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Written by Adrian Goldsworthy

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ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Adrian Goldsworthy



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THE TWO LANDS

Egypt was already ancient long before Cleopatra was born in 69 BC. Almost four hundred years earlier Herodotus – the first man to write a prose history in any western language – assured his fellow Greeks that they must have learnt much of their own religion and knowledge from the Egyptians. Like much of his work, Herodotus' account of Egypt is a curious mixture of myth, fantasy and confusion, occasionally leavened with accurate information. Greeks tended to idealise Egypt as the home of ancient wisdom, while at the same time despising a people who worshipped sacred animals and practised circumcision. They were also awed by the sheer scale of the pyramids at Giza and included them amongst the Seven Wonders of the World.

It is sobering to remember that Cleopatra lived closer to us in time than she did to the builders of the great pyramids. The largest pyramid of all was built for the Pharaoh Khufu, who died in 2528 BC, some twenty-five centuries before the queen took her own life. That is the same distance of time separating us from Herodotus himself, from the Persian invasions of Greece and the early days of the Roman Republic.

Khufu was not the first pharaoh, but belonged to what is known as the Fourth Dynasty. The organisation of rulers into dynasties was done by a priest scholar working for Cleopatra's family, and the scheme he devised is still largely followed today. There were no fewer than thirty dynasties before her family came to power at the end of the fourth century BC. The first pharaoh ruled from around 2920 BC – it is difficult to be

precise at such an early period. That was not the beginning of civilisation in Egypt – there were organised communities farming on the banks of the Nile long before then, and in time two major kingdoms had emerged, which eventually combined. The pharaohs were the lords of ‘two lands’, Upper and Lower Egypt, and wore a crown symbolising this union. Upper Egypt lay to the south with its capital at Thebes. Lower Egypt was to the north, reaching to the Mediterranean coast and with Memphis as its centre. (This arrangement of upper and lower only seems strange to us because we are so accustomed to maps and globes showing north at the top.)¹

The Nile made everything possible. Each summer it flooded its banks and then receded – a natural cycle only ended by the building of the Aswan Dam in the second half of the twentieth century. The annual inundation left behind a rich deposit of dark alluvial silt, and with it moisture to make the land wonderfully fertile. All of the earliest civilisations rested on the ability of farmers to produce a surplus. They grew because communities were better able to develop large-scale irrigation systems than individuals. In Egypt the problems of dealing with and exploiting the bounty offered by the inundation were greater, and did even more to encourage the growth of central authority.

People lived only where there was water. Egypt’s population was very large by ancient standards, but was overwhelmingly concentrated in just two areas. In the north was the Delta, where the river split into many separate channels to flow into the Mediterranean, irrigating a wide stretch of land as it did so. South of this was the Nile Valley as far as the first cataract. The inundation did not spread far, producing a very densely populated strip of land some 500 miles long and never wider than a dozen miles. The lands beyond were desert. A few communities survived around the rare oases, but mainly there was nothing.²

Egyptians saw themselves as the centre of the world and the one true civilisation. Outside there were chaos and hostile barbaric peoples. Even inside there were threats to order – the Nile inundation was unpredictable in its scale. Too much water could be as disastrous as too little, producing very poor harvests – the years of plenty and years of famine of pharaoh's dream in Genesis. There were supernatural threats to add to the natural ones and the human enemies, for the struggle between order and chaos was reflected in the divine world as well. The pharaohs stood between gods and men and communicated with both, ensuring that order and justice – embraced by the term 'Maat' – prevailed over chaos.³

They were also the heads of a rich and powerful nation, but there were other powers in the world and conflict was not uncommon. At times Egypt was strong, and pharaohs extended their rule further south along the Nile at the expense of the Kingdom of Meroe, or eastwards into Syria and Palestine. Sometimes the balance of power favoured their neighbours and they lost territory. In the second millennium BC a foreign people known as the Hyksos overran much of Egypt and ruled for nearly a century before they were expelled and the New Kingdom created. Nor was Egypt free from internal rebellion and civil war. At times the two kingdoms were divided and rival dynasties ruled simultaneously.

Egyptian culture was never entirely static or immune to change, but it was remarkably conservative. At its heart was the annual agricultural cycle centred around the inundation, and farming methods changed hardly at all in thousands of years. Surrounding this and all aspects of life were the rituals and beliefs that secured the order of seasons, the growth of crops and every aspect of life itself. Outside Egypt the power of the pharaohs stretched far afield or shrank as other empires rose and fell. In the last millennium BC the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians in turn dominated the middle east. For some

of this time Egypt was itself powerful, controlling substantial territories in Asia, but its strength declined and for over a century from 525 to 404 BC the Persians ruled Egypt. Finally, the Egyptians rebelled and expelled them, and for the next sixty-one years were ruled again by native pharaohs. Yet the Persian Empire remained strong and in 343 BC it again conquered Egypt. This occupation seems to have been especially brutal, and was certainly bitterly resented.

