

Ptolemy XII and the Romans – an Alexandrian money story

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Abstract

The paper contains a brief insight into the beginnings of contacts between Rome and Egypt, especially during the reign of Ptolemy XII and at the beginning of the reign of his successors. The struggle for power in Alexandria is presented in the context of financial situation of the Ptolemies and of the beginnings of the Roman exploitation of the land on the Nile.

Keywords: *Egypt, Ptolemies, Rome, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra VII*

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In the third century BC Rome, then a young power, entered into the history of Egypt. Diplomatic relations began in 273.¹ In the second century BC, Egyptian affairs were already being determined from the Tiber. Legations were frequent: for example in 191 two Ptolemaic legations went to Rome and in 173/2 a Roman legation arrived in Alexandria. After the victory of Aemilius Paulus over the Macedonian king Perseus at Pydna in southern Macedonia in June 168, Caius Popillius Laenas, a Roman legate, went to meet the Seleucid king Antioch IV, who at that time had invaded Egypt. Without a military campaign, Roman diplomacy alone forced Antioch to leave Egypt.

The Alexandrian kings also travelled to Rome. Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II appointed Rome the heir to his realm. His will was not fulfilled, but the will of Ptolemy X Alexander I again appointed Rome the heir to Egypt and Cyprus.² In 96 Ptolemy Apion offered Cyrenaica to Rome in his will. At Rome in 65 Marcus Licinius Crassus insisted on the execution of the gift by Ptolemy X Alexander I concerning Egypt. The failure of the project was mainly due to Cicero's speech *De rege Alexandrino*. At the end of 64 the *tribunus plebis* Publius Servilius Rullus proposed an agrarian law (*lex agraria*) which would entitle the commission of the *decemviri* to administrate the entire *ager publicus* outside Italy too. At the beginning of 63, Cicero, appointed consul and maybe bribed by Ptolemy XII, opposed the project (two speeches *De lege agraria* of January 63) and in this way protected Egypt from Roman colonisation.³ In his speech, when defending Egypt against the demagogues, Cicero made a significant remark, that the Roman administrator of the wealth of Alexandria and of the fertile soil of Egypt would be like "a king of the richest country".⁴ Egypt was already sentenced to death; the execution was only delayed.

Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos nicknamed Auletes helped Pompey to occupy Syria in 63. Egypt was now the last large Hellenistic monarchy. At that time Ptolemy XII probably had to fight against an internal Egyptian rebellion.

In 60 Diodorus Siculus came to Egypt. He states that a Roman was lynched by the Alexandrian mob for having killed a cat.⁵ The deed, considered evidence of the Egyptian fanatic cult of animals, was in reality rather an expression of the Alexandrian hatred of the Romans. The rural population, ex-

¹ All dates are BC unless otherwise stated.

² G. Geraci, *Genesi della provincia romana d'Egitto*, p. 14, n. 7.

³ G. Hölbl, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches. Politik, Ideologie und religiöse Kultur von Alexander dem Großen bis zur römischen Eroberung*, p. 198.

⁴ Cicero, *De lege agraria* II 43.

⁵ Diod. Sic. I 83.8–9; cf. G. Hölbl, *op. cit.*, p. 190.



ploited by Ptolemy XII more than ever as a consequence of his inducements to Roman politicians, also revolted (for example in 61/60 in a village of the Heracleopolite nome).⁶

Caesar and Pompey were bribed by Ptolemy with an enormous amount of 6000 talents, close to the annual revenue from Egypt.⁷ In 59 Caesar was a consul. He passed a *senatus consultum* corroborating Ptolemy XII as king, and another law (*lex de rege Alexandrino*), conferring upon Ptolemy the status of a friend and ally (*amicus et socius populi Romani*) as a reward for his help to the Roman army in Syria.⁸ The agrarian law (*lex agraria*) of the same year, also due to Caesar, did not mention Egypt any more. However, the agreement with the king did not include Cyprus, which, however, had been mentioned in Ptolemy X Alexander I's will. Since 80 Cyprus was an independent kingdom. The people's tribune of 58, Publius Clodius Pulcher, a Caesar supporter, presented a project of law stipulating the *Anschluss* of Cyprus. Eight years earlier, Clodius was taken prisoner by pirates, who wanted a ransom. Clodius asked Ptolemy of Cyprus to pay. Ptolemy was reluctant and finally sent an amount so small, that the pirates did not want to accept it. Now, Clodius found an opportunity for revenge. He was certainly not alone when preparing the murky plot. Ptolemy XII, the giver of bribes, was spared, but the island of Aphrodite was delivered to the Romans.

