

Q: A Hellenistic balance of power or the continuation of unlimited ambitions in the Third and Sixth Syrian Wars?

In the centuries following 281BCE despite numerous conflicts the kingdoms of the Antigonids, Ptolemies and Seleukids persisted side by side till they each in turn were absorbed by the advance of Rome. That these kingdoms never destroyed each other leads to the impression that they acknowledged each other's existence and maintained a sort of balance of power in which the outright destruction of the others was not intended. However, in the middle of the Hellenistic era there are two distinct instances of kings acting as if the total defeat of their opponent was a possibility. By looking at the actions of Ptolemy III and Antiochus IV we can see that while there may have been practical limitations the need to maintain a delicate balance of power did not hinder the actions of the Ptolemies or Seleukids.

Sometimes explicitly stated and at others implied, scholarship has often favoured the idea of a balance of power or limited ambitions in some form¹. This is most often seen in relation to the Ptolemies whose imperial policy has numerous times been labelled defensive. Burstein picks up on this and suggests that despite advances elsewhere in the field Hellenistic historiography has not changed much during the last century in this regard². We can see this view in a number of works. In the mid-twentieth century Rostovtzeff's general work on the Hellenistic period supported the idea of a balance of power from the second generation of monarchs³. In more recent times Grainger's work on the Syrian Wars frequently suggests that the Ptolemies maintained a defensive policy⁴. Burstein cites the example of Hölbl who saw the Ptolemaic empire serving as a defensive shield to Egypt⁵. Moments and actions which seem to break with this defensive and balanced image are isolated as a kind of "short-lived aberration".⁶

A number of recent works have taken an opposite view both in terms of reassessing the defensive aims of the Ptolemies and rejecting the idea that any balance of power could have existed. For both Eckstein and Austin the Age of the Successors did not end in 281BCE⁷. Eckstein's view in particular leaves no room for any interstate stability, rather the period was an interstate anarchy with no international law to restrain ambitions⁸. Instead there was continuous war driven by external factors and the internal needs of ideology and propaganda. In Austin's view the very idea of a balance of power is "a patent anachronism, artificially injected into Hellenistic history on the analogy of the history of nineteenth-century Europe"⁹. This view of a much more unstable Hellenistic world which

1 Burstein, 2016

2 Burstein, 2016, p77

3 Rostovtzeff, 1941, p23

4 Grainger, 2010

5 Burstein, 2016, p77; Hölbl, 2001, p28

6 Ellis, 1994, p46

7 Eckstein, 2006, p88; Austin, 1986, p456

8 Eckstein, 2006, p80

9 Austin, 1986, p455

can not be meaningfully separated from the decades of conflict following the death of Alexander is the view I will be adopting here and while there are many good reasons to support views connected to a balance of power I will hopefully show that in some cases this is an assumption that can not be explicitly drawn from the evidence.

Those who do not see a balance of power often base their argument on elements of royal ideology and iconography as well as the actions of certain monarchs and a reassessment of the career of Ptolemy I. There are a number of elements in the ideology and propaganda of the Hellenistic kingdoms which do not support the notion of limited ambitions. Naturally, the figure of Alexander the Great was a focus for his successors. Given that Alexander was the founder of the empire it was important for the legitimacy of the new kingdoms to make a connection to the conqueror but any such link could be taken as a claim to be the successor to Alexander. The coins of both linked to Alexander before Ptolemy and Seleukos took precedence¹⁰. Bodzek describes the replacing of Alexander's image with that of Ptolemy as a move by the latter to claim his place as successor to the empire¹¹. It seems reasonable to infer, as Meeus does, that Ptolemy's elephant scalp coinage referred to India, at the very least a connection to Alexander and, as a reminder of the further edges of Alexander's empire, an image that would not sit well with a separatist¹². Seleukid iconography too frequently drew on Alexander and Zeus¹³. Furthermore, both monarchs had stories re-casting them as members of the Argead royal line¹⁴.

Ptolemy I in particular drew on his connection to Alexander. He possessed the king's body, eventually housing it in a mausoleum within the place complex in Alexandria¹⁵. Ptolemy shaped the memory of Alexander by writing his account of the campaigns. The link to Alexander is also present in the parade of Ptolemy II described by Kallixenios of Rhodes¹⁶. In the parade Dionysus, a god known for wide-ranging wondering and conquests, figures prominently along with Ptolemy and Alexander. Dionysus is seen connected to other figures about whom there is little hesitation to ascribe grand ambitions. Plutarch for instance has Demetrius Poliokrates imitating Dionysus especially¹⁷.

It was not just Greek images and elements that pushed the ideology and iconography of the Hellenistic kings in extravagant directions. Strootman argues that after stepping into the Near East the Macedonians picked up the idea of universal kingship which “required of kings that they always try to expand their realm”¹⁸. Sherwin-White and Kuhrt suggest a similar effect with Babylonian and

10 Bodzek, 2014; Erickson, 2013

11 Bodzek, 2014, p287

12 Meeus, 2014, p282

13 Erickson, 2013

14 Erickson, 2013, p114; Ogden, 1999, p67

15 Erskine, 1995, p41

16 FGr Hist 627 F2

17 Plu. Demetrius.2.3

18 Strootman, 2014, p41

Achemenid traditions pressing for “conquest, military glory and the quest for booty”¹⁹. These different elements would have made the recognition of rival powers difficult and created an expectation of conquest and military glory. Ideologically the ground was laid for expansion and aggression rather than stability.

