various interest groups.¹²⁹ In the Hellenistic Mediterranean, notably priestly and civic elites were co-opted by the rival empires. Coercive means were used against cities only as a last resort. In the context of the Seleukid Empire, John Ma has elaborately shown how *poleis* in Asia Minor often had a relatively strong bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the empire,¹³⁰ while this author has pointed out the fundamental entanglements between civic and imperial elites (civic and imperial leaders often belonged to the same social groups, or even families).¹³¹ In civic inscriptions, a bond between a *basileus* (the king as a person) and a *dēmos* (the citizens of a *polis*) were cast as *symmachia* (military alliance) but also as *philia*, a ritualized friendship bond for mutual assistance.¹³² Because of the internal political disunity that characterized many *poleis*, imperial rulers often were eager to give in to the wishes of friendly regimes, and thus prevent them from changing sides. A case in point is the already mentioned Island League (or Nesiotic League). This federation of Cycladic *poleis* was originally founded under the auspices of the Antigonid Dynasty; but around 287 the Cycladic *poleis* strengthened their autonomy by negotiating a change of allegiance from the Antigonids to the Ptolemies.¹³³ All this also means that agents representing rival empires could be simultaneously present in the same city. The thing with network empires, is that the modern notion of state borders is not applicable to them: their networks crossed and their spheres of influence overlapped.

The control of islands was vital for the exercise of sea power in the Aegean.¹³⁴ The strategically located isle of Kos was a major Ptolemaic naval base in the

128 On this war comprehensively Hölbl 2001, 48–51.

129 See the “Introduction” to this volume.

130 Ma 2000. But rulers co-opted local elites and negotiated with them in exchange for revenue even in relatively firmly controlled regions such as Egypt (Manning 2003, 226) or Seleukid Babylonia (Strootman 2013).

131 Strootman 2011a.

132 Strootman 2019b, with previous literature.

133 Constantakopoulou 2012.

134 Constantakopoulou 2007.

third century.¹³⁵ Ptolemy II negotiated his way into becoming the protector of the Island League, as we just saw.¹³⁶ The League was dissolved under Antigonid pressure at the end of the Chremonidean War (ca. 267–261),¹³⁷ or early in the Second Syrian War (ca. 260–253).¹³⁸ After 250, the Cyclades came under the hegemony of Rhodes.¹³⁹ Ptolemaic sea power did not dwindle with the dissolution of the League.¹⁴⁰ The Ptolemies held on to their naval bases on Thera, the southernmost of the Cycladic Islands,¹⁴¹ and on Keos, near the tip of Attika.¹⁴² They also retained a major naval base at Methana, renamed Arsinoe, on the Peloponnesian coast of the Saronic Gulf.¹⁴³

Although the Ptolemies no longer intervened militarily in mainland Greece after 250, they continued to intervene there indirectly and remained very much present in the *poleis* through benefactions, dynastic cults, and sponsorship of religious festivals.¹⁴⁴ Even their participation *in absentia* in the great Pan-Hellenic festivals in southern Greece (the Olympic, Isthmian, and Nemean games) can directly be associated with their imperial interests in the Peloponnese.¹⁴⁵ And if empire is indeed about visibility, then the Ptolemies were surely winners—even in mainland Greece, and even after 250. Bronze and marble portraits of successive Ptolemaic kings and queens could be seen far and wide in the Aegean, but particularly in harbor towns and Pan-Hellenic and regional sanctuaries.¹⁴⁶

135 Bagnall 1976, 103–105; Sherwin-White 1978, 90–108.

136 Relations between the League and the Ptolemaic court are explored in Bagnall 1976, 136–141. Meadows 2013 argues that the Island League was founded by Ptolemy II, and was purely an instrument of power of the Ptolemies; Buraselis 2013, 174–177, too, doubts whether the League should be termed a genuine federation of *poleis*; contrast however the more nuanced view of Constantakopoulou 2012.

