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Egypt and Rome: conquest through “Soft power”

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Abstract

Modern scholars (Badian 1967, Lampela 1998, and Manni 1949, 1950) have long recognised the fact that the mighty kingdom of Egypt was reduced to the status of a Roman dependency long before being conquered by war. Roman influence (and interference) upon the kings has been accused of being the cause of this change. It is important to observe that most authors recognise Egypt had also started to fall under Roman control before the first century BC, probably from the 140s BC, when the king Ptolemy VIII, who owed his power to Roman support, got the control of Egypt.

Nevertheless, very few analyses have been done on the personal relationships between Romans and Egyptians, and none has been made about the modern concept of soft power: the power relation between Rome and the Ptolemies has been mainly shown as a mere convenience for the kings, later turned into a (justified) fear of Roman power and direct intervention, and it is has often been analysed through the political relationship of the Ptolemaic kings and Rome.

In general historiography has until now focused more on how the Egyptians had been forced into the protectorate by Rome, rather than on how they themselves had entered its net by seeking Roman interventions and cultivating relationships (I think to Ptolemy VIII connection with the Scipionic circle, or to the debt of Ptolemy XII with Pompey and other Roman bankers). Thus, I want to analyse in this work the history of Roman and Egyptian relations from 200 BC to 31 BC, observing how the multiple relationships and the usefulness of Rome brought Egypt progressively under the control of the Roman state.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine how the Roman Republic progressively subordinated the Ptolemaic kingdom to its influence during the second century BC. Modern scholars such as Badian, Lampela, and Manni have long recognised the fact that the mighty kingdom of Egypt had been reduced to the status of a Roman dependency long before it was conquered.¹ Continuous Roman influence (and interference) upon the kings has been suggested as the cause of this change. This article will analyse how a number of Roman senators and officials were able to influence Egypt, creating a channel of soft power for Rome.

Soft power is a modern political science term coined in the 1990s by Joseph S. Nye, which he described as 'intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions.'² Nye contrasts these with hard power resources, described as being of military and economic nature.³ This definition has often been discussed and in many cases expanded: Bell, for example, proposes that British influence in other countries can still be secured 'via companies which promoted British economic and political interests through corporate imperialism'.⁴ Vuving identifies that non-state actors can be used as an outsourced currency of soft power. His main examples are NGOs, which can be used to provide humanitarian aid, thus improving the image of their original host or headquartered country. Vuving treats such displays of 'benignity' as a kind of soft power currency which can be used to engender favour for the projecting country.⁵ In the ancient world, similar phenomena can be observed. Roman merchants and diplomats often acted in ways comparable to corporate imperialism, promoting Roman economic and political interests through trade and diplomatic missions.

Nye later theorised the concept of 'smart power', a term he coined in 2003, in order to 'counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy'.⁶ He added that although it is more desirable for a country to shape the preferences of others

¹ Badian 1958: 110-111; Lampela 1998: 242-243; Manni 1950: 243, 247.

² Nye 1991: 32.

³ Nye 1991: 32.

⁴ Bell 2016: 1.

⁵ Vuving 2009: 14.

⁶ Nye 2009: 160.

with soft power, this alone can rarely replace the effectiveness of the ‘carrot and stick’ approach represented by soft and hard power used together.⁷

Despite the fact that some scholars such as Lampela and Manni discuss Egypt’s increasing dependence on Rome in terms that are suggestive of soft power, very few analyses to this end have been made on the personal relationships between Romans and Egyptians and never as the central focus of any particular study. Furthermore, none have ever been made on soft power. Power relations between Rome and the Ptolemies have mainly been described in terms of their convenience for the kings, which later turned into a (justified) fear of Roman power and direct intervention, with the analysis often focusing on the political relationship between the Ptolemaic kings and the Roman state.⁸ The purpose of this article is to show the importance of soft power in Egypt, in this case represented by the attractiveness of Rome as a reliable throne-maker and strong ally upon which the Ptolemies could rely, with an especial focus on the importance of personal relationships that were created. It will explain how it was possible that a country which was still one of the most powerful in the Mediterranean became trapped in the Roman sphere even before a military intervention. This discussion will be connected to what Cicero calls *vis benevolentiae* (strength of goodwill), which he describes as one of the ways through which Rome was able to exert control over many states (Cicero *De officiis*: 2.20-29):⁹

‘But, of all motives, none is better adapted to secure influence and hold it fast than love; nothing is more foreign to that end than fear...[26]...Let me add, however, that as long as the empire of the Roman People maintained itself by acts of service, not of oppression, wars were waged in the interest of our allies or to safeguard our supremacy; the end of our wars was marked by acts of clemency or by only a necessary degree of severity; the senate was a haven of refuge for kings, tribes, and nations;...[29]... And since it is manifest that the power of goodwill (*benevolentiae vim*) is so great and that of fear is so weak...’

It seems that *vis benevolentiae* is analogous to Nye’s ‘soft power’ in many respects and is therefore a useful tool for understanding Roman foreign policy. The trust in Roman *fides*, their reliability, was an essential element for *vis benevolentiae*.

⁷ Nye 2009: 160.

⁸ Lampela 1998: 243; Burstein 2004: 10.

⁹ Trans. Miller 1913.

Fides is a Roman concept, which means 'good faith', which Cicero associates with keeping agreements and promises (Cicero *De officiis*: 1.23). It was, therefore, a powerful negotiatory tool, as it meant that people could rely on and trust a person who possessed *fides*.

