



## **Beyond the Glamour - Delving into the Dark History of the Ptolemaic Dynasty**

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The focus of this paper is to delve into the symbolism behind the events that unfolded during the Ptolemaic Dynasty's reign, a period often glorified for its artistic and intellectual patronage. While the dynasty's achievements are undeniable, propelling Egypt to a position of power and influence within the Hellenistic world, this paper aims to shed light on the darker aspects of their rule. Historians frequently praise the Ptolemies for their contributions to art and knowledge, portraying their era as a golden age for Egypt. However, this paper seeks to understand the true cost of this perceived glory. It argues that the splendor of the Ptolemaic era was built on the backs of the suffering Egyptian people, who endured oppression, brutality, and economic hardship throughout the dynasty's 300-year reign. This paper will explore the events not simply as isolated occurrences, but as results of a system designed to enrich the ruling class at the expense of the Egyptians. By examining the symbolism behind these events, we can gain a deeper understanding of the true human cost of the Ptolemaic Dynasty's success. Our exploration of the Ptolemaic Dynasty's dark side begins with the most brutal instrument of their control: the tax system. This wasn't just a method of collecting revenue; it was a weaponized system designed to bleed the Egyptian population dry.

### **Taxes and Agriculture**

In Ptolemaic Egypt, the king held absolute ownership of all land.<sup>1</sup> This system, coupled with agriculture being the lifeblood of the economy, placed the Egyptians in a precarious position. They bore the brunt of a harsh economic reality, also the farmers were obliged to stay in their registered lands and never leave it.<sup>2</sup> The Ptolemaic grip on Egypt was absolute, enforced by a heavy-handed security apparatus. Imagine armed guards stationed everywhere, a constant reminder of the regime's power and the potential consequences of dissent. Farmers were subjected to a relentless system of taxation. High taxes were levied on their crops, leaving them with a meager portion of their harvest.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to taxes, they were forced to pay high rents to the king for the land they cultivated. The misery of the farmers didn't end there. The Ptolemaic grip on Egypt extended beyond land ownership, as they established monopolies on essentials like oil and wine, taxed everything from professions like acting to the beer people drank, and

<sup>1</sup> Tarn, 1964, 207; this was also the situation in the pharaonic period and continued in the Ptolemaic period.

<sup>2</sup> Murry, 1904, 75-76; Durant, 1939, 587-588; ١٥٣-١٥٢، ٢٠١٧، احمد صالح، ٤٥٧، ٢٠١٩، سليم حسن،

<sup>3</sup> Durant, 1939, 587.



even levied a tax on the roofs providing shade from the harsh sun – their relentless pursuit of revenue turning every aspect of life, from basic needs to leisure, into a source of income for the government, leaving the Egyptian people suffocated by the burden.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the Pharaonic system where the state received a flexible one-tenth share of the harvest and even shared losses due to natural disasters, the Ptolemaic era saw a harsh shift. Farmers were forced to deliver a predetermined amount of grain to the king's granaries, regardless of their actual harvest. This meant they bore the full brunt of poor yields from pests or lack of irrigation, and on top of that, had to shoulder the additional burden of transporting the grain themselves. This relentless and inflexible system ultimately plunged many farmers into poverty and despair.<sup>5</sup>

The Ptolemaic regime's discrimination against Egyptians was evident in their land distribution practices. The king granted the lands for cultivating grapes, a crop taxed less than grains. These vineyards were overwhelmingly owned by Greeks, who unlike Egyptian farmers, benefited from the king shouldering any losses due to pests or lack of irrigation. This policy highlights the racial prejudice of the Ptolemaic system, favoring Greeks while placing a heavier tax burden and greater risk on Egyptians cultivating essential food crops.<sup>6</sup>

Mercenaries were the main element in the Ptolemaic army; they found a land of golden opportunities. The ever-expanding Ptolemaic army was a magnet for soldiers seeking fortune. These foreign fighters settled in Egypt, and after battles, the king rewarded them handsomely. Land grants – fertile plots for cultivation – provided them with a steady income. Unlike the heavily taxed Egyptians, these mercenaries enjoyed significant privileges and preferential treatment, making Egypt a land of prosperity compared to their lives before.<sup>7</sup>

The misery of Egyptian farmers didn't end with grain taxes. Even the green fodder, traditionally grown after the harvest to feed livestock, wasn't spared. This essential source of animal feed became entirely state-controlled, forcing farmers to pay a hefty tax just to access enough for their own cattle.<sup>8</sup>

The Ptolemaic state wielded an iron fist of control. They micromanaged agriculture, distributing seeds to farmers, meticulously checking cultivated areas, and monitoring the harvest. Brutal efficiency then stripped farmers of any autonomy. They couldn't sell their crops freely; the king, setting absurdly low prices, became the sole buyer of everything

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig, 1939, 463.