137 Meadows 2013, 37–38.

138 Merker 1970, 159–160 with n. 99.

139 Reger 1994.

140 So Erskine 2013, who is skeptical of the Polybian narrative of Ptolemaic decline after 250.

141 Bagnall 1976, 123–134. Thera may have remained in Ptolemaic hands until the reign of Ptolemy VI (180–145); see Reger 1994, 33; Palagia 2013, 146–147.

142 Bagnall 1976, 141–145.

143 Bagnall 1976, 135–136.

144 This is often called “soft power”; I do not think however that forcing these forms of imperial politics into a distinct category is useful.

145 Kralli 2013.

146 Overviews: Palagia 2013; Hintzen-Bohlen 1992. Pan-Hellenic and regional sanctuaries: Bagnall 1976, 151–156 (Delos); Hoepfner 1971 (Olympia); Kosmetatou 2002 (Delphi); Cavalier and Des Courtils 2013 (Xanthos); Stanzl 2003 (Limyra). The Ptolemies of course were not the only dynasty interested in these sacred places; as to be expected, the Seleukids and Antigonids infiltrated these places as well.

Ptolemaic hegemony in the Aegean was extensive. For the late third century (the reign of Ptolemy III) Polybios mentions a Ptolemaic military presence as far north as Thrace.¹⁴⁷ Polybios' information is corroborated for this period by an epigraphically attested Ptolemaic *stratēgos* (military governor) in Thrace between 240 and 221.¹⁴⁸ On the opposite shore of the Sea of Marmara, Ptolemy II was in alliance with the Bithynian kings Nikomedes I and Ziaëlas, enemies of the Seleukids, who controlled the Bosporus.¹⁴⁹ In the northern Black Sea littoral, an inscription shows that Ptolemy II was allied with king Pairisades II.¹⁵⁰ Pairisades may have been a vassal of sorts, as is suggested by a black basalt statue of the Ptolemaic queen Arsinoe II excavated at Pantikapaion, near the Aphrodite sanctuary where the Isis sgrafitto was found.¹⁵¹ This brings us back to the Crimea, and the ship called Isis.

Conclusion

We started this chapter with an image of a Ptolemaic warship, named after a goddess who was commonly associated with Ptolemaic queens. The presence of the ship so far to the north should not come as a surprise. The Hellenistic period was a time of increased connectivity. The Ptolemaic Empire took advantage of that and at the same time enhanced it, as imperial powers often do. Empires create connectivity and stimulate migration, both voluntarily and involuntarily (soldiers, sailors, colonists, slaves). If the ship indeed is Ptolemaic, its presence in a Crimean sanctuary dedicated to the sea deity, Aphrodite, and near a statue of Arsinoe II, can be seen as a symbolic demarcation of the northern edge of Ptolemaic maritime hegemony.

I have argued that the Ptolemaic Empire in its heyday under Ptolemy I to IV was seaborne: its main avenues of communication and control were maritime. Ptolemaic power was based on a strong fleet and an extensive high-density maritime infrastructure. Sheila Ager rightly stressed that the idea of a Ptolemaic grand strategy of defensive imperialism is largely based on hindsight: that Ptolemy I's campaigns in mainland Greece and Ptolemy III's campaigns in

147 Polyb. 5.34.8; cf. Liv. 31.16.3–4.

148 Bengtson 1952, 178 and 183 n. 1; the sources for the Ptolemaic presence in the North Aegean are discussed by Bagnall 1976, 159–168.

149 *FGrH* 434 fr. 14; *Sylloge* 13 456.