It is also important to analyse the concept of *clientela*. *Clientela*, or patronage in English, is a type of social relation in the Roman world and, according to Badian, is a relation between a socially inferior person and a superior one.¹⁰ This is distinguished from *amicitia* (friendship), a different concept that instead suggests equality between the people involved, even if it was a vague term which, as Badian writes, could with time have become a polite term for relations even between a superior and an inferior.¹¹ Historians have often analysed the exact limit of *clientela*. Saller, for example, considered this relation to be an asymmetrical one, based on the exchange of goods and services between the two parties, including freedmen and their ex-masters.¹² Still, most modern commentators seem also to agree that *clientela* was never defined by law but that, as Badian writes, it was mostly upheld by custom and morality, by *fides*.¹³ The usefulness, benefits, and real effects of *clientela* are something about which commentators diverge. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, clients could expect legal protection in courts (and protection in general) from their *patroni*, and this protection was hereditary, something which is supported by Deniaux and Badian (Dionysius: 2.10ff.).¹⁴ As Verboven writes, ancient sources generally give us the impression that clients were very useful for powerful Romans, as they could support them politically, and there are reported cases in both the early and late republic of Roman elites raising armies from their clients.¹⁵ Brunt on the other hand disagrees with this view. He suggests that it had not initially been customary to request military support from clients, as Dionysius does not mention it in his analysis of the Roman patronage system.¹⁶ He further suggests that the political support of clients, as in elections, was negligible.¹⁷ Brunt supports the idea that in general, even if *clientela* had once been a stronger bond before it started to lose power during the republic, it was never a vital part of the Roman elite's power, even if it could enlarge the *patronus'* prestige, and he further observes that clients could in practice easily avoid their obligations,

¹⁰ Badian 1958: 11.

¹¹ Verboven 2013: 1; Badian 1958: 12.

¹² Saller 1982: 1.

¹³ Badian 1958: p. 11; Verboven 2013: 2 and Brunt 1988: 441 agree.

¹⁴ Deniaux 2006: 846-847; Badian 1958: 4.

¹⁵ Verboven 2013: 3; For Early Republic, see Dionysius: 9.15 (Brunt observes there is no direct mention of clients); for Late Republic, see Appian, *Bellum Civile*: 1.80.

¹⁶ Brunt 1988: 438.

¹⁷ Brunt 1988: 430.

and even betray their *patroni*.¹⁸ Verboven partially agrees, recognising that the use of clients was not decisive, though he maintains that they still had their usefulness in politics.¹⁹

In his seminal work *Roman foreign clientelae*, Badian explains that he sees the Roman empire as a network of client states and foreign clients, but others oppose this vision.²⁰ Burton, for example, is convinced that the ties of *amicitia* in Rome could also exist between people of different status, rather than just with equals. He therefore proposes that Rome saw its relations with allied states as closer to *amicitia*, which he justifies by observing that Rome often used the term *amici* to describe such kings and allied people, especially during the last two centuries of the republic.²¹ Similarly, Rollinger argues that *amicitia* was a practical network of social and political relations, crucial for Roman society, which was the basis of many elite networks of senators.²² Eilers also disagrees with Badian's definition according to which patronage is the key concept through which the Romans viewed their empire. He instead posits that the idea that Rome treated its allies as if it were a relationship of patronage is mostly metaphorical, an image that the Romans used.²³

It is important for the analysis of this article to highlight the distinction between the Roman state and Roman individuals. The senate was composed of individual senators, each of whom had their own mind and interests. Of course, what benefited individual Roman senators could also benefit Rome, as Polybius recognised when he wrote about Flaminius and his interests in Greece ('For this general had shown a sagacity equal to that of any Roman, having managed both public enterprises and his own private dealings') (Polybius: 18.12). The problem, however, is that individual senators' interests did not always align with those of the Roman state. Still, senators could advance the state's policies, and in so doing they could establish ties in Egypt. Through the ties established by individual senators, the Ptolemies could be influenced by Rome. This means that *clientelae* connections could be established between Roman nobles and Egyptian kings, resulting in a gradual dependence on Rome. Rome was useful to the kings, therefore they were interested in gaining allies inside the senate, relying on private relations of *amicitia* that would result in a *de facto*

¹⁸ Brunt 1988: 393, 441.

¹⁹ Verboven 2013: 3.

²⁰ Badian, 1958:1-14.

²¹ Burton 2011: 5.

²² Rollinger 2014

²³ Eilers 2002: 186-187.

relationship of *clientela* between senators and the kings. This would have required that the Ptolemies trust enough in the Roman state's usefulness, in its *benevolentia* towards them, and in its *fides*, to ensure that the eventual promised benefits could really be enacted. This *benevolentia* could then have been enhanced by relationships with individual Roman senators, who in turn could have worked on behalf of the king in the senate.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence on Romans and Egyptians' personal relationships. However, it will be shown here that many of these relationships can be easily theorised. Furthermore, the remaining evidence is mostly from Roman sources, or pro-Roman sources, which will naturally show their bias, especially regarding the last century of Ptolemaic Egypt. It will not be denied here that Egyptians were at times persuaded to acquiesce to Roman demands out of fear of their hard power and that in some cases Egypt was influenced by Roman smart power. Rather, this article will analyse the soft power component that brought Egypt into the Roman sphere.

Start of Roman-Egyptian relations

Little is known about the first relations between Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt, but it seems that they were limited. The first time that Egypt asked for Roman help was around 200 BC, when the Macedonian king Philip V and the Seleucid king Antiochus III plotted to invade the Egyptian dominions. Although it is not accepted by many historians, it seems that Rome nominated M. Aemilius Lepidus as a guardian of the young king Ptolemy V.²⁴ Rome answered Philip and Antiochus by imploring both kings not to invade, but this ended with the Macedonians and Romans fighting a war and with the Syrians conquering Coele-Syria, though they did not invade Egypt itself (Livy: 35.15).

Here, Roman help was not very useful, as Syria was still able to conquer a huge part of the Ptolemaic empire. Yet Egypt needed Rome as an ally. It was a problematic ally, but it was the only one available. Whether the presence of Lepidus, if true, weighted the court and the child king to rely on Rome cannot be confirmed. At most, it can show that the Ptolemies needed Roman support, and started to tie themselves to the new power, creating a channel, through the personal relationship of Lepidus to the court, for soft power. It is also possible that Lepidus, had his behaviour been honourable, could have convinced Egypt that Rome

²⁴ Lampela 1998: 79-80.

was reliable, thus creating a *vis benevolentiae* situation to encourage Egypt to willingly give political concessions to Rome out of trust and positive diplomatic relationships. While the fact Rome did not act directly against Antiochus on Egypt's behalf cannot have improved those relations, Rome still remained a valuable potential ally compared to its dangerous Hellenistic neighbour, even if Ptolemies and Seleucids were now tied by marriage.

