

Bradford, E. "Cleopatra." Penguin 1971  
(2000 Ed.)

## THE EARLY PTOLEMIES

The Ptolemaic dynasty was founded in the fourth century B.C. by Ptolemy I, the son of Lagos, a Macedonian nobleman. Ptolemy was one of Alexander's most able and trusted companions, as well as being one of his best generals. He was also, unlike some of the others, not only a good soldier, but a brilliant politician and indeed more than that, a statesman. On the death of Alexander and the division of the empire that he had carved out of Asia and the East, only one man managed to assure himself and his descendants a dynasty that really worked, and a kingdom that was economically sound. This was Ptolemy.

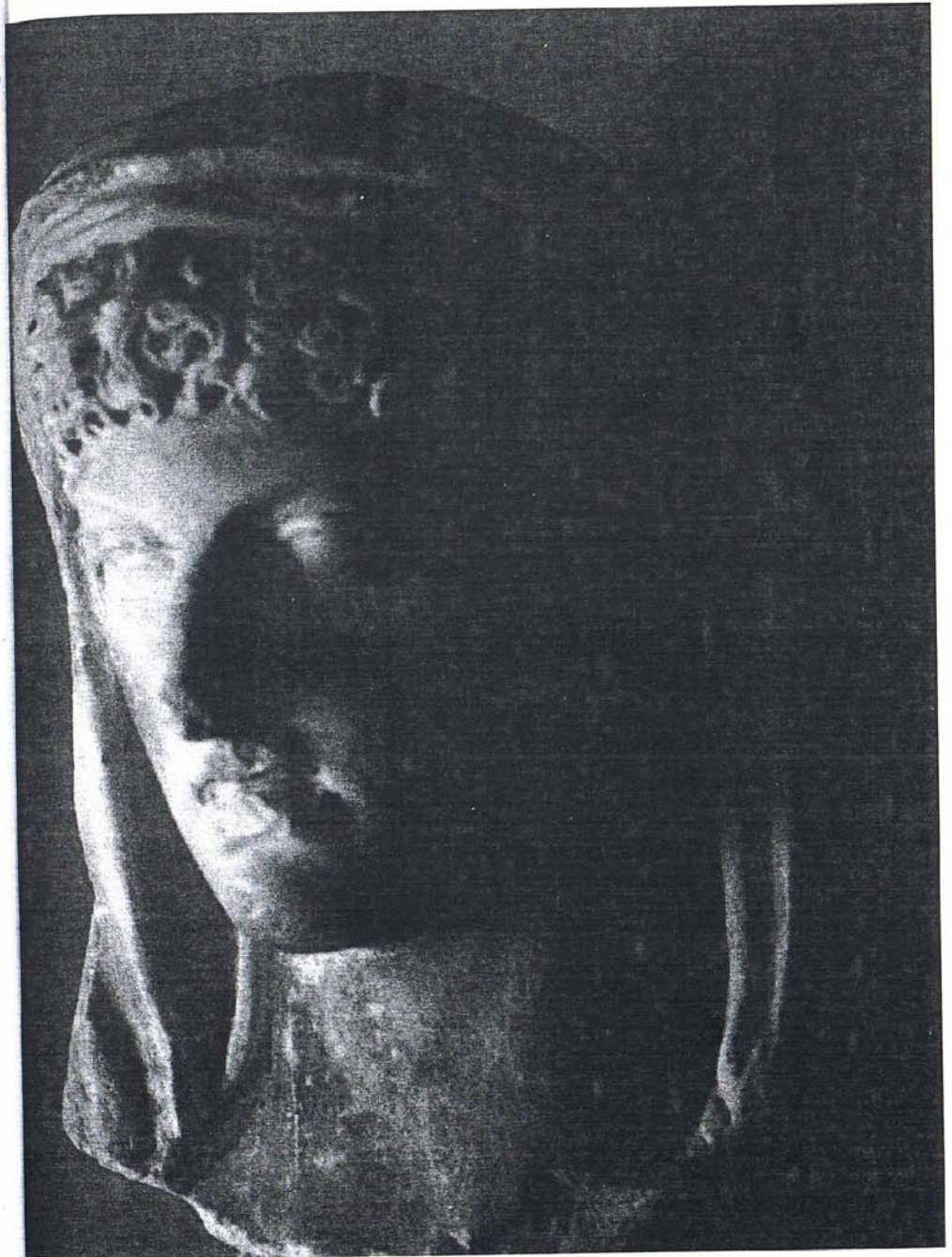
As A. R. Burn writes in his *Alexander the Great*: "Alexander dead?" said Demades at Athens. "Impossible! The whole world would stink!" Yet it was even so; and now men must accustom themselves to the fact that had so many times been prematurely reported.