Less than a decade later, the world changed suddenly and drastically with the arrival of Alexander the Great. Persia fell, and all of its territories came under the control of the new conqueror.

THE KING OF MACEDON

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of Alexander. Impact is the right word, for there was something intensely physical about his career, and we need to keep reminding ourselves of the speed and sheer scale of what he did. Alexander was not quite thirty-three when he died at Babylon on 10 June 323 BC and had been king for just twelve and a half years. He inherited from his father, Philip II, a Macedonia that was internally strong, possessed a superb army and already dominated Greece. The preparations had also already begun for an expedition against Persia, but although Alexander inherited the idea from his father, it was his own restless energy and insatiable lust to excel that drove the wars that followed.

Alexander and his soldiers marched or rode more than 20,000 miles. By the fifth year the Persian king was dead and his royal city reduced to ashes. Alexander was now head of the largest empire in the known world, but saw no reason to stop. He kept on eastwards, until he controlled all the lands from the Balkans to what is now Pakistan. When Julius

Caesar was thirty he saw a bust of Alexander and is supposed to have wept because his own life seemed so paltry by comparison.⁴

Alexander left Macedon in 334 BC and never returned. The same was true of many Macedonians and Greeks who accompanied him. What Alexander hoped ultimately to achieve is now impossible to say. It may well be that he had not yet made up his own mind how he wanted his new empire to function. Alexander was clever, subtle, ruthless, suspicious, at times appallingly savage, and at others merciful and generous. His army was powerful, but far too small to have held down the empire by force. He founded cities populated by settlers – often veteran soldiers – in many places, but these remained a tiny minority of the overall population. Greek language and culture was spread far more widely as a result of Alexander's conquests, but it was also spread thinly.

Alexander's empire was too vast to be ruled simply as a collection of provinces of Macedonia. As the years went on he made more and more use of Persian noblemen as governors and administrators, as well as Persian soldiers. There were not enough Macedonians and Greeks with the linguistic skills and experience to fulfil every role. It was far more practical to enlist local men, and this had the important benefit of giving his new subjects a stake in his empire. Aspects of court ceremony and the king's role changed from a traditional Macedonian pattern to a hybrid monarchy including Persian elements as well as new innovations. Alexander took honours and symbols that were at least semi-divine, and may even have wanted to go further and be worshipped as a living god. Yet once again we must remember the time factor. In little more than a decade there was very little chance for any aspect of the new regime to bed itself in.⁵

All of the various territories were tied directly to Alexander, with nothing else to unite them. This might not have mattered

if there had been a clear and viable heir when Alexander died. He had a half-brother, Arrhidaeus, who had only been allowed to live because he was considered to be a half-wit. In spite of this, he was now named as king. Alexander's latest wife Roxanne, the daughter of a Bactrian chieftain (and thus from what is now Afghanistan), was pregnant when he died. Some months later in 322 BC she gave birth to a boy who was named Alexander IV and promptly made joint king. The empire now had two monarchs ruling jointly, but one was an infant and the other incapable. Real power was exercised by a group of senior officers and officials, most of whom were in Babylon during these months.

A general named Perdiccas was appointed as regent – Alexander was supposed to have handed him his signet ring in his last moments. The dying conqueror was also supposed to have replied that his empire should go 'to the strongest', and that 'his foremost friends would hold a great funeral contest over him'. If he actually uttered these words, it may have reflected a yearning for the heroic age of a man who slept with a copy of Homer's epic, the *Iliad*, under his pillow, or a realistic understanding of the inevitable. It is doubtful that even if he had chosen an adult heir at this late date his empire would have held together.⁶

At first the others co-operated with Perdiccas, as they sought to build up personal power bases amidst a climate of growing suspicion and fear. The most important men were appointed as satraps, regional governors who were in theory loyal to and controlled by the monarchs and the regent. Ptolemy, a distant relative of Alexander and now in his early forties, was made satrap of Egypt at his own request. Soon it became apparent that Perdiccas could only control the satraps by force and he and his army could not be everywhere at the same time. In 321 BC he marched against Ptolemy, but the campaign ended in disaster with a botched attempt to cross the Nile. Perdiccas'

senior officers murdered their leader. They offered command to Ptolemy, but when he cautiously refused the bulk of the army marched away.