Sporadic Roman-Egyptian political contacts followed. When Ptolemy V died in 180 BC, his heir, Ptolemy VI Philometor, was still a child. In 173 BC, Rome sent an embassy in order to renew the alliance (*societas*) between the two countries. The war against Perseus of Macedon was impending and Rome wanted to probe its allies' position (Livy: 42.6).²⁵ In 170 BC the Ptolemaic officials who controlled the court were ready to start a war against Syria, and so the Seleucids sent their embassy to Rome in order to accuse the Ptolemies of waging an unjust war (Polybius: 27.19). According to Bevan, the Romans did not want to engage in a new war while they were already fighting against Perseus, so when the Ptolemies sent an embassy requesting support for their actions against Syria, the Romans avoided such an entanglement (Polybius: 28.1).²⁶ Manni seems to believe that the Egyptians, who were officially there in order to renew their friendship with Rome as they had already done a few years earlier, struck a deal in this period with the Romans, whereby Rome and the Ptolemies became allies, though not publicly.²⁷ This is because Roman sources later refer to the relationship with the Ptolemies as a *societas* or συμμαχία and not an *amicitia*. Moreover, the Ptolemaic officials needed Roman support at all costs, therefore they could have made a deal that was favourable to Rome, but they were forced to keep it secret in order to avoid problems with their populace. Rome, on the other hand, wished to avoid another war.²⁸ The desire of the Egyptians to use Roman military strength is an example of the results of Roman soft power. The Roman army was something that appealed to Egypt, as it was vital for the Ptolemies. If the Romans had instead used their legions to coerce Egypt into obedience, that would have been an example of Roman hard power.

This is a good example of the desperate need of the Egyptian government to secure an alliance with Rome. It sufficiently trusted Rome even though it felt compelled by a lack of

²⁵ Manni 1950: 230- 231.

²⁶ Bevan 1927: 284.

²⁷ Manni 1950: 233-236.

²⁸ Manni 1950: 233-236; for *societas*, Justinus, 34.2; Polybius, 31.20.

other options. As Lampela observes, it is possible that Lepidus, the supposed guardian for Ptolemy VI's father and *princeps senatus* at the time, was friendly towards the Egyptians.²⁹ After all, in the same embassy he had suggested to the Egyptian ambassadors not to mention the possibility of mediating a peace between Romans and Perseus (Polybius: 28.1). Rhodes made this proposal instead because it had not been warned, and thus it angered Rome. This means the Egyptians seemed to trust Lepidus, therefore it can be said that Egypt was counting on Roman *benevolentia*, and on its ties with Lepidus (and on his *fides*). Rome still needed to both avoid a war with the Seleucids and to avoid making enemies with Egypt in such a delicate moment.³⁰ If this explanation is accurate, then it seems that the connection with Lepidus can be considered the first real start of Roman soft power in Egypt. The Ptolemies appear to have trusted him enough to give us the impression that they trusted in the prospect of a genuine alliance with Rome because of the presence of this individual Roman representative negotiating in good faith.

At the same time, the Seleucids and Ptolemies fought a war that resulted in a Seleucid victory and the installation of a puppet government in Egypt led by the young king Ptolemy VI. However, a problem arose for Antiochus: Ptolemy VI's brother, Ptolemy VIII, was simultaneously crowned king in Alexandria by the locals. Once Antiochus had departed, the brothers decided to rule together. Antiochus invaded the Ptolemaic kingdom once again in 169 BC, and Rome, by this time worried by the prospect of a Seleucid victory, sent embassies to mediate for peace, until a final embassy, led by Gaius Popilius Laenas, arrived in Egypt (Livy: 45.10).³¹ Popilius was ordered by the senate to tell Antiochus and Ptolemy VI to desist, with the threat of withdrawal of Roman friendship (Livy: 45.12).³² Therefore Antiochus, to whom the will of the senate was reported first, chose peace and retreated, fearing Roman hard power. It is at this precise moment that Egypt was, informally, bound to Rome. The Ptolemies owed their survival to Rome, therefore they could not take any hostile action against Rome.

Furthermore, in 164 BC Ptolemy VI was forced away by his brother Ptolemy VIII. The king fled to Rome, where he asked the senate to reinstate him to the throne. Remarkably,

²⁹ Lampela 1998: 120.

³⁰ Lampela 1998: p. 120.

³¹ Lampela 1998: 122-124.

³² Lampela 1998: 126.

Ptolemy VI trusted Rome enough to accept the senate's proposal to divide the country, with Cyprus and Egypt returning to him, while Cyrenaica was left to his brother.³³ This trust in Roman *benevolentia* meant that Egypt was now informally bound to Rome, and therefore unable to take hostile actions against it. Only the senate could give him back his throne, and so the king needed to trust it to recover what was his by right and to accept the senate's decision. If he had not already placed his trust in the senate he certainly had to now, representing as it did his only chance to win in Egypt. Crucially, all of these negotiations were conducted without any active Roman military involvement. The ensuing strife was entirely between the two Ptolemies' forces. Roman *fides* thus acted as a strong tool of soft power, enabling Rome to exert significant pressure and enforce change without deploying soldiers.

A brief analysis of the position of the ruler of Cyrene at this time will also help to emphasise the extent of Roman soft power over the Ptolemies. Ptolemy VIII, king of Cyrene, was also able to keep his throne only thanks to Roman *fides* and *benevolentia*, which he had originally received due to Rome's earlier support and continued to benefit from via their legal recognition. He even created a will in which he said he would leave his kingdom to Rome (SEG IX 7). Furthermore, he was able to convince Rome to give him Cyprus by removing it from his brother in 154 BC. He received sanction from the senate to invade Cyprus, thus confirming that Rome was helpful and reliable, demonstrating its *fides* when called upon by an ally, even one of lesser status (Polybius: 33.11). This demonstration of Roman *benevolentia* in acquiescing to Ptolemy VIII ambitions is a further example of a careful senatorial policy that sought to make select rulers well-disposed toward it and to increase Rome's soft power indirectly. Ptolemy VIII invasion of Cyprus failed, but his brother forgave him, because, as Manni writes, he feared Rome's response following his previous actions (Polybius: 39.7).³⁴ Furthermore, Ptolemy VI may still have needed to seek Roman support, as he had already requested it against Antiochus in 169 BC and against his brother in 164 BC. Therefore, it is possible that the usefulness of Roman support, primarily through legal recognition, was still one reason for him to keep on Rome's good side. Thus, the king could still be influenced by Rome's soft power, albeit to a much lesser extent than to the hard power represented by the menace of war.