Immediately after his death – in Babylon, 323 B.C. – the inevitable fight broke out between his battle-hardened generals for the inheritance of his conquered kingdoms. Some hoped to win all, and others (the more prudent) set themselves limited objectives. Ptolemy was one of these.

By setting himself this limited objective Ptolemy succeeded where most of the others ultimately failed. In choosing Egypt he had chosen one of the richest countries (and one of the main granaries) of the ancient world. Syria, Persia, Asia Minor, all these might on the surface appear to have more attractions, but they also had greater problems – hostile tribesmen and hostile neighbours among them. Egypt, on the other hand, was – and had always been – something of an isolationist country. Its basic wealth lay in the valley of the Nile. Every summer the river overflowed its banks, and the inundated land proved in autumn to be perfect for man's necessary cereals, such as barley and wheat. The land had in its further mountains rich metal-deposits and semi-precious stones. The people themselves were accustomed over thousands of years to autocratic rule and were unlikely to make any trouble – intellectual or political. There were yet other advantages: Egypt was difficult to attack and difficult of access. The only ways by which an enemy could approach it were either from the north, across the sea, or across the desert from the east. To the west also lay desert land, and the first of the Ptolemies was astute enough to

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*From ancient Mauretania, a marble head of a veiled woman, persuasively argued on the evidence of the coin portraits to be Cleopatra VII, whose daughter by Antony, Cleopatra Selene, married Juba II of Mauritania*





seize and garrison this area (Cyrenaica) so that his left flank was secure, while his right, or eastern, flank could only be approached by the coast road which was commanded by the garrison town of Pelusium.

'Everything fears Time, but Time fears the pyramids!' The Ptolemies, like the Pharaohs before them, had the immense conservatism of the Egyptian people on their side. They would continue to toil and work the delta, and adore their ancient gods, so long as the new rulers also appeared to be god-descended. This was a most important factor in the life of Cleopatra's ancestors, and in assessing her character we must remember that she saw herself not only as a queen, but of divine descent.

This concept, which the Ptolemies had inherited from their predecessors and, to some extent, from Alexander himself, is incomprehensible to us. But the patterns of thought two thousand years ago were very different from today. As Professor J. A. K. Thomson put it in the context of the Homeric world:

The limits of human and superhuman were but dimly realized. There was something in common between gods and men and the beasts of the field and all growing things, and a pathway between the living and the dead. . . . Every stream and oak and mountain was the habitation of a spiritual being whose nature was on the borderland between the human and the divine and partook of both. And so weak was the sense of identity, that with a touch of magic it was felt the barrier might be passed, and a man might become a wolf or a serpent or a hoopoe or a purple lily. He might renew his youth; he might be raised from the dead. With the waving of a branch and sprinkled waterdrops the wizard might bring a rain-shower down the sides of Lykaïos. Like Melampous he might understand the language of all living creatures, even the woodworms in the decaying rafters, and say with Alkman 'I know the songs of all the birds'.

Ptolemy I added to the authenticity, as it were, of his kingship of Egypt by securing the body of Alexander the Great – to the fury of the other claimants – and by having it taken to Memphis. The High Priest, so the legend goes, was unwilling that the world conqueror should lie there, saying: 'Take him to the new city he has built at Rhakotis; for wherever his body lies, the place will be uneasy, and troubled with wars and battles.' So Alexander came down the Nile and was interred in a splendid tomb in the very centre of the city that he had founded. Certainly the High Priest's prophecy was proved true in terms of both Alexandria and the lives of the Ptolemies.

A large part of Ptolemy I's reign was occupied with wars with the other Macedonian chiefs who were dividing up Alexander's empire. Having secured his western flank by seizing Cyrenaica, it was his ambition to do the same to the east and the north, by annexing Palestine and Cyprus. Although at various times he managed to occupy Palestine he was ultimately defeated by Antigonos, another general of Alexander's who claimed dominion over all Asia, and who founded the Antigonid