<sup>5</sup> Murry, 1904, 76; سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٤٥٦.

<sup>7</sup> Durant, 1939, 588; سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٥٥٥.

<sup>8</sup> Murry, 1904, 76.

<sup>٦</sup> سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٤٥٧-٤٥٩.



from oilseeds and grain to "almost everything else." This ruthless system left farmers with little control over their own land and livelihoods.<sup>9</sup>

The Ptolemaic grip on Egypt stifled even the most basic economic activity. Owning an oil-press for example was a dangerous act. Authorities would confiscate the equipment, impose a crippling fine that few could afford, and drag the offender before a court. For most, the exorbitant fine meant a brutal physical punishment. While Egyptians faced suffocating control, Greeks enjoyed a far more privileged position. This was a sort of agreement between the king and the Greek population.<sup>10</sup>

Profession like beekeeping wasn't spared the harsh realities of Ptolemaic taxation. Beekeepers faced a double whammy – a hefty tax of up to 25% on their honey production, and an additional burden in the form of a licensing fee just to operate. This system stifled a vital industry, as honey served as a crucial sweetener similar to how sugar is used today.<sup>11</sup>

Even animal husbandry wasn't exempt. Egyptians faced licensing fees just to raise livestock, taxes on every head of sheep, goat, or other animal and even additional taxes for the supposed "guarding" of their herds.<sup>12</sup> If a farmer fell behind on taxes, their animals weren't safe. This threat loomed even in cases of shortages on the king's land, grain supply, or any other tax owed. Essentially, the farmers' livestock could be seized not just for their own failures, but also to compensate for shortfalls in other areas.<sup>13</sup>

The head tax exposed the glaring inequality under the Ptolemies. This annual levy, imposed solely on Egyptian men, served as a stark reminder of their subjugation. Egyptians were subjected to a yearly census, a process likely viewed as both intrusive and humiliating. In contrast, Greeks were exempt from this tax, a privilege that underscored their superior status within Ptolemaic society. This discriminatory system functioned as a subtle form of enslavement, constantly reminding Egyptians of their place at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy.<sup>14</sup>

The Ptolemaic tax system wasn't merely a collection of policies; it was a relentless squeeze on the lifeblood of Egypt. Every aspect of daily life was subject to exorbitant taxes and licensing fees. These were just a few examples of the brutality employed by the Ptolemies, who bled the country dry to enrich themselves and their elite circle. The result was a stark societal divide, with the king and his inner circle overflowing with wealth while the Egyptian people sank deeper into poverty.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Murry, 1904, 75-77; ٤٦٣-٤٥٦، ٢٠١٩، سليم حسن؛

<sup>١٠</sup> سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٤٦٦-٤٦٧؛ Dogaer, 2021, 316-317

<sup>١١</sup> ابراهيم نصحي، ٢٠٠٢، ٢٩١-٢٩٤.

<sup>12</sup> Durant, 1939, 590; ٢٩٤-٢٩٠، ٢٨٥، ٢٠٠٢، ابراهيم نصحي؛

<sup>١٢</sup> أحمد صالح، ٢٠١٧، ٢٤٩.

<sup>14</sup> La'da, 1994, 188.

<sup>15</sup> Tarn, 1964, 209.



The Egyptian farmers essentially funneling a significant portion of their yield to the Ptolemaic government, leaving them with little to invest in their farms or improve their living standards. This system created a vicious cycle of poverty and resentment that would eventually contribute to social unrest.