³³ Bevan 1927, 291.

³⁴ Manni 1950: 238.

Despite this, both Egypt and Cyrenaica retained their independence. Moreover, many Romans active in Egypt started to become prominent and are therefore mentioned in the ancient sources (PP VI 14852; PP V 13535). According to Manni, the senate was apparently split between those who supported Ptolemy VI and those who supported Ptolemy VIII.³⁵ Perhaps the senators were looking to what they believed was the best solution for Rome and for everybody involved, or perhaps they feared that the annexation of Egypt and its annexation as a province would lead to the creation of a potential governor who would be too rich and powerful, as Cicero feared many decades later, but it cannot be ruled out, especially considering how frequently the kings of Asia Minor resorted to bribery in Rome, that the Ptolemaic kings corrupted some Roman senators (Diodorus Siculus: 36.15.1; Cicero, *Ad familiares*: 1.7.).³⁶ Had they been able to do so, the Ptolemies would have bound themselves even more to Rome, enhancing the already strong soft power that Rome could bring to bear upon the monarchs. Indeed, this would have only increased the Ptolemies' dependence on Rome, as they continued to count on its support.

It has also been suggested that the Romans agreed to give Cyprus to Ptolemy VIII in order to weaken Egypt and to preserve Roman favour in the Ptolemaic court: after all, they could not allow Ptolemy VI to become too powerful.³⁷ Polybius believed that the Romans had actually started to fear the risk posed by a strong and unified Egypt (Polybius: 31.10). At the same time, he observes that:

‘... many decisions of the Romans are now of this kind: availing themselves of the mistakes of others they effectively increase and build up their own power, at the same time doing a favour and appearing to confer a benefit on the offenders’ (Polybius: 31.10.7).³⁸

It should be remembered that this was Polybius' view, rather than a statement of fact.³⁹ However, whether or not it is true that the senate wanted to act in this way, Polybius clearly shows there was a belief that Romans liked to be well-considered and to be seen as fair. Appearing so would have naturally served as an advantage in negotiations where obedience was sought, or even just to have their arbitrations, when connected to the Roman interest,

³⁵ Manni 1950: 239-240.

³⁶ Altman 2017: 7-8.

³⁷ Lampela 1998: 157-159.

³⁸ Trans. Paton 1922-1927.

³⁹ Lampela 1998: 142-143.

be more accepted by foreign people. All of this would have increased Roman soft power, giving the impression that Rome was a reliable partner, and that people could therefore trust in its *fides* and *benevolentia*).

Cato, the Scipiones, and the Ptolemies

At this point, it is necessary to analyse another possible connection of Roman soft power in Egypt during this period. A Roman senator, L. Minucius Thermus, appears to have been connected to Ptolemy VIII on several different occasions. The first time he encountered Ptolemy VIII was during the embassy of 154 BC, to install the king of Cyrenaica as new monarch of the island of Cyprus, which was still in the possession of Ptolemy VI (Polybius: 33.11). Later, his name is cited in Cato's oration, *De Ptolemaeo minore contra Thermum*, where Thermus is commonly identified as the same L. Minucius Thermus who was involved in the embassy to the Ptolemaic king.⁴⁰ In any case, it is not known what Thermus was accused of, but according to some historians he had done something to offend Ptolemy VI during the embassy.⁴¹ There is evidence from a fragment reported by Gellius that the crime was connected to financial misconduct, leading many, such as Scullard, to suspect that Thermus had been bribed (Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 18.9).⁴² Lampela is instead convinced that Cato was simply angry at Thermus' failure to force Ptolemy VI to submit to the Roman decision regarding Cyprus.⁴³ Based on this evidence it is highly probable that Thermus was accused of having received bribes by Ptolemy VIII, either when the king of Cyrenaica went to Rome, or later during the trip to Egypt.

In any case, after these events, Thermus' presence was recorded years later in Alexandria, during Ptolemy VIII's conquest of the city after his brother's death (Josephus *Against Apion*: 2.50). No source reports the reason for his presence, but there is nothing to suggest that he opposed Ptolemy VIII's play for power after an Alexandrian embassy asked him to take the throne following Ptolemy VI's death. Therefore, it is important to question what the possible reasons for Thermus' presence in Egypt were. Was he sent there because the senate wished to place a loyal ally, Ptolemy VIII, as king of Egypt? He was, after all, much more compliant with Roman requests than his brother. Or was it because enough senators had

⁴⁰ Lampela 1998: 182.

⁴¹ Lampela 1998: 182-183

⁴² Scullard 1973: 237.

⁴³ Lampela 1998: 182-183.

been bribed to support him? Or perhaps because Thermus had enough private interests in this venture? There is no sufficient evidence to determine whether Thermus was in Egypt in private or official capacity. It is also interesting to observe that, as Manni writes, it is possible that Thermus was there in order to protect Roman traders' interests: after all, Ptolemy VIII protected Roman merchants and businessmen (IDelos 4.1526).⁴⁴ Roman economic interests in Egypt were increasing, with wheat being badly needed in Rome, and the traders and bankers could have been a powerful force in lobbying the senate.

Unfortunately, there is not enough information to fully understand what the reason for Thermus' presence was. However, an interesting pattern appears, showing a connection between Ptolemy VIII and Thermus. Thermus had been supporting the king since the Cyprus problem, probably receiving bribes, and, as Bevan (who calls him a partisan of Ptolemy VIII) observes, Thermus was present in Alexandria when the king of Cyrene became king of Egypt.⁴⁵ This leads to the conclusion that Thermus did in fact have a connection with the king, though it cannot be excluded that Thermus was also acting to protect eventual trade interests there, either his own or those of his *clientes* in Italy. In any case, the connection between Ptolemy VIII and Thermus remains. This means that the king could have tried to use this connection to strengthen his influence in Rome, making the Roman state more reliable for him as a political ally, and ensuring that Roman *benevolentia* would have supported him, thus creating his own soft power channel over Rome. At the same time, however, he was entering more and more into the Roman sphere of influence, both commercial and political, thus strengthening the growing Roman soft power over the Ptolemaic dominions. In this instance we can see a double soft power channel which can work in both ways, but that resulted especially in binding Egypt to Rome more effectively.