On that occasion Rome got rid of an *enfant terrible*. Marcus Porcius Cato was appointed executor of the incorporation of Cyprus as a *quaestor pro praetore*. Cato made a stop at Rhodes and from there he wrote to King Ptolemy of Cyprus, demanding his kingdom, and offering him the position of a priest of Aphrodite at Paphos in his own realm. Cato's envoy was one Canidius. Ptolemy committed suicide. Rome took over his treasures, which were sold at an auction for 7 000 talents.⁹

Together with Cato, in the years 58–56, Brutus, the future killer of Caesar, sojourned in Cyprus. The distinguished gentleman practiced there a lucrative business in the field of usury. He lent money at rates of interest of 48% per annum.

The Alexandrians were fed up with their king and forced him to leave Egypt. The king fled to Rome via Rhodes, where he met Cato. According

⁶ BGU VIII 1815; cf. G. Hölbl, *op. cit.*, p. 198, n. 19.

⁷ Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* LIV 3; cf. G. Hölbl, *Geschichte...*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁸ Caesar, *De bello civili* II 107; Cicero, *Pro C. Rabirio Postumo* 3; Cicero *Ad Att.* II 16.2; cf. G. Hölbl, *Geschichte...*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁹ Plutarch, *Cato* 36 and 38.



to malicious gossip, the Roman received Ptolemy while sitting on his toilet seat.¹⁰ Cato warned the king before a trip to Rome, which would avail to nothing since the Roman aristocracy desired to pillage Egypt. Ptolemy was ready to take Cato's advice to go back to Alexandria together with him as a mediator, in order to settle the Alexandrian conflict, but the king's advisors protested, fearing a dispute with the influential Roman enemies of Cato. The royal party set forth and reached Rome. In Rome Ptolemy lived in Pompey's villa in the Alban hills. Later he left for Ephesus.¹¹

In Egypt, Ptolemy's eldest daughter Berenice IV ruled together with her mother Cleopatra VI Tryphaena. After her mother's disappearance in 57, she shared the throne with one Archelaos, who claimed to be the son of Mithridates VI Eupator, king of Pontus. (In actual fact he was a son of Mithridates' general Archelaos). Starting from 56, the year 2 of Berenice is also year 1 of Archelaos.¹² The new rulers of Egypt sent to Rome a legation of one hundred persons. Most of them were murdered by Auletes' assassins upon arrival in Puteoli while others were killed in Rome, like the philosopher Dio, the leader of the legation, who was poisoned. The survivors were intimidated by Ptolemy's people.

The Roman politicians did not react. The Roman bankers had already lent the king a lot of money and were interested in his return to Egypt.

At the end of 57 a statue of Jupiter at Mons Albanus was hit by a thunderbolt. The Sybilline Books provided an explanation: when the king of Egypt comes for help, he should be received in a friendly manner but not offered any military assistance!¹³

That oracular response was invented by Cato who forced the priests to proclaim it.¹⁴ The purpose was to prevent Lentulus from taking command of the expedition to Egypt. The main supporter of Ptolemy was Pompey. Cicero, together with many others, was in favour of a military solution, but not necessarily under Pompey's command. In 55, when Pompey and Crassus were consuls, things developed rapidly since Ptolemy now bid more money. Pompey sent Ptolemy to the proconsul of Syria Aulus Gabinius, with an order to bring the king back to Alexandria. In actual fact the action was illegal.

One of the protagonists was Caius Rabirius Postumus, who invested all

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Cato* 35.4–7.

¹¹ W. Huß, *Ägypten in hellenistischer Zeit 332–30 v. Chr.*, p. 688.

¹² cf. G. Hölbl, *Geschichte...*, op. cit., p. 201, n. 31.

¹³ Cassius Dio XXXIX 15.2; W. Huß, op. cit., p. 689.