The so called Revenue Law Papyrus of 259 BC, aimed at maximizing tax revenue across various economic sectors, offer valuable insights into tax collection practices in the Ptolemaic Kingdom. The Papyrus, specifically, details regulations for leasing out tax collection rights. The first section focuses on taxes levied on wine, fruits, olive oil, and banking activities. Similar to practices in Classical Greece, particularly Athens, the Papyrus reveals a reliance on tax-farmers, especially in Egypt, Syria and Phoenicia.<sup>16</sup>

These tax-farmers, often Greek wealthy individuals or organizations or an ex-mercenary, acted as intermediaries between taxpayers and government officials. They were contracted to collect a specific amount of revenue for the king. This system helped control state corruption, as tax-farmers were liable for any shortfalls caused by corrupt officials. Any collection exceeding the contracted amount, however, became their profit. For taxpayers, however, this system offered little opportunity to avoid their obligations. This system had a significant drawback: tax collectors, incentivized to maximize their profits, often resorted to oppressive measures to extract the highest possible sums from farmers. Their brutality manifested in public displays of force and violence: whips cracked, torture implements gleamed, and cudgels fell. Accusations of bribery were rampant, suggesting officials enriched themselves by terrorizing the very people they were meant to govern. Egyptians lived under a regime fueled by fear and injustice.<sup>17</sup> It was also forbidden for lawyers to have cases and defend people against the royal treasury. It is said that Egypt paid to the Ptolemies eight times what Gaul paid for Caesar.<sup>18</sup> It is also said that Ptolemies collected more than any other country in the period between the Persian fall and the roman conquest.<sup>19</sup>

The threat of forced labor loomed large, as the king could enslave Egyptians for special projects, disrupting their lives and livelihoods. Adding to the fear, the king held the right to seize donkeys or other animals for transportation purposes, further tightening his control over the population and their resources.<sup>20</sup>

This oppressive tax-farming system serves as a prime example of the phenomenon known as “anachoresis”. Faced with such exploitation, many Egyptian peasants sought refuge in the harsh environments of the deserts and the Delta marshes, abandoning their

<sup>16</sup> Hölbl, 2001, 62; Riad, 2000, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Papaopoulou, 2012, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Durant, 1939,

<sup>18</sup> مانفريد كلاوس، ٢٠٠٩، ٨١.

<sup>20</sup> أحمد صالح، ٢٠١٧، ١٧٠-١٧١؛ سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٥٤٤.



farmlands in a desperate attempt to escape the crushing tax burden.<sup>21</sup> This instability drove many farmers to abandon their land, swelling the ranks of bandit gangs that thrived in the fringes of the Nile Delta and the deserts. Many examples were reported, papyrological documents containing complaints of theft or violence carried out by bandits.

The rampant banditry plaguing the Ptolemaic period became such a severe issue that the administration was forced to enact numerous laws specifically aimed at curbing these criminal activities.<sup>22</sup>

### **Industry, Monopoly and monetary system**

The Ptolemaic state exerted absolute control over every aspect of Egyptian life. This extended beyond agriculture, as all industries and trade, both internal and external, were heavily regulated. The government meticulously documented every detail, held monopolies on certain sectors, and heavily taxed all private industries. Since the state also owned all raw materials, Egyptians had little control over their economic activities. To enforce this rigid system, the Ptolemaic government employed a massive bureaucracy with a vast number of officials for registration and tax collection.<sup>23</sup>

Ptolemies ignored all the Greek traditions concerning free trade, free ownership, and all the economic principles. They controlled every aspect of the mining industry. They crushed any free market in Egypt, controlling everything from oil seeds to the final product. They directly owned the mines and could choose to either operate them themselves or simply seize the extracted ore.<sup>24</sup>

This absolute power allowed them to dictate exorbitant prices, like the inflated oil prices in Alexandria compared to the world market. To further solidify their monopoly, Ptolemy II banned oil imports exceeding a three-day supply, imposing fines, confiscations and very severe punishments.<sup>25</sup> This ruthless system ensured the king profited from both domestic sales and exports while simultaneously restricting imports and creating a closed economy where Egyptians had no control over a vital commodity. Ptolemies excluded any competition and they secured a profit between seventy to three hundred percent.<sup>26</sup>

Papyrus, the essential writing material of Egypt, wasn't spared from Ptolemaic control. Unlike other industries, however, the grip wasn't as absolute. While high taxes choked the domestic market and the king dictated which types of papyrus could be produced, he

<sup>21</sup> Murry, 1904, 76; Bagnall, 1982, 16; Durant, 1939, 596; Riad, 2000, 187; Hölbl, 2001, 154,157; Moyer, 2022, 155.

<sup>22</sup> Mcging, 1998, 167-170.

<sup>23</sup> Murry, 1904, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Durant, 1939, 589.

<sup>25</sup> Papaopoulou, 2012, 6; Dogaer, 2021, 315-318; سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٤٧١-٤٧٣.