That was just one episode in a long and convoluted series of wars fought between Alexander's generals as they tore his empire apart in a struggle for personal power. Ptolemy was one of the more cautious players, determined not to risk losing what he already controlled. The 'funeral games' lasted for almost fifty years, and almost all of the main protagonists died violently. Arrhidaeus was murdered in 317 BC, and Alexander IV and his mother in 311 BC. They were not replaced, and at no point did any of the rival generals have a realistic chance of reuniting the whole empire under his own control. The prospect of any one man gaining supremacy invariably prompted the others to forget their differences for the moment and combine in opposition. Yet for years the satraps continued to style themselves as governors serving monarchs who no longer existed. In Babylon and Egypt official documents were even dated according to fictional years in the reign of the murdered boy king Alexander IV.⁷

It was not until 305–304 BC that Ptolemy and the other satraps threw off the pretence and declared themselves to be kings. He was Cleopatra's ancestor and for nine generations his family would rule the empire he created during the struggle with Alexander's other former generals. Ptolemy was a Macedonian, and Cleopatra herself was the first of the family able to speak the Egyptian language – only one of nine languages in which she was said to be fluent. The Ptolemies spoke Greek, and for centuries it was a mark of prestige at their court to be able to speak the peculiar Macedonian dialect of the language. As we shall see, they were kings who controlled Egypt, but they were not primarily kings of Egypt. Yet it was always the wealthiest of their possessions, and the last one to fall.⁸

THE HOUSE OF LAGUS

There were Greeks in Egypt long before Alexander arrived. Some came as merchants and many more as mercenaries. In the last centuries of an independent Egypt the pharaohs relied heavily on foreign professional soldiers, who were used against both foreign and domestic opponents. These soldiers with their alien religions were not always popular with the Egyptians. Alexander himself came to Egypt late in 332 BC. Although he had won two battles against the Persians, and taken Tyre and Gaza, the struggle with the Persian King Darius was still far from over. The Persians did not defend Egypt, and the Egyptians, who had no love for the Persians, seem to have welcomed Alexander as a liberator. They were anyway in no position to resist him, but there may have been genuine enthusiasm when he was named as pharaoh. Alexander spent several months in Egypt, and some have seen this as longer than the strategic situation warranted, giving time for Darius to regroup.

Mystery surrounds the long march he made into the western desert to reach the oasis at Siwah with its temple of the god Ammon, equated by the Greeks with Zeus. The shrine was famous for its oracle, and it was widely believed that the priest who acted as the god's mouthpiece welcomed the conqueror as Ammon's son. One tradition claimed this was a slip of the tongue. Less controversially, Alexander laid out and began the construction of Alexandria. It was not the only city founded by him and bearing his own name, but it would prove by far the most important. A man named Cleomenes, who came from the Greek community in Egypt, was appointed to govern when Alexander left in the spring of 331 BC. He never returned to Egypt during his lifetime.⁹

Soon after Ptolemy came to Egypt in 323 BC as satrap he had Cleomenes dismissed and executed. In 321 BC his men intercepted Alexander the Great's funeral cortège on its way to

Macedonia, and instead brought his mummified body to Egypt. It was eventually installed in a specially built tomb in Alexandria. Ptolemy himself wrote a detailed history of Alexander's campaigns, helping to shape the myth of the conqueror in a way favourable to his own ambitions.

Ptolemy began with relatively few soldiers. He and his successors encouraged immigrants from Greece and Macedonia to settle in Egypt. From the beginning Alexandria was to be an overtly Greek city, with its own laws inspired by those of Athens. Mercenaries serving only for pay were not fully reliable and inclined to change sides if the campaign went against them. Therefore the Ptolemies granted their soldiers plots of land known as *cleruchies* to give them a stake in the new regime. It was not a new idea, but was done quickly and on a generous scale. Officers received more than ordinary soldiers, cavalry more than infantry. The produce of these farms was taxed, but the main obligation of the settlers or *cleruchs* was to serve in the king's army. On at least one occasion when some of Ptolemy's soldiers were captured by a rival leader, they preferred to remain as prisoners in the hope of eventually returning to Egypt rather than defect. This was extremely unusual.¹⁰