¹⁴ Cicero, *Ad fam.* I 14.2; 15.2.



his money in that campaign and who also represented other money-lenders. Gabinius set for Syria via Palestine not later than at the beginning of March. The excuse for that expedition was the alleged danger for Syria from the Egyptian fleet. Another false argument was the support given to pirates by Berenice IV and Archelaos. Also the Judaeian authorities (the high priest Hyrcan II and the Idumaeian Antipater, the father of Herod the Great) offered money, arms and logistics. The Pelusium fortress on the frontier was taken by a cavalry commander named Marcus Antonius. Antipater's role in taking Pelusium was decisive. He convinced the soldiers of the garrison, who were mainly Jewish, to surrender. Antony prevented Ptolemy from exterminating these soldiers. Archelaos was killed in a battle near Alexandria. According to Strabo, Archelaos was executed on the order of Ptolemy XII.¹⁵

In the spring of 55, Ptolemy XII came back to Alexandria under protection of the soldiers of Aulus Gabinius. He put his daughter Berenice IV to death and along with her a number of important Alexandrians. Caius Rabirius Postumus was appointed *dioecetes* (minister of economy and finance) of Egypt. Rabirius dealt with collecting the sums of money lent to Ptolemy by the Romans. His appointment signified the ruin of the Egyptian economy and the end of Ptolemy's monopoly to exploit his own country.

Gabinius and Antonius had to leave Egypt, when troubles began in Syria. Gabinius' soldiers (*Gabiniani*) were later stationed in Egypt at the service of Ptolemy. When the Roman commanders left, Ptolemy felt more free. Soon, he put Rabirius in prison (allegedly for his own security). Later, Ptolemy helped Rabirius to escape. In 54 Gabinius came back to Rome. He was put on trial (*de maiestate* and *de repetundis*) together with Rabirius (*de repetundis*). Both were defended by Cicero – with a dubious outcome. (In the case of Gabinius, Cicero first accused him and in the second trial he defended him!). The worshippers of Egyptian deities wanted to lynch Gabinius. They remembered well his action against the cult of Isis and Sarapis in 58. Gabinius was sentenced to pay the incredible sum of 10 000 talents, which he was said to have received from Ptolemy. Since he had no money, he was sent to exile. The result of Rabirius' trial remains unknown.

Ptolemy XII was again the master of Egypt. On the 16th of July 54 in the presence of the king, the foundation ceremony for a new temple of the goddess Hathor was held at Dendera in Upper Egypt.¹⁶ Thus, the king re-

¹⁵ Plutarch *Ant.* 3.10–11. Strabo XVII 1.11.

¹⁶ A. Łukaszewicz, *Wokół Złotej Bogini. Dendera*, p. 20 and 32.



warded the loyalty of the Egyptian priests. In 54 Ptolemy XII ceased paying debts to the Romans. Cicero wrote to his friend Trebatius: *eos ipsos qui cum syngraphis venissent Alexandream nummum adhuc nullum auferre potuisse*.¹⁷

In 53 the Romans were defeated by the Parthians at Carrhae. In Rome the gangs of Milo and Clodius fought in the city. Meetings were dispersed, magistrates terrorised; even the senate was not secure. In one of the skirmishes, Clodius perished. His funeral was an occasion for further unrest during which the *curia* was burned. It was Pompey, as *consul sine collega*, who restored peace and order to Rome.

For Egypt, the disorder at Rome, the initial success of Vercingetorix and the victory of the Parthians signified a new hope. However, Ptolemy XII was close to the end of his reign although he was not yet old. Soon, he died of an illness.¹⁸ His children Ptolemy XIII and Cleopatra VII became his successors in 51. In reality it was Cleopatra who reigned and the guardians and advisors who governed.

One of the decrees of the year 50, dated 1st November, reads:

By order of the King and Queen.

Nobody who in the nomes above Memphis buys cereals or pulse crops is allowed in any circumstances to send these commodities to Lower Egypt or upstream to Thebaid, but all are obliged to deliver to Alexandria. Any transgressors will be punished by death. Everyone who denounces the transgressors to the strategus of the nome will take one third of the estate of the guilty one. If the delator is a slave, he will be free and will take one sixth of the estate. Year 3, Phaophi 23.

(m. 2) Horos, district scribe...by agency of the scribe Onias.

I have published it near the precedent ordinance. Year 3, Hathyr 5.¹⁹

Delivery to Alexandria implied payment of transfer fees. The possibility of confiscation was imminent. The death penalty for a simple transgression of delivery rules was really a tyrannical measure. The economic situation was undoubtedly disastrous. During almost the whole reign of Cleopatra,

¹⁷ Cicero, *Ad fam.* VII 17.1.

¹⁸ Strabo XVII 1.11 (796). Cf. W. Huß, op. cit., p. 697.