Otto has also observed that L. Minucius Thermus was a relative of Q. Minucius Thermus, a known member of the Scipiones' circle.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is possible that L. Thermus was a member of that circle too, that he was really working to support the Scipiones' interests, and that the senate (and the Cornelii) chose him as an envoy because he was already acquainted with Ptolemy VIII (or, for the Scipiones, because he was working with them). Another important point is that senator Gnaeus Cornelius Merula was present in both the

⁴⁴ Manni 1950: 251.

⁴⁵ Bevan 1927: 307.

⁴⁶ Otto 1934: 119.

162 BC and 154 BC embassies (Polybius: 17.20; 33.11). He was from a recent Cornelia family branch, and, according to Landrea, his family was at that time allied with the Scipiones.⁴⁷ This lends even more credit to the fact that the Cornelia Scipiones were actively trying to influence Egyptian politics to place on the throne the king whom they desired.

So far two interesting possibilities have been introduced. The first is that Thermus was a man with interests in Egypt, either hoping to receive bribes from the king, or having other economic interests in Egypt or Cyrenaica. The second is that the Scipiones had interests there. It should be remembered this is not the first time that the Cornelia Scipiones and the Gracchi were connected to foreign kings, as shown by the examples of Pergamum, Cappadocia, and Numidia (Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius*: 14; Polybius: 31.32).⁴⁸ It seems that the family was very interested in cultivating foreign friends. This meant that Roman individuals had gained some personal connections in Egypt. With such powerful connections, it would have been much more difficult for Ptolemy VIII to oppose his protectors' will. Moreover, this meant the senate could be persuaded by the Scipiones to act in a way favourable to the local Egyptian faction that they supported.

This is a curious situation: most of the actions had apparently started from Egypt, which therefore placed itself in a situation of almost submission towards Rome, even before the senate had started to intervene. Because of this apparent lack of intervention, it is likely that the senate was trying to stabilise the throne of Egypt, thus avoiding a pointless civil war, while at the same time securing influence over the kingdom through an ally like Ptolemy VIII, who, unlike his brother Ptolemy VI, never defied Roman will. After all, in this period Rome seemed intent on keeping the Eastern Mediterranean at peace, rather than conquering it.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the influence of the Scipiones may also have been instrumental in moving the senate to support Ptolemy VIII, as it seems that they were already well connected to him, as has been shown above regarding Thermus. This means that the king would have been right to trust individual Romans, ensuring that he could profit from Roman *vis benevolentiae*, though he enhanced Roman soft power at the same time because of his over-reliance on them. Thus, it seems likely that the personal interests of the Scipionic network may have been a reason for some senators to speak in the senate on behalf of the king, thus

⁴⁷ Landrea 2022: 279.

⁴⁸ Badian 1967: 193.

⁴⁹ Gruen 1984.

influencing the senate's decisions. Unfortunately, the extent to which the senate's decisions were due, either to the senatorial attempt to stabilise the country or to the Scipionic faction's influence, cannot be established for certain.

At this point, Egypt could not avoid relying on Rome. And yet, at the same time, the Romans had still not sent an army to conquer the Ptolemaic kingdom. Due to personal and political means Egypt was already too tied with and reliant on Rome, and so the kingdom was forced to appease it.

In any case, these relations with Rome yielded other kinds of benefits to Egypt. There is evidence from Josephus that during the reign of Ptolemy IX Lathyros (from 116-107 BC, then 88-81 BC), following a Jewish embassy, the Romans had ordered that everybody had to pay the Jews if they wanted to export goods from their harbours, except the Ptolemies, who were exempt from these impositions because they were friends and allies of Rome (Josephus, *AJ*: 14.247-255).⁵⁰ Therefore, having trust in Roman *fides* could have been useful to the Egyptians for many other purposes, who in turn became even more absorbed into the Roman sphere. It was a double-edged sword, but it was still compelling, even if Rome was often a menacing and risky friend. The benefits were probably able to keep the Egyptians partially satisfied, even if it is doubtful they would suffice to make them forget the danger Rome posed to their independence.

The Egyptian court was nevertheless able to have independent policies, despite increasingly strong Roman interference. As Sullivan observes, until Ptolemy IX death in 81 BC, Egypt continued to follow an independent policy in Syria.⁵¹ During the First Mithridatic War, the Ptolemaic kings (both in Cyprus and Egypt) did not send any support to Sulla, despite his commander Lucullus trying to find warships among the allies. Roman influence thus seems to have been lost, but it is important to remember that Rome was at that time divided between Sulla and the Marians. The kings did not know who they ought to support, as they feared reprisal were they to support the losing faction.⁵² Therefore, Roman soft (and fear of

⁵⁰ Lampela 1998: 216-217.

⁵¹ Sullivan 1990: 87.

⁵² Manni 1950: 255.

hard) power could not work because of this problem. Otherwise, according to Manni, Egypt was very subservient to Rome.⁵³

Successive developments

In the first century BC, Roman soft power in Egypt continued. During the First Mithridatic War Mithridates VI captured Ptolemy XI, but he later fled and reached Sulla in 84 BC. Here there is an interesting attempt by Sulla at leveraging Roman soft power in the support of Ptolemy XI. As Appian writes:

‘Sulla declared that Alexander [...], who had been reared in Cos and given up to Mithridates by the inhabitants of that island, and had fled to Sulla and become intimate with him, should be king of Alexandria. He did this because the governor of Alexandria was destitute of a sovereign in the male line, [...], and because he expected to reap a large reward from a rich kingdom. As, however, Alexander relying upon Sulla behaved himself in a very offensive manner toward them, the Alexandrians, [...] put him to death; for they too were still without fear of foreigners, either by reason of the magnitude of their own government or their inexperience as yet of external dangers’ (Appian, *Bellum civile*: 1.102).⁵⁴