<sup>26</sup> Durant, 1939, 589.





didn't monopolize production itself. However, he maintained a stranglehold on exports, ensuring Egypt remained a vital source of papyrus for Greece and other outside markets. This strategy fueled the state's coffers through export taxes and high prices.<sup>27</sup>

The monopoly extended far to include all essential goods like salt, natron, incense, and even textiles. While some private textile factories existed, they weren't truly free to operate. All their production had to be delivered to the state, effectively making them cogs in the state-controlled textile industry.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike other Hellenistic kingdoms, the Ptolemies established a unique and self-serving coinage system designed to enrich the king. Their coins contained less precious metal than their stated value, essentially shortchanging the public. Furthermore, foreign currency was banned, forcing newcomers to exchange their money at the king's official (and rigged) exchange office in Alexandria. With no private banks or dealers to offer competition, the king controlled the entire currency exchange process, skimming profits off the top through the devalued exchange rate. This system, unlike any other in the Mediterranean, solidified Egypt's status as the Ptolemies' personal domain, a situation that persisted throughout the Hellenistic period.<sup>29</sup>

The Ptolemies kept a tight grip on Egypt's financial system. All banks, even local ones, ultimately belonged to the king. He granted licenses only for the Greek to operate them, but with strict regulations and exorbitant interest rates far exceeding those in other Greek territories. This ensured the king maximized his profits on loans. The entire system was meticulously controlled, likely with a central bank in Alexandria overseeing the smaller regional banks. However, details about the central bank's specific regulations and goals remain scarce.<sup>30</sup>

### **Racism**

The Greeks ruled Egypt as conquerors, not equals. This attitude played out most starkly in their legal system. Unlike rulers who might seek to assimilate with the conquered, the Greeks laws didn't recognize marriages between Greeks and Egyptians for example. This legal barrier underscored their separatist ideology. They saw themselves as a distinct ruling class, deliberately discouraging any attempt at social integration or unification between the two groups.<sup>31</sup> While some scholars downplay the existence of ethnic tension and apartheid-like policies in Ptolemaic Egypt, several texts and historical events suggest otherwise.

<sup>27</sup> Riad, 2000, 186; سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٤٧٧-٤٨١; For more see The Price of Papyrus in Greek Antiquity by Gustave Glotz, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. 1929, Vol 1, no. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Durant, 1939, 589.

<sup>29</sup> سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٥٠٩-٥١٠.

<sup>30</sup> Durant, 1939, 590; سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٥١٣-٥١٥.

<sup>31</sup> Durant, 1939, 595.



It is obvious the use of ethnic term in both official and non-official documents in Ptolemaic Egypt and it seems to be the numerous different labels that we find given to individuals in both demotic and Greek papyri from Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>32</sup>

Examining official documents, we see a shift around the time of the Roman takeover. The last documented use of demotic script to denote ethnicity in these documents dates to 69 BC. Interestingly, Greek ethnic markers also become very uncommon in papyri from the Roman period. This two-fold pattern suggests the Roman provincial authorities discontinued the practice of recording ethnicity altogether.<sup>33</sup>

The Greeks thrived in a world of privilege. They dominated key positions as tax collectors, military personnel, bankers, royal supervisors, and high officials.<sup>34</sup> This close association with the king elevated their social standing, granted them special legal protections, and undoubtedly afforded them a far more comfortable life compared to the average Egyptian.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to popular belief, Greeks weren't as widely settled in the Egyptian countryside. Instead, they concentrated their presence in urban areas, particularly the capitals of each province (nome metropoleis).<sup>36</sup>

Despite ruling Egypt, the Ptolemies had very few Egyptians in high-ranking positions. The earliest prominent exception is the famous Dionysios Petosarapis, who led a rebellion around 165 BC. Later, Egyptians like Paos was the Theban governor in 130 BC, and Phommous was also the Theban governor in 115 BC. They were rare exceptions and the only Egyptians who had such position. While there were a dozen other Egyptians in lesser administrative roles during the 1st century BC, overall, Egyptians were largely excluded from the Ptolemaic administration.<sup>37</sup> This absence of Egyptians in high-ranking positions during the early Ptolemaic years is a noteworthy aspect of their governance.