150 H. I. Bell in *Symbolae Osloenses* 5 (1927) 1–2.

151 The statue is mentioned by Murray 2002, 549, citing Vinogradov and Zolotarev 1999, 365 (*n.v.*).

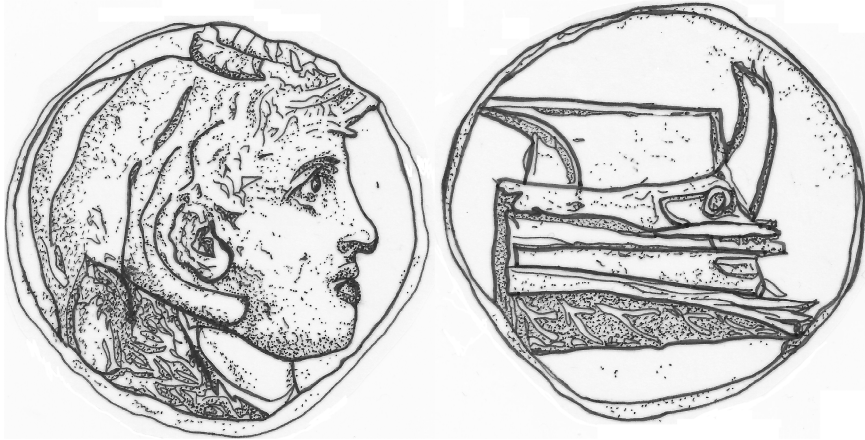


FIGURE. 5.2 Gold Stater of Ptolemy I, ca. 313–306
DRAWING LEONOR STROOTMAN

Syria and Babylonia were unsuccessful does not mean that these kings had limited ambitions.¹⁵² In fact, the opposite is true. And although it is also true that the Ptolemies never controlled the entire Aegean in actuality, they were certainly all over the place. The problem was that the Seleukids and Antigonids were there too.

The Ptolemaic Empire was different from the city-based thalassocracies of Athens and Carthage in that it expressed its sea power in its representation and propaganda—in panegyric (Theokritos' 17th *Idyll*; Kallimachos' *Hymn to Delos*), by the promotion of the cult of Aphrodite-Isis across the Mediterranean, or in the form of the well-known image of Alexandria as 'Queen of the Sea'. There is moreover the so-called "naval supremacy coinage" of Ptolemy I, but this type of coinage is rather early and quite rare (Figure. 5.2).¹⁵³

Elsewhere I have argued that if Ptolemy I thought of himself as an Egyptian pharaoh, he would have stayed in Memphis. This is where he resided when he was still no more than satrap of Egypt. By making the Mediterranean port Alexandria his principal residence, and by bringing there the embalmed body of the world conqueror, Alexander, Ptolemy publicly upgraded his ambition from provincial ruler to world leader pretend.¹⁵⁴ As a province, Egypt of course was hugely important, and the Ptolemies did visit Memphis

152 Ager 2003, 49.

153 Bodzek 2014.

154 Strootman 2014b.

for specific festive occasions; but in the third century other regions were important, too.¹⁵⁵

This is also what Ptolemaic propaganda tells us. Universalistic claims are pervasive in Ptolemaic representation, for instance in the Adulis Inscription of Ptolemy III,¹⁵⁶ or Theokritos' encomium for Ptolemy II, as we saw above. Around 270, the court poet Kallimachos boasted that Ptolemy II ruled an empire stretching from sunrise to sunset,¹⁵⁷ and more than two centuries later Kleopatra VII still claimed suzerainty over an empire extending from the Hellespont to India.¹⁵⁸

Acknowledgment

While finishing this chapter, I heard the sad news that Herman Wallinga, former Chair of Ancient History at Utrecht University and an outstanding scholar of maritime history, passed away on January 1, 2018, at the age of 92. In a short obituary on Facebook, my colleague Jaap-Jan Flinterman correctly characterized Professor Wallinga as “een groot geleerde en een ontzettend aardige man” (“a great scholar and an extremely amiable man”). I dedicate this article to his memory.

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155 The Ptolemies took good care of Egypt, but one does not get the impression that in the third century Egypt was their priority when it came to (re)investing resources; the unknown, but likely high, combined costs of civic benefactions, gift giving to local *philoï*, garrisoning, fleet maintenance, and waging war suggests that more Ptolemaic money streamed into the war-torn Aegean than into Egypt.

156 Above, n. 68.

157 Kallimachos, *Hymn* 4.169–170.

158 Dio Cass. 49.40.2–41.3.

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