This shows that Sulla was in an interesting position. There was no legitimate king in Egypt since the previous one had died, and Sulla was now effectively the protector of the only legitimate Egyptian heir. As Appian writes in the passage above, Sulla knew that he could expect a monetary reward, as many politicians in the second century BC had believed they could from other client states. However, it is impossible to seriously discount the likelihood that Sulla also calculated that a foreign ally could be of later use in case of need. Egypt could provide money, soldiers and ships, or wheat, which were all vital to Rome. At the same time, the king trusted in Roman *fides* as many of his predecessors had done, and thus he was already under the influence of Roman soft power. Unfortunately, Ptolemy XI was killed by the Alexandrians, who did not like the Romans. Egypt was not an easy country to control, not only for the local kings, but also for the Romans who hoped to use the kings as their puppets. The fact that Sulla did not intervene should not be shocking. As Badian wrote, why should he have enlarged the empire and risk giving somebody else a territory as rich as

⁵³ Manni 1950: 255.

⁵⁴ Trans. White 1912-1913.

Egypt? Its wealth would have made any Roman governor far too powerful and changed the balance of power in Rome.⁵⁵

When Ptolemy XII took power in 80 BC, Egypt was in an unstable situation. In Rome a will, allegedly written by the previous King Ptolemy XI, was shown, in which the kingdom of Egypt was bequeathed to the Roman people, as had previously been done by many other Mediterranean kings (Cicero, *De lege agraria*: 2.41). This means that, as with other kingdoms like Pergamum, Bithynia, and Cyrene, the Romans had an excellent pretext for annexation. It is not known whether the will was authentic or a forgery.⁵⁶ It has been proposed that the bequest should not take us by surprise and can be considered plausible on the following grounds: it could offer hope to Roman creditors, including eventual senators. If the kingdom had passed to Rome, creditors could have pressured the Senate for repayment, thus serving as a form of security for the loan in the absence of the king's heirs.⁵⁷ Another interesting possibility suggested by Bouché-Leclercq is that Ptolemy XI had been forced by Sulla to produce such a will.⁵⁸ The significance of this alleged will lies not just in its potential as a pretext for annexation, but also in how it exemplifies Rome's use of soft power. By leveraging financial influence and political pressure, Rome could manipulate the internal affairs of Egypt without immediate military intervention. The mere existence of this will, whether real or fabricated, indicates the extent to which Roman financiers and political leaders were intertwined with the governance of Egypt. This entanglement is an effect of soft power, as it allowed Rome to exert control and influence over Egyptian affairs indirectly, even if the will was never enacted.

A few years later, around 73 BC, the queen mother Cleopatra asked the senators to place her other children on the throne, but she was not even permitted to plead her case, as Rome was troubled in the same years by many wars and by Spartacus (Cicero, *In Verrem*: 2.4.61). Therefore, the king's position was not stable, and all the other pretenders were already trying to rely on the Roman senate for support. It seems that many trusted the Roman senate's *benevolentia*. At this point, the Romans were becoming more and more interested in

⁵⁵ Badian 1967: 188-189.

⁵⁶ Bevan 1927: 350.

⁵⁷ Badian 1967: 187.

⁵⁸ Bouché-Leclercq 1903-1906.

Egyptian riches, and the fact that the kingdom often relied on Rome, exemplified by the bequest of the kingdom entailed in Ptolemy XI's alleged will, no doubt exacerbated an already existing attitude of possession on the part of Rome's governing elite. In 65 BC, Crassus tried to convince the senate to take the island of Cyprus, because of the aforementioned will. Later, in 63 BC, he made further attempts to have Rome take direct control of Egypt, but he was always blocked by many other senators, who wished to avoid giving too much power to a single governor.⁵⁹ For a long time, therefore, Ptolemy XII was in a precarious situation.

Desperately needing to secure his position in Rome, Ptolemy XII convinced Caesar to get for him the recognition of the senate as a *socius et amicus populi Romani*, thus giving him an official Roman endorsement (Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*: 11).⁶⁰ In exchange, Ptolemy XII allegedly gave a sum of six thousand talents to Caesar and Pompey (Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*: 54). Moreover, Pompey desired new clients, and getting control of the king of a rich kingdom could have been a major boon for his plans. Ptolemy XII, for his part, had recently witnessed the annexation of the Seleucid kingdom by Pompey, so he had even more interest in trying to appease Rome. According to Westall, many Romans received a large portion of the Ptolemaic payment, especially many *equites* who would have exerted their influence in order to pass the law to declare the king *amicus et socius populi Romani*.⁶¹

In any case, Ptolemy XII was forced to borrow money to pay such enormous sums. Most likely, the king asked for money from Roman lenders. To recover the sum, according to Cassius Dio, he started to collect the money from his subjects (Cassius Dio: 39). They accordingly began to grow restless, and in the end the king fled to Rome in order to get support for taking back his country. *Vis benevolentiae* was now working at its maximum. The king trusted his allies. Because of this, Egyptians sent their own envoys to Rome in order to explain the situation and why they had in the meantime placed Ptolemy XII's daughter Berenice IV on the throne, but the king ordered his men to kill or terrorise most of the embassy (Cassius Dio: 39.13).

⁵⁹ Siani-Davies 1997: 313.

⁶⁰ Siani-Davies 1997: 316.

⁶¹ Westall 2010: 32-33.

The surviving members of the embassy tried to convince the senate, but Ptolemy XII bribed enough people to prevent a meeting between them and the senate, according to Cassius Dio (Cassius Dio: 39.14). The same author writes, noting the assassination by Ptolemy XII's agents of a certain Dio who led the Alexandrian embassy, that:

'Furthermore, even after Dio had later been assassinated, [Ptolemy] suffered no punishment [...], largely owing to the fact that Pompey had entertained him in his house and continued to render him powerful assistance' (Cassius Dio: 39.14.3).⁶²

This shows us that Pompey's patronage in supporting a foreign king ensured that the latter was indebted to and controlled by him both politically and economically. Moreover, he allowed Ptolemy XII pay his living expenses in Rome, so the king accumulated even more debts. The clear winner in this situation was Pompey, who secured significant power in Egypt by entirely non-violent means, because the king was able to survive in Rome thanks to his power and connections. Because of this, it is likely that Pompey's influence played a part in preventing the surviving Alexandrian envoys from addressing their petition to the senate, considering that Ptolemy XII was now his *cliens*.