Even literature reflected the tense relationship between Egyptians and Greeks. In Theocritus' poem written in Alexandria in the period of Ptolemy II "Idyll XV,"<sup>38</sup> a character named Praxinoa praises Ptolemy II for supposedly keeping Egyptians from violence and robbery against Greeks. This portrayal suggests Egyptians were viewed stereotypically as criminals by some Greeks.<sup>39</sup>

There is a case of Egyptian brothers, where those with Greek names seemingly paid only the salt tax while their siblings with Egyptian names paid both taxes (salt and obol tax),

<sup>32</sup> La'da, 1994, 183.

<sup>33</sup> La'da, 1994, 186.

<sup>34</sup> Papaopoulou, 2012, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Bagnall, 1982, 16.

<sup>37</sup> O'Neil, 2006, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Theocitus, Idyll. 15. 44-50.

<sup>39</sup> McCoskey, 2002, 14-15.

<sup>٣٥</sup> سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٥٣٣-٥٣٤.



this raises concerns about potential discrimination within the Ptolemaic tax system. This distinction suggests that ethnicity, rather than anything else, may have influenced tax obligations, placing a heavier burden on Egyptians.<sup>40</sup>

Examining receipts from Diospolis Magna reveals a trend of Egyptians readily adopting Greek names. This wasn't just a personal choice; Egyptians even named their sons with Greek names. However, the reverse situation – Greeks adopting Egyptian names – seems almost nonexistent. The closest we come to this practice is the creation of entirely new Greek names that incorporated elements of Egyptian deities' names. The social and political landscape of Ptolemaic Egypt played a significant role. Greeks held the positions of power, and someone with political or economic aspirations might find a Greek name more advantageous. Adopting a Greek name could be seen as a way to gain acceptance and potentially climb the social ladder within the ruling class. The Greek elite likely viewed their culture as superior. Egyptians adopting Greek names might have been seen as a sign of assimilation and a way to integrate into the power structure.<sup>41</sup>

The burden of forced labor in Ptolemaic Egypt wasn't shared equally. The elite – Greeks, priests, citizens of Greek cities, tax collectors, government officials, and the king's inner circle – were all exempt. Some others could buy their way out with an annual payment. This left the peasantry, the backbone of Egyptian society, shouldering the brunt of this forced labor system. They faced the constant threat of being pulled away from their farms and families to toil on state-sanctioned projects.<sup>42</sup>

## Revolts

The majority of the Egyptian people belonged to poorer group, and this groups suffered socio-economic inequalities that prompted the revolt in the end. The Ptolemaic era in Egypt was far from peaceful. The Egyptian population erupted in numerous rebellions – estimates suggest at least 10 major uprisings throughout the dynasty's 300-year reign.<sup>43</sup> The biggest is called the 'Great Theban Revolt' which occurred between 206-186 BC.

Long before major revolts erupted, simmering discontent bubbled over in smaller acts of defiance. Miners, quarrymen, boatmen, peasants, artisans, tradesmen – even those who oversaw them and police officers – all participated in strikes and protests. A papyrus record captures their desperation: "We are worn out," they declared, "we will run away!" This threat of seeking refuge in temples highlighted the stark reality – nearly all those exploiting the workforce were Greek, while Egyptians bore the brunt of harsh conditions

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, 1992, 326; McCoskey, 2002, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Packman, 1968, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Fischer-Bovet, 2015, 18-20.

<sup>42</sup> أحمد صالح، ٢٠١٧، ١٧٠-١٧١؛ سليم حسن، ٢٠١٩، ٥٤٤.





and meager pay. These smaller acts foreshadowed the larger rebellions that would erupt, fueled by years of accumulated resentment.<sup>44</sup>

The Ptolemaic administration's growing interference in temple management across Upper and Lower Egypt wasn't just a power grab; it also fueled tensions. While this move aimed to tighten their grip on all aspects of life, it backfired, creating further unrest.<sup>45</sup> This interference was also another element that fuelled revolts.

The Ptolemies, ruling Egypt as outsiders, relied heavily on foreign troops, a sign of deep distrust towards the Egyptians. This, coupled with their general disinterest in learning the language or fostering cultural connections, paints a picture of a dynasty more concerned with exploiting Egypt's resources than integrating with its people. Cleopatra VII stands as a stark exception, but the rest of the Ptolemaic rulers come across as tyrannical figures who viewed Egypt primarily as a tool for their own gain.