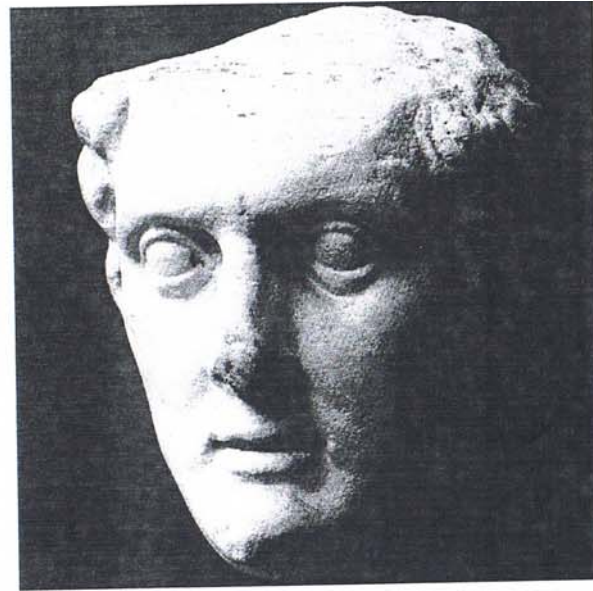
*Bronze statuette of Isis, 2nd century A.D., modelled in a mixed Greek and Egyptian style, with the ends of the mantle tied between the breasts in a magical knot; 10½ inches high.*

dynasty. With Cyprus, however, Ptolemy was more fortunate, and he managed to establish an Egyptian protectorate over the petty kings in that warm and fertile island.

Ptolemy had three wives and several mistresses, by all of whom he seems to have had children. Among his mistresses was the famous courtesan Thais, who had accompanied Alexander on his Asiatic campaign, and who is said, though on doubtful authority, to have persuaded the conqueror to set fire to the city of Persepolis. It is Berenice, Ptolemy's third wife, who is of importance in the history of the dynasty, for it was her son, Ptolemy Philadelphus, who was decreed heir to the kingdom by his father. Berenice may possibly have been a daughter of Lagos, and therefore Ptolemy I's sister or half-sister. She was a woman of considerable intellect and ability, and exerted a great deal of influence over him and the whole pattern of the court. These two founders of the Ptolemaic dynasty were equally remarkable for their strength of character and their talents. Ptolemy himself was not only a fine soldier; he and Berenice between them set the pattern for the future Ptolemaic patronage of the arts. Liberal and full of bonhomie, he attracted to his city and his cause many Macedonian and other Greeks, as well as securing peace and prosperity in Egypt for the native people. He is perhaps best remembered in history for his foundation of the great library of Alexandria, which was to prove an inspiration to scholarship in the Mediterranean world. On his death at the age of eighty-two, after half a century or more of soldiering and statecraft, he left behind for his son by Berenice a secure and well ordered inheritance.

Ptolemy II, later known as Philadelphus, was a very different man from his father though in his way as distinguished. He was no Macedonian warrior-general but an intellectual, who nevertheless managed to maintain his kingdom during the wars that were then ravaging the Mediterranean, and created in Alexandria one of the most splendid courts in history. During his reign Egypt became the dominant naval power in the eastern Mediterranean, and a large part of the Aegean Sea, including the Cycladic islands, as well as many of the ports and coastal towns of Asia Minor, came within the Ptolemaic sphere of influence. After an unsuccessful campaign against Antiochus II, the descendant of another of Alexander's generals who ruled the Syrian area, Ptolemy managed to secure a successful peace by marrying his daughter to his former enemy. At home in Alexandria he was an outstanding patron of the arts and sciences and is said to have increased the contents of the library founded by his father from two hundred thousand volumes to four hundred thousand. He set the style which many other Ptolemies were to emulate, but few to equal, for magnificent displays and pageants, for the elaboration of public buildings, and for a whole way of life that was as un-Greek as it was un-Egyptian. In him the West and the East were curiously mingled, and it was he, even more than his father, who first evolved what can only be called the 'Alexandrian Mode'. It has been rightly said of him that his court was 'magnificent and dissolute, intellectual and artificial'. It has been compared with the Versailles of Louis XIV.

His first wife was Arsinoë, daughter of the King of Thrace and Macedonia, who



Marble head of Ptolemy I Soter, 304-282 B.C., said to be from El-Faiyum; 9½ inches high

may also have been his half-sister; for Ptolemy I had married his daughter to her father. (The couplings of the Ptolemaic dynasty are incredibly complicated.) Arsinoë was to become the mother of his successor Ptolemy III although he later repudiated her and married his genuine, full sister, yet another Arsinoë. The latter seems to have been indeed the love of his life. Their marriage was celebrated in the Egyptian style as the union of two deities, Isis and Osiris. These were two of the principal Egyptian divinities: the goddess of the moon and the great father-god (who were also supposed to have been brother and sister).