¹⁹ BGU VIII 1730 (BL III), Heracleopolite nome, 1 November 50. Cf. A. Łukaszewicz, *Świat papyrusów*, no 36.



the Nile floods were not sufficient. The debts of Ptolemy XII to the Roman usurers were certainly still a burden to Egypt's finances. Later, when the Roman civil war broke out, deliveries to Pompey's army began. The internal war in Egypt was an additional catastrophic factor. It is possible that the decree under discussion was issued at the time when Cleopatra was already in exile as a result of conflict between the young rulers and the purpose of the ordinance was to cut off the deliveries to Thebaid where the queen took refuge.²⁰

At the dawn of the dynasty, the founder, Ptolemy I introduced in his kingdom a monetary system slightly different from other Mediterranean standards. The tetradrachm of the Ptolemies was lighter than the Attic unit. Upon arrival in Egypt, the money was to be exchanged. Egypt always had a deficit of silver. The market was flooded with bronze coins. In 210 Ptolemies set the ratio of copper to silver drachmas at 1:60.²¹ In the new system an important unit was the talent, equal, as usual, to 6000 drachmas. These were, however, copper drachmas, so that a talent amounted to 100 silver drachmas. The author of the reform was a *dioecetes* named Theogenes. This reform remarkably coincided with the important economic aid offered by Egypt to Rome, connected with the consequences of Rome's war with Hannibal.

Ptolemy XII is often said to have introduced coins with lower contents of silver after his return in 55.²² In reality the author of that measure was probably his daughter Cleopatra VII.²³ The coins of Ptolemy XII contained from 80 to 90% silver, almost as much as the early Ptolemaic coins containing 99 or 98% pure silver. Cleopatra's coins usually contained about 33%. This fact means that Cleopatra desperately sought revenue and risked an economic crisis. The ratio of bronze to silver was established at 1:480. New coins had a value of 80 or 40 drachmas, being respectively one obol (= 1/6 of a silver drachma) and a *hemiobolion* (1/12 of a silver drachma).

Banks played an important role in the policy of the royal treasury. The essential function of a bank was to exchange. There were three types of banks. Private banks in Alexandria from the very beginning of Ptolemy I's reign were specialised in lending money to sea merchants. From the beginning of

²⁰ P. Green, *D'Alexandre à Actium. Du partage de l'empire au triomphe de Rome*, p. 730, n. 134; M. Grant, *Cleopatra*, pp. 48–53.

²¹ M. Chauveau, *L'Égypte au temps de Cléopâtre (180–30 av. J.-C.)*, pp. 110–115 and notes, p. 272.

²² Ch.-G. Schwentzel, *Cléopâtre*, p. 101. M. Chauveau, op. cit., p. 115.

²³ S. Walker, P. Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt, from History to Myth*, p. 177.



the third century, royal banks were attested all over the country. They were a source of credit and dealt with exchange operations and with all payments to the royal treasury. The third kind were royal banks which were let on lease to private persons.

Money lending was the most common banking operation. A royal decree of the third century set the maximum rate of interest at 24%. Such expensive credit was characteristic for the interior of the country, where money was lacking. We must realise that before the arrival of the Greeks, Egypt did not use money. In the fourth century the pharaohs issued coins to reward Greek mercenary soldiers. The Greek and Macedonian colons of the fourth and third century had the enormous advantage of possessing money, while the Egyptians had rather little. In Alexandria the rates of interest were lower – from 10% to 12%. Mortgage was a frequent occurrence. Even high ranking persons, like the famous *dioecetes* Apollonios under Ptolemy II, had recourse to money loans. In 250/249 Apollonios borrowed money from an Alexandrian banker named Pytheas and from the usurer Theodoros, offering as collateral his silver dishes and jewellery. Interest-free loans were also given, but only as a form of mutual help among members of associations.

What was Cleopatra doing in 49 and in the early 48? In Thebaid, later in the Near East, she had to borrow money necessary for her political projects.

Did Julius Caesar play a role in her business? That would explain some of the future events.

After the battle of Pharsalos in 48, Pompey set forth to Egypt. Caesar followed him with a small force of four thousand soldiers: 3200 infantry and 800 cavalry from two legions on ten Rhodian ships and on a few other ships from Asia Minor. The rest of his troops were unable to travel.

It seems that Caesar first arrived in an area of the Egyptian Delta where he expected to find Pompey. However, he did not find him there. There is a question whether at that time Pompey was already dead. It seems that the assassination of Pompey was perpetrated by the Egyptian leaders when Caesar was already in Egypt. Otherwise, why would Caesar wait near Alexandria until the evidence of the enemy's death was brought to him by the king's envoys? Caesar states only that he learnt of Pompey's death in Alexandria.²⁴ The issue was deliberately narrated in an unclear way in the sources which depended on Caesar's propaganda, in order to avoid the question of Caesar's responsibility for the deed.