While the Ptolemaic rulers initially viewed Egyptians with skepticism as soldiers, historical evidence suggests a more nuanced picture. The Ptolemies, facing a shortage in manpower and money, made a rare decision: enlist Egyptians into their army for the Battle of Raphia in 217 BC. The decisive victory at Raphia, credited to the inclusion of 20,000 Egyptians, challenges the assumption of Egyptians as "second-rate soldiers." Recent scholarship, however, reveals even earlier Egyptian participation, with some fighting alongside the Greeks as early as 312 BC at the Battle of Gaza, albeit in smaller numbers.<sup>46</sup>

However, after securing victory, the Egyptian soldiers felt cheated. Discontent simmered beneath the surface of Ptolemaic Egypt, uniting both soldiers, and commoners. This wasn't just about ethnicity or resisting foreign rule. By the final years of Ptolemy IV, crushing taxes, harsh demobilization practices and unfair treatment after the battle fueled rebellions throughout the land, from the Delta to Thebaid. Previously satisfied elites, officers, and soldiers found their rewards dwindling, creating an opening for them to join forces with the suffering masses. In Upper Egypt, local elites had always chafed under control from the northern capital, adding a political and religious dimension to the discontent. The Great Revolt wasn't just an economic uprising – it was a multi-faceted explosion of frustration demanding change.<sup>47</sup> Egyptians and Greeks inflicted heavy losses. The chaos triggered widespread poverty and famine as farmers fled their fields and economic activity stalled.

Egypt's stability crumbled during the 20-year period between 206 and 186 BC. The nation fractured, with Upper Egypt falling under Egyptian control while the Ptolemaic

<sup>44</sup> Durant, 1939, 597.

<sup>45</sup> Véisse, 2022, 72.

<sup>46</sup> Fischer-Bovet, 2013, 209-210, 220.

<sup>47</sup> Fischer-Bovet, 2014, 92; Véisse, 2022, 70.

grip on power weakened. Even Lower Egypt simmered with unrest, as evidenced by widespread revolts that spilled over into the Delta region. Alexandria and some other parts of Lower Egypt remained under Ptolemaic rule, but their control was far from secure.<sup>48</sup>

The Greeks were scattered all over Egypt with few Greek cities and outside these cities they established what is called *politeumata*, they were living also in the Thebaid.<sup>49</sup> After the revolt most probably they fled the area. The complete absence of Greek names among witnesses in Theban contracts during Haronnophris/Chaonnophris<sup>50</sup> rule stands in stark contrast to earlier Theban documents. This shift raises intriguing questions: how did this leader view the Greeks and the Ptolemaic dynasty?<sup>51</sup> This absence sets another example of the ethnic tension in this period, in particular the overall hatred towards the Greeks.

In a desperate attempt to quell the unrest, the Ptolemies issued a series of amnesty decrees, and the first was issued by Ptolemy V, most famously the Rosetta stone inscription of 196 BC named the priestly Memphis decree and another by Ptolemy VII in 118 BC. These measures highlight the severity of the situation – Egypt was engulfed in flames for decades, with continuous and relentless rebellions challenging Ptolemaic rule.<sup>52</sup>

While the revolts against Ptolemaic rule undoubtedly stemmed from a multitude of grievances, the role of ethnic tension deserves closer examination. Many texts, believed to be authored by the Egyptian priesthood, offer a glimpse into societal attitudes towards foreigners. These writings, with their perceived anti-Greco-Macedonian sentiment, might be tempting to view as one of the reasons for the uprising.

### Resistance Literature

The emergence of a specific type of literature, known as "Resistance Literature," becomes evident during this period of unrest like the Demotic Chronicle and the Oracle of the Potter.<sup>53</sup> The Demotic Chronicle, a work composed under Ptolemy III Euergetes' reign,<sup>54</sup> serves as a prime example. This timing, coinciding with a period of disturbance, suggests the Chronicle might have reflected or even fueled sentiments of resistance against Ptolemaic rule. It can be interpreted as a form of oracle.<sup>55</sup> These works likely

<sup>48</sup> Véisse, 2022, 64.

<sup>49</sup> Tarn, 1964, 202.

<sup>50</sup> The two Egyptians who ruled upper Egypt as kings in the period between 206 and 186 BC.

<sup>51</sup> Véisse, 2022, 67.

<sup>52</sup> Durant, 1939, 597; Fischer-Bovert, 2014, 96.

أحمد صالح، ٢٠١٧، ٢٥٩-٢٦٠.

<sup>53</sup> Moyer, 2022, 152.