The king in this period indebted himself much and considering what the already related facts, Ptolemy XII could not do anything else without consulting the future triumvir, who was probably behind many of the king's plans. Pompey needed to secure Egypt, and he was slowly turning Ptolemy XII into one of his puppets, again without resorting to violence or military intervention, only taking advantage of the kings' debt and excessive dependence on general *fides*, and on the *benevolentia* he could have from the senate. Thus, as Siani-Davies observes, Ptolemy XII acted most likely as a client of Pompey or of Caesar, rather than as an independent agent with his own agenda.⁶³

Because of the opposition of a supporter of Clodius, the intervention of Rome was blocked, and Ptolemy XII went to Ephesus devastated by the fact that Rome would not support him (Cassius Dio: 39.15). Pompey, however, chose to intervene, and he sent via Ptolemy XII a letter to Gabinius, one of his protégés and the then governor of Syria.⁶⁴ It is not known what was written in that letter, but Siani-Davies proposes that it offered Pompey's protection

⁶² Trans. Cary 1914-1927.

⁶³ Siani-Davies 1996: 221.

⁶⁴ Cassius Dio: 39.56.

should Ptolemy XII move to Egypt, while Cassius Dio claimed that it ordered Gabinius to act, almost as if he were his lackey (Cassius Dio: 39.56).⁶⁵ Moreover, it has been said by Cicero that Ptolemy XII promised the governor a bribe of ten thousand talents (Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Postumo*: 21). True or not, the king surely promised money, and Gabinius led his army into Egypt, battled the usurpers, and in early 55 BC Ptolemy XII was back on his throne. This time Gabinius left two thousand soldiers as a garrison to support, and to control if necessary, the king.⁶⁶ This was the first time that Roman soldiers were sent to Egypt. Until then, Rome never had the need to send soldiers to impose its will, even if sometimes the locals had refused to obey (as with Ptolemy VI). Moreover, because Ptolemy XII owed the Romans money, he could not just refuse to pay, because it was not just an order from Rome, but a series of legal contracts he had stipulated. Therefore, the king nominated Rabirius, one of the main Roman creditors, as *dioiketes*, his treasurer (Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Postumo*: 28). This way, the Rabirius could collect taxes to recoup the money owed to him and to his friends. This means Roman soft power influence was great, because the king was bound by his debts to the point, he had to place a Roman as a state official. Thus, Gabinius had been able to leave a garrison, and he could consider the king his debtor, even if he no longer owed him any money and Pompey was able to achieve some influence on the kingdom.

Ptolemy XII also wrote an interesting will. He did not offer Egypt to Rome, though: he instead asked Rome to become guardian of his children.⁶⁷ Pompey was present to ratify this in the senate. Thus, Ptolemy XII was able to ensure the accession of his heirs to the throne. However, at the same time, Pompey was securing Roman, and especially his own, power and influence over the Egyptian throne in a perfectly legal manner, because Rome was recognised as having influence in the kingdom, or specifically over its new queen and king, Cleopatra VII ad Ptolemy XIII, at their father's death.

Unfortunately for Rome, the hard power lever of the Gabiniani failed, as the troops started to fight on behalf of Egypt rather than for Rome, probably bribed by the Ptolemies (Caesar, *De Bello Civile*: 3.110). Still, Pompey could count on being the man to whom the king owed his throne. This fact is significant because it shows that even the direct use of troops, thus hard power, in a somewhat 'softer' role (they were there to keep Ptolemy XII on the throne,

⁶⁵ Siani-Davies 1997: 329.

⁶⁶ Siani-Davies 1996: 223.

⁶⁷ Burstein 2004: 14.

after all) still did not work to keep Egypt in check. It was interpersonal dependence on and need of Roman strength that ensnared Ptolemaic Egypt, not direct military action. Therefore, the trust the kings had in Roman *fides* and *benevolentia* was a very powerful tool in this period.

With Cleopatra, Roman soft power increased even more. After the defeat at Pharsalus in 48 BC, Pompey hoped he could receive support from Ptolemy XIII, brother of Cleopatra, but he found only death (Cassius Dio: 42.2.4-6). Pompey certainly commanded significant influence in the region as a result of those channels of soft power that have been outlined, but the Egyptian court understood that the winner was Caesar—a man who had hitherto done nothing for them—and adapted their decision-making to the new reality. In this instance, Caesar's hard power is undeniable.

At this point, though, Roman soft power still had some strength in Egypt. When Caesar arrived, he asked Ptolemy XIII to repay him the sum he was owed by Ptolemy XII, but he forgave part of the debt, limiting his requests to just ten million drachmas, because he needed money for his army and fleet (Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*: 48.5). Caesar was then interested in two things: money, and stabilising the kingdom in a manner favourable to him. Thus, he was trying to get soft power influence in Egypt, substituting Pompey's previous influence.

As Westall points out, Caesar was also trying to show 'magnanimity' by lowering the debt owed to him.⁶⁸ If this was true, then it is possible that he was trying to appear as a reliable and honest man, placing the Ptolemies in moral debt, thus increasing his soft power. In the end, Caesar and Ptolemy XIII's court clashed militarily and Egypt ended up in Cleopatra's control.

We also read in the *Bellum Alexandrinum* that:

'all the others [three legions] he [Caesar] left there, the more to bolster up the dominion of the said rulers,...At the same time he deemed it conducive to the dignity of our empire and to public expediency that, if the rulers remained loyal, they should be protected by our troops: whereas if they proved ungrateful, those same troops could hold them in check' (*Bellum Alexandrinum*: 33).⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Westall 2010: 36-37.

⁶⁹ Trans. Way 1955.

Thus, Caesar was trying to secure his new ally, acquiring new soft power as a reliable ally of the kingdom. At the same time, he had a lever of hard power, represented by the legions, which could be used should Cleopatra have any thought of doing anything against Caesar's will, which at the time was Roman will, as Caesar had control of Rome after Pompey's defeat.