²⁴ Caesar, *De bello civ.* III 106.



Finally, Caesar landed in Alexandria. The Alexandrians were hostile to the unwelcome visitor and Caesar moved into the palace quarter.²⁵

Caesar claimed that it was his duty to settle the conflict in the royal house. He sent for legions from Asia. One reason he gave for his sojourn in the city was also the alleged impossibility of leaving because of the unfavourable Etesian winds. The real reason, however, was money. Caesar wanted to get his half of the bribe of 6000 talents promised by the late king Ptolemy XII. Caesar allegedly wanted only a part of the “due” 17.5 million drachmas. He required “only” 10 million drachmas for the necessities of the army. The rest he had (allegedly) presented to the children of Auletes.²⁶ According to Plutarch, the eunuch Potheinos, who received the intruders in the Alexandrian palace, plotted against Caesar. The Roman leader, fearing for his life, was obliged to spend his sleepless nights drinking.²⁷ Potheinos fed his occupants poorly. Plutarch writes that he gave them old cereals. At banquets meals were served on wood and clay, since the golden and silver dishes had been allegedly confiscated by Caesar for some debts of Ptolemy XII.²⁸ Potheinos gave Caesar the advice to leave Alexandria, at least for a time, but in vain.²⁹ Caesar sent for Ptolemy XIII and his sister Cleopatra VII.³⁰ Plutarch states that Caesar “secretly” sent for Cleopatra who was “in the countryside”.³¹ Cleopatra, hidden in a sack for sheets or bedcovers, was carried into Caesar’s headquarters by “a friend” Apollodoros.³²

Cassius Dio says only that Cleopatra, beautifully clothed and in make-up, secretly entered the city and the palace.³³

Chauveau thinks that there were a lot of preparations before Cleopatra made for Caesar’s headquarters.³⁴

When Pompey was alive, his deal with Ptolemy and his advisors posed a great threat to the young queen. Cassius Dio states that Cleopatra communicated with Caesar through agents, then sent him proposals to meet and

²⁵ Caesar, *De bello civ.* III 112.

²⁶ Plutarch, *Caesar* 48.4; Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* LIV 3; Caesar, *De bello civili* III 107, comm. p. 263 (ed. F. Kraner, Berlin 1868).

²⁷ Plutarch, *Caesar* 48.6.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 48.7.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 48.8–9.

³⁰ Caesar, *De bello civ.* III 107.

³¹ Plutarch, *Caesar* 48.9.

³² Plutarch, *Caesar* 49.2.

³³ Cassius Dio XLII 34.6.

³⁴ M. Chauveau, *op. cit.*, p. 41.



finally – with Caesar’s approval – announced her arrival.³⁵

Her coming was therefore no surprise. For Cleopatra the meeting was vital, since the assassination of Pompey brought about the perspective of a new alliance between Ptolemy XIII and the victorious Caesar. Cleopatra had to secure the support of Caesar or perish. When Ptolemy XIII came the next day, he was told to reconcile with his sister.³⁶

The queen obtained from Caesar what she wanted.³⁷ Later, all parties perished as a result of the deal. The young Ptolemy soon died in a battle (27th March 47). Cleopatra had still 17 years to live, and Caesar less than 4. Ptolemy XIII who died in his country’s struggle for independence deserves a better memory than the denigration resulting from Roman propaganda and a place at the bottom of Dante’s Inferno.

As any event in history, Caesar’s activities in Egypt may also be evaluated in terms of moral correctness.

Recently, we discovered in Alexandria fragments of marble slabs with red Latin dipinti from the Late Ptolemaic or early Roman period. These fragments were in antiquity brought to the place from a dismantled building in order to be burnt in a lime kiln. The dipinti feature the name of a “Caesar” several times without a context.³⁸ Is it a signature from the time of the *bellum Alexandrinum* left by Julius Caesar (?) on the wall of a room in the royal palace (which is not very likely) or just the scribbles of Julius Caesar’s or Octavian’s soldiers? That is the question.

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³⁵ Cassius Dio XLII 34.3–6.

³⁶ G. Hölbl, *The History of the Ptolemaic Empire*, p. 235.

³⁷ G. Hölbl, *The History...*, op. cit., p. 208; A. Świderkówna, *Siedem Kleopatry*, p. 307.

³⁸ A. Łukaszewicz, *Caesar in Alexandria. Fragmentary Latin dipinti discovered at Kom el-Dikka*, pp. 79–92.



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