<sup>54</sup> Quack, 2017, 27.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, 1990, 494-495; Quack, 2017, 27.



reflected the anxieties and frustrations of the Egyptian people living under Ptolemaic rule. By portraying a potential hero who would expel the occupiers from Egypt,<sup>56</sup> the Chronicle might have served as an expression of hope for change and a rallying point for those yearning for liberation.

The Oracle of the Potter takes a much more direct stance against the Ptolemies.<sup>57</sup> This prophecy was written after 131/130 BC,<sup>58</sup> the exact date is debatable but may be dated to soon after 129 BC and 116 BC respectively according to last conclusions.<sup>59</sup> It is harshly criticizes the Ptolemaic rule and even predicts their downfall.

Therefore, while ethnic tension undeniably played a part in the complex web of factors leading to the revolt, it shouldn't be seen as the sole or even primary cause. All the previous examples are a response to bad political, socioeconomic, climatic, and environmental conditions.

The entire 2nd century BC in Ptolemaic Egypt was marred by unrest. Egyptians never stopped resisting the oppressive rule, and frequent civil wars became a hallmark of the era. This constant state of conflict suggests a kingdom deeply fractured, with simmering resentment boiling over into open rebellion.<sup>60</sup>

### **Internal disputes**

The Ptolemaic dynasty wasn't immune to internal conflict. The kingdom faced numerous attempts to seize power from within. Agathocles, a Greek aristocrat with Ptolemaic family ties, wielded significant power despite King Ptolemy IV's marriage to his sister Arsinoe III. He even held the prestigious position of high priest. When Ptolemy IV died, Agathocles and his inner circle, including Sosibius another Greek elite, plotted to loot the treasury and potentially usurp the throne for Agathocles himself. This conspiracy resulted in the shocking murder of Arsinoe III. Initially, Agathocles acted as regent for the young Ptolemy V, but tensions rose as he eliminated Sosibius and dismissed existing military forces. This brutality, coupled with his ambition, sparked outrage. In 203/202 BC, a rebellion erupted, uniting Egyptians and Greeks of Alexandria. They stormed the palace, and Agathocles, abandoned by his allies fearing a gruesome fate, was killed. His sister Agathoclea and their family suffered a horrific end, torn apart by the enraged mob. This bloody episode exposed the ruthless opportunism of the Ptolemaic elite and the violent consequences they faced when their actions pushed the people to their breaking point.<sup>61</sup> The very core of power, the Ptolemaic family, was

<sup>56</sup> Quack, 2015, 35.

<sup>57</sup> Tarn, 1964, 207.

<sup>58</sup> Moyer, 2022, 151-152.

<sup>59</sup> Koenen, 1984, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Papaopoulou, 2012, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Polybius, 15. 25-29; Fischer-Bovert, 2014, 94-95; Mayor, 2022, 158.



riddled with scheming and violence. Agathocles' plot against his own king and queen exposes the ruthlessness within the dynasty itself.

Following Ptolemy V's death in 180 BC, a power struggle erupted. His young son, Ptolemy VI, ascended the throne with his mother as regent. Her death left him in the hands of inept and foolish regents who plunged him into the Sixth Syrian War against his uncle, Antiochus IV. Antiochus as a result swiftly conquered parts of Egypt, forcing Ptolemy VI, now co-ruling with his sister Cleopatra II and his brother Ptolemy VIII, to seek terms. A fragile peace was established with Antiochus acting as protector, but dissent arose. Ptolemy VIII took advantage of this situation and was declared king by Alexandrians, sparking a civil war between Alexandria, backing Ptolemy VIII, and the rest of Egypt supporting Ptolemy VI. Desperate, the Alexandrian court's plea for Roman intervention fell on deaf ears.<sup>62</sup>

Each brother desperately sought allies to bolster their position. Rome played a hand through diplomacy, while Antiochus IV saw an opportunity and invaded Lower Egypt in 170-168 BC.<sup>63</sup> This foreign incursion only ended with Roman pressure, a stark reminder of the Ptolemies' weakened state. The once-powerful kingdom was fracturing from within and becoming a pawn in the games of greater powers.<sup>64</sup>

Later on another revolt broke out, the so-called “revolt of Dionysios Petosarapis” in 168 BC. Dionysios Petosarapis, a powerful courtier of possibly mixed Egyptian and Greek origin, leveraged his influence in the army and among Egyptians to launch a coup. He ignited unrest by falsely accusing King Ptolemy VI of harming his brother. The coup attempt failed in Alexandria, forcing Dionysios to flee and appeal to the Egyptians for rebellion.<sup>65</sup> While the revolt spread to the Heracleopolite nome in Middle Egypt and beyond, the king retained the army's loyalty and swiftly crushed the uprising in Panopolis.<sup>66</sup>

These dramatic events illustrate the simmering tensions of the era and highlight the underlying instability. While these are just prominent examples, numerous smaller incidents likely plagued the period, reflecting the fragility of the Ptolemaic reign.