Still, this likely never caused trouble for Cleopatra: with her sister Arsinoe alive in Ephesus, she would have considered all those soldiers as more of an asset to keep her own throne rather than a threat, as her father before her. After all, the author of *Bellum Alexandrinum* reports that Caesar:

'left there [all the other legions], the more to bolster up the dominion of the said rulers, who could enjoy neither the affection of their people, inasmuch as they had remained throughout staunch friends of Caesar, nor the authority of a long-established reign, it being but a few days since they came to the throne' (*Bellum Alexandrinum*: 33).⁷⁰

Caesar had thus created an incredibly powerful soft power channel for himself, and for Rome, of which he was now dictator, in the richest country in the Mediterranean, which was also the main producer of wheat for the capital. Furthermore, should Cleopatra have rebelled, he could still use his legions as hard power to force her to comply. In the end, how the tool or resource is used determines its nature as either soft or hard power.

After Caesar's death in 44 BC, Cleopatra aligned herself with Mark Antony, as she was still compelled by Roman soft power, and the threat of its hard power, to find a new protector in Rome, especially during another round of Roman civil wars. It seems that Antony, having formed a relationship with the queen, did many things to support her. The queen's sister Arsinoe, for example, was assassinated by Antony's men, and Cleopatra's opponents were also killed.⁷¹ Antony also increased Cleopatra's dominions in 36 BC, including former Egyptian territories in Syria, Cilicia and Phoenicia (Cassius Dio: 49.32). At the same time, Roman soft power on Egypt was still enhanced, because again the Ptolemaic kings relied

⁷⁰ Trans. Way 1955.

⁷¹ Bevan 1927: 374.

on the Romans for all of their power. Trusting in Antony's *benevolentia*, Cleopatra expanded her kingdom.

Burstein suggests this means that in the end Antony was acting in Rome's interests, doing everything 'in his capacity as a Roman official in expanding Egyptian authority in the Near East', and adding that he never acquiesced to all of Cleopatra's requests.⁷² However, Antony was really just trying to please Cleopatra. Indeed, all of these concessions were of no use to the campaign, or to Rome, because strengthening Egypt with new territories was not a priority for Rome. At the same time, though, Antony was trying to better prepare for the campaigns: as Bevan reminds us, he never left Judea to Cleopatra.⁷³

Cleopatra desperately depended on Roman power in order to remain relevant in the Mediterranean and to avoid Egypt itself being directly annexed by Rome. Egypt was at this point stuck in a vicious cycle. In any case, Roman soft power finally ended in Egypt when Octavian invaded the country and conquered it in 30 BC, taking the province for himself: it was too rich to leave it to anybody else.

Conclusion

Roman intervention in Egypt was a long process that can be divided into two phases. The first phase, as it has been shown, began after 200 BC, when Roman involvement in Egypt started to increase through diplomatic contacts. Following this, the presence of Roman traders, the increasing importance of the Roman wheat market, and the opening of the free harbour of Delos, made Rome a useful and interesting partner. The lack of an external ally also contributed to Egypt's need of Rome as a trading partner, and, especially, as a possible military ally against neighbouring Syria. The perceived geopolitical usefulness of Rome in this first early phase contributed to Egypt's increasing entrapment in a Roman soft power 'net'. The closeness of the two countries was further augmented by economic interests, evidence of which started to arise around the same period.

The second phase started once Ptolemy VIII, who had received many benefits and much support from Rome in previous decades, became the king of Egypt in 145 BC and Roman

⁷² Burstein 2004: 26.

⁷³ Bevan 1927: 375.

control escalated. Ptolemy had profited too much from Roman favours, and he still depended on them. In this new phase, Romans started to have much more importance in Egypt, even in its internal policies. The senate had become the new kingmaker in Egypt, thus strengthening the impression in the minds of Roman senators that they were the rightful masters of Egypt, even before the will which granted the country to Rome and making the Ptolemies further acknowledge their desperate dependence on Rome. The economic presence of Rome also increased throughout the later second century BC and into the first, making Egypt even more vulnerable and over indebted to Roman financiers and politicians. In this phase, soft power obtained through economic channels was more prominent and important than in the first. The presence of personal connections between individual Romans and the Ptolemies reached its maximum extent during the first century BC. The kings had to tie themselves to Roman politicians such as Sulla, Pompey, Caesar and Antony in order to survive on their throne, while fighting to keep their thrones during civil wars and rebellions.

It is curious that the presence of so many Roman soldiers, especially the Gabiniani when they entered into Ptolemaic service, did not increase Roman interests in the area. In fact, the failure of direct military interventions in Egypt during the final decades of the Late Republic casts into even higher relief the distinctive potential offered by soft power channels. It is remarkable that Egypt's dependence upon Rome had been achieved by the time of the Late Republic without direct military intervention. This feat is particularly noteworthy given that the Ptolemies did indeed attempt, as it has been shown above, to carry out their own independent policies, as was certainly the case before 80 BC, and that much of the Egyptian population, especially in Alexandria, had little sympathy for Rome.

Roman *fides* was a vital factor which caused the weaker parties in Egyptian civil wars to ask for Roman support, even when Rome was following its own interests. But the Ptolemies were short of options. They were stuck between their own plans, the Romans, and the Egyptian population. It should also not be forgotten that Egypt, until its fall under Cleopatra VII, was distant from Rome and also rich and powerful, which gave its kings hope that they could stop the increasing Roman power grab in their country. The fact that they likely understood that Roman senators were divided about the annexation of Egypt also gave them more possibilities for action. They could even bribe some senators, as Ptolemy VIII probably did with Thermus, and as Ptolemy XII had done with Pompey and Caesar, to give

their support for laws favourable to the monarchs. Thus, the Ptolemies could easily have believed that they could sway Roman power using their wealth and by exploiting internal divisions in Rome itself. After all, what else could they have done other than play along with the new geopolitical situation with Rome as the strongest power in the Mediterranean?

Therefore, even if being far from Roman power undoubtedly played a role in the fact that Egypt believed it could use Rome to its advantage without too many risks, at least during the second century BC, Roman *vis benevolentiae* and Roman businessmen ended up strengthening Roman control of Egypt, despite all the difficulties involved with that process.

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