It was during the reign of this second Ptolemy that so much of the intellectual and artistic vitality of his city flourished with poets like Theocritus and Callimachus and innumerable lesser poets, authors, scholars and scientists all engaged in perpetuating the image of the King and his court. On the death of his second wife Ptolemy II was grief-stricken. He did all that he could to perpetuate her memory, having her declared a goddess, and worshipped as such in the Egyptian temples, as well as erecting buildings and statues to her. He never married again, but we are familiar with the names of some of his successive mistresses - Agathoclea, Didyma, an Egyptian, Myrtilon, an actress, and so on - all of whom seem to have been women of intellect as well as beauty. Once again there is a parallel with the Sun King's court at Versailles.



Bas-relief of Ptolemy II

It was during the reigns of these first two Ptolemies that the Egyptian economy and agriculture were, for the first time, properly systematized. Surveys were conducted throughout the kingdom to determine which areas were best for particular crops. The finest land was declared the personal property of the ruler and this was leased for cultivation to Egyptian natives – who thus became crown peasants. The grain was carefully measured at the time of the harvest and the rent due to the King was then determined. The whole of Egypt was now run and regulated by a carefully organized bureaucracy, at the head of which was the government in Alexandria, where the King's chief minister or *dioiketes* resided. A series of papyri exists containing correspondence between this minister and one of his subordinates during the reign of Ptolemy II. They show how the Greek genius in the alien land of Egypt was applied with scientific precision to furthering and improving the return of the fertile land. Foreign strains of wheat and vines were imported, a careful system of rotation of crops was introduced – with the result that the land was soon made to yield two harvests a year. Throughout all the great estates (which were given by the King to his nobles in reward for their services) the same type of scientific farming became the rule.

The nobles themselves were mainly absentee landlords. They had their country houses but Alexandria was the hub of the world; for where Ptolemy was, there was the power and the influence. Besides, Egypt itself can have had little attraction for these Greeks. Only in Alexandria, with its theatre, gymnasium, library, law courts and palaces, was anything like the Greek 'way of life' to be found. But it was not really that, not at least as it had been understood in, say, Periclean Athens. These Greeks of the Hellenistic period were not the same men as their ancestors, except in their insatiable curiosity and their capacity for intrigue. The ancient virtues –

which few of their ancestors followed, but many had aspired to – were gone. They had become orientalized.

Centuries later Renaissance Italians would say of Englishmen who learned their language, and aped their fashions and manners: '*Inglese Italianato, Diavolo incarnato*' ('An Englishman Italianate, Devil incarnate'). The same might, in a sense, have been said of the Greeks of Alexandria and indeed of the other eastern states. They retained a courage, vitality and capacity to do mischief far greater than the peoples they had conquered, but they had also absorbed the devious approach, the sensual tastes and the corrupting luxury of the East. Herodotus tells the story of how, several centuries before, the great Persian King Cyrus was approached by some of his most influential citizens, who suggested that, since Persia was now the most powerful country in the world, it would be a good thing if they were to emigrate from their own poor and mountainous country and settle in the rich lowlands. Cyrus thought the matter over carefully and then made his judgement: 'You may do so, if you wish. But, *if you do*, you must be prepared no longer to be the rulers, but to live under the rule of other men. Soft countries breed soft people. It is not in the law of nature that a land which produces fine crops will also produce fine fighting-men.' Egypt was a soft country.

The third Ptolemy, known as Euergetes (The Benefactor), was the son of the first Arsinoë, but had been adopted by her successor and proclaimed the legitimate heir. His name 'The Benefactor' derived from the fact that, early in his reign, he had made an immense raid into the eastern provinces of what had been Alexander's empire, advancing as far as Babylon and Susa. He had brought back with him not only a vast amount of treasure but also all the statues of Egyptian deities which had been captured long ago by the Persians, and he restored them to their respective temples. Little of the territory that he had 'conquered' remained in his hands for long, saving only a part of Syria. His fleets, however, carried on the expansion that had been begun by his father, and nearly all the eastern Mediterranean now fell under the dominance of the Ptolemies. Euergetes was equally remarkable in his patronage of the arts and science; among other things attempting to discover the source of the Nile (a task in which he failed). This third Ptolemy combined most of the virtues – as well as the vices – of his predecessors. But there can be no doubt that he consolidated their work, and Egypt was at the height of its power when he died at the end of 222 or early in 221 B.C. The predominant civilization in the eastern Mediterranean – just as it had been centuries before in the days of the Pharaohs – the Land of the Pyramids was flourishing and prosperous and, in Alexandria at least, more cultured than anywhere else. All was soon to change.

In-breeding, as any horse-racing stud-book can show, has its benefits. Stamina, intelligence and courage can be transmitted through it. But after a comparatively short length of time out-breeding becomes essential in order to retain the 'bone' and other necessary physical qualities. The decline of the Ptolemies began with the fourth of the line. The stock went steadily from bad to worse.