There was also a long civil war between Ptolemy VIII and his sister Cleopatra II officialdom finally broke down starting in 132 BC.<sup>67</sup> Documents and papyri from the era reveal a nation divided, with some regions backing Queen Cleopatra II and others supporting King Ptolemy VIII. The exact reasons for the dispute remain unclear, but

<sup>62</sup> Fischer-Bovert, 2014, 98-99.

<sup>63</sup> Tarn, 1964, 204.

<sup>64</sup> Fischer-Bovert, 2014, 99-100.

<sup>65</sup> Clarysse, 2009, 213; Fischer-Bovert, 2014, 100.

<sup>66</sup> Véisse 2004, 28-32; Fischer-Bovert, 2014, 100.

<sup>67</sup> Tarn, 1964, 204.



scholars believe Cleopatra II maneuvered to secure the throne for her son, bypassing the claims of her grandsons - the sons of her daughter Cleopatra III and husband (who was also her brother).<sup>68</sup>

The squabbles and fights we just discussed are just a taste of the Ptolemaic family drama. Throughout their 300-year reign, these brutal fights for the throne were a constant feature, weakening the dynasty from the inside out.

### **Conclusion**

The grand public image of the Ptolemaic dynasty, burnished by institutions like the Library and Museum, did little to improve the lives of their Egyptian subjects. While material wealth can be impressive, it shouldn't obscure the ethical shortcomings of their government. Compared to other Macedonian dynasties, the Ptolemies fall short.

The Antigonids, despite having limited resources, ruled a free people and acted as a shield for the Greek world against threats from the north. They also played a crucial role in fostering the remarkable cultural flourishing of the 3rd century BC. The Seleucids, burdened by their vast and complex empire, nevertheless made efforts, and with some success, to raise the overall level of civilization across their territories. The Ptolemies, in stark contrast, focused solely on exploiting their domain for personal gain, amassing wealth in their treasury. Despite lacking outright unpopularity, the Ptolemaic kings remained distant figures to the common people. Their connection to the bureaucratic machinery that truly governed daily life was tenuous at best.

The Ptolemies prioritized maximizing Egyptian resources, ruthlessly levying high taxes, rents, and establishing monopolies. This exploitation extended to seizing property and sidelining Egyptians from government and military leadership positions, all fueled by a disdain for the native population. Greek language and culture dominated these spheres of control, further marginalizing the Egyptians.

Soaring taxes during the Ptolemaic period had a devastating consequence: mass depopulation. Unable to bear the crushing financial burden, many Egyptians were forced to abandon their homes, leaving once-thriving regions eerily deserted.

The Ptolemaic stranglehold on industry and trade through monopolies stifled any chance of economic development for the Egyptians. This economic stagnation left Egyptian life frozen in time throughout the Ptolemaic period.

The Ptolemaic era was punctuated by unrest, with rebellions erupting roughly every 30 years throughout almost 300-year reign. This constant churn of revolts, at least ten in total, starkly reflects the simmering tension and dissatisfaction among the Egyptian populace.

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<sup>68</sup> Lanclers, 2020, 25-26.





Ethnic tensions simmered beneath the surface of the Ptolemaic era, fueling much of the unrest. While some scholars downplay its significance, the frequency of revolts suggests a more central role for ethnic tensions in driving popular dissatisfaction with Ptolemaic rule. This discontent, intertwined with economic hardship and political marginalization, would erupt periodically throughout the dynasty's reign.

As a result of racial discrimination, the Greek and foreigners had many privileges over the Egyptians, for example:

- No forced labor.
- The right of being high official.
- The complete political rights inside the Greek cities, which was systemized as city-states.
- The right of owning private lands.
- The amnesty of paying certain taxes like the obol tax.

In few words; the king and Greek elite were the main benefactors of Egypt and the Egyptians didn't benefit any of the economic developments; the rich land, the wide cultivated lands and the newly cultivated lands. The prosper trade or even the prosper industry. There were no benefits for them only more taxes and misery. The country was poor, the government was rich thus the people revolted occasionally.

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