In the third century BC Egypt may have had a population as big as 7 million. Probably half a million lived in Alexandria. A few other cities, such as Memphis, may have had populations a tenth of that size, but most were smaller. The Ptolemies were less enthusiastic about founding cities than others of the Successors, and most people lived in villages, better suited to housing an agricultural workforce. The Delta and the Nile Valley continued to be densely occupied. The Ptolemies also developed the Fayum to the west, creating irrigation systems around Lake Moeris and elsewhere to make farming possible. Many *cleruchies* were established here, as were large estates leased to prominent and wealthy Greeks. It added a third highly populated area to the country. The development of this area

had the advantage of increasing the scale of the harvest, which the king could tax. At the same time he rewarded his soldiers and followers without having to evict large numbers of Egyptians from their land.¹¹

Egypt's population remained overwhelmingly rural under the Ptolemies; it was also overwhelmingly Egyptian. Even in the cleruchies, the bulk of the actual labouring was done by Egyptians; there were very few slaves outside Alexandria. In many cases the cleruchs leased some or all of their land to tenant farmers. Military duty took the cleruchs themselves away, but over time many became absentee landlords living off rents.

Greeks remained a small minority throughout the rule of the Ptolemies. It was clearly impossible for the two communities to live in complete isolation. Yet scarcely any Egyptian words passed into Greek and it is striking how separate the two cultures remained over the course of the centuries. There were separate Greek and Egyptian law codes with their own judges and courts. At times individuals from one group chose to have particular aspects of their life regulated under the other law code if this seemed advantageous. Egyptian law granted considerably more rights to women and was often employed by Greek families wishing daughters to inherit property. One papyrus surviving from the early first century BC (and so more than two hundred years after Ptolemy I took control of Egypt) is the will of an Egyptian soldier in the service of the Ptolemies. It is written in Demotic – the form of the Egyptian language written in an alphabet rather than hieroglyphics – but the layout and style are Greek in every respect. In most cases Greek law was dominant, and there was never any attempt to merge the two legal systems.¹²

There were many wealthy and influential Egyptians. Just as Alexander had done, the Ptolemies assumed the religious role of the pharaohs. In name – and sometimes even in person –

they performed the rites necessary to ensure that order prevailed over chaos and the natural cycle continued. The family spent heavily on temple building, and many of the most spectacular temple sites visible in Egypt today were either heavily restored or constructed by the Ptolemies. Large estates were granted to particular temples to support the cults. Priests were men of considerable importance, and acted as judges in cases involving Egyptian law.

Other Egyptians served in the royal bureaucracy. This was large and complex, and had as its principal role the collection of taxation: there were levies of a share of the harvest and taxes paid in money. Even the produce taken from land dedicated to one of the temple cults passed through the hands of the royal bureaucracy. There were never enough Greeks to have provided all the necessary clerks and officials and, in particular, there were never enough of them capable of speaking the native language. As a result there were always large numbers of Egyptians at all levels of the administration and over time in the army as well. Many could read and write in Greek as well as their own language and they often adopted Greek names for certain aspects of their life, while retaining their own names in other contexts.

An example of this is Menches or Asklepiades, a village clerk at the end of the second century B.C. An official at this level of the administration needed to be fluent in both languages. In his official capacity he is always called Menches, perhaps because most of the time he dealt with Egyptians. However, he proudly styled himself a 'Greek born in this land' in one text. Ethnically, he seems to have been predominantly – perhaps wholly – Egyptian, but knowledge of Greek gave him and his family a distinct status. It was in many respects a question of class as much as race.¹³

There were some poor Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt and considerably more well-off Egyptians. Most of the latter

adopted some aspects of Greek culture and certainly employed the language, at least when performing their public roles. The majority of Egyptians, however, were not especially wealthy and worked on the land. Some owned or leased fields, but most were labourers paid in kind. This had been true throughout Egypt's history. There is no great indication that the Ptolemies exploited the workforce more brutally than earlier governments. At first they may have done it more efficiently, and certainly significantly expanded the area under cultivation.

Some individuals moved in both communities and over the years there was some intermarriage. Yet in spite of this the separateness of the Greek and Egyptian communities endured. The Greeks were dominant, but they could not have governed or profited from Egypt without the compliance and assistance of large numbers of Egyptians, who themselves benefited from the regime. The Egyptian religion required a pharaoh to help preserve Maat. The Persian kings had nominally fulfilled this role during the years of occupation and now the Ptolemies took over. They supported the temples, whose priests performed all the necessary rituals to hold back the forces of chaos. Yet the Ptolemies were first and foremost Greek kings, who always had ambitions for territory outside Egypt from the old empire of Alexander. There is no indication that they ever thought of themselves as anything other than Greek, and specifically Macedonian. Three centuries of ruling Egypt did not change this.