A possible counter-point to an ideological imperative to expand is presented by Kosmin²⁰. In this view the Seleukids were capable of recognising a bounded territory surrounded by equal neighbours. This was done by Seleukos I and his treaty with the Indian king essentially renouncing territory won by Alexander and followed up by his successors never threatening the Antigonids²¹. Kosmin does not see the Seleukid empire as universalist, however, even in his model it could expand. The cases of Antiochus III crossing to Euboia and marrying an eponymous bride and Antiochus IV invading Egypt and being crowned Pharaoh are seen as ways in which the Seleukids envisaged methods of attaching territories to themselves beyond their previous bounds²². Whether they viewed their empire as universalist or bounded attempts at expansion were made.

It could be that a major reason why Ptolemaic imperialism was viewed as defensive is due to an interpretation of the career of the empire's founder. Ptolemy is often seen as the successor who broke the mode and aimed from the beginning not for Alexander's entire empire but to rule his own separate portion²³. Rather than being a separatist Meeus argues that Ptolemy was “not less ambitious, but simply more careful than his rivals”²⁴. As seen above in terms of propaganda Ptolemy was keen to stress the link to Alexander, something which could confer legitimacy as well as a claim to be Alexander's successor. In terms of his actions Ptolemy was very active from an early stage beyond Egypt taking control of Cyrene, Cyprus, Syria and Phoenicia.

These territories would indeed be useful for the defence of Egypt and when given the chance following the death of Perdikkas Ptolemy turned down supreme command²⁵. Given what had just happened to Perdikkas this was probably a wise choice in the moment and need not exclude any larger ambitions. A sign of such ambitions came later. In a move which Ellis labelled “uncharacteristic aggression” Ptolemy briefly campaigned in the Aegean while trying to marry Kleopatra, a move that would have boosted his image as the successor to Alexander²⁶. These plans ultimately did not pan out but a lack of success need not mean a lack of ambition. Diodorus states that the rival leaders sort the hand of Kleopatra “in order thus to gain supreme power for himself”²⁷.

Ptolemy was not excluded from the category of those seeking supreme power.

19 Sherwin-White and Kuhrt, 1993, p53

20 Kosmin, 2014

21 Kosmin, 2014, p87-89

22 Kosmin, 2014, p137-140

23 Rostovtzeff, 1941, p23; Ellis, 1994, p2

24 Meeus, 2014, p263

25 Diod.Sic.18.36

26 Ellis, 1994, p46

27 Diod.Sic.20.37

Despite these indications Ptolemy is often not ascribed the same level of ambition as his one time comrades. For example, immediately after downplaying the significance of Ptolemy's move Ellis credits Kassander with aims of supreme command even though he was active in a more restricted area than Ptolemy²⁸. Seleukos' career is in a way not that different from Ptolemy's. He too focused on a specific heartland, Babylonia, regaining it once lost. The decision not to go to war with Ptolemy over Koile-Syria can be seen as a temporary practical restraint rather than a limit to ambitions. Seleukos however, had the opportunity to put into practice his desire to conquer as much of the empire as possible and was cut down on the verge of returning to Macedonia. Had Ptolemy been granted a similar opportunity to take more territory and defeat an opponent there is little in the sources that tell us he would not have at least tried. I would argue that the view that Ptolemy was different from the other successors is an interpretation not something explicitly stated in the available evidence. This belief that Ptolemy himself was defensively minded went on to influence how people viewed the actions of his successors.

The string of territories that made up the Ptolemaic Empire would certainly have provided protection for Egypt and valuable resources but they could also serve as springboards for launching an attack. Focusing on the defensive value of these lands is I believe one of the assumptions that leads to the idea of a balance of power. Polybius seems to mention both the defensive and offensive potential of the empire. Before describing the overseas territories as something which “long ago strengthened their position by a ring of princedoms” another purpose is hinted at:

“because they ruled the territories of Coele Syria and of Cyprus the earlier Ptolemies had always been able to put pressure on the kings of Syria both by sea and by land”²⁹.

Cyprus, Asia Minor and Koile-Syria were all positions from which the Ptolemies could threaten the Seleukids. This is seen in practice during the Third Syrian War. This added to the Seleukid Empire's difficulties as keeping such a diverse and far-flung collection of territories together occupied most of their strategic focus. The Ptolemies were a consistent threat to the Seleukid west and frequently supported pretenders in Asia Minor to make things worse³⁰. None of these considerations excludes a defensive interpretation but the ring of territories protecting Egypt could just as equally threaten the Seleukids.

If we accept that aspects of Ptolemaic and Seleukid ideology and iconography acted against limits to empire and that the Ptolemaic Empire was not founded as a defensive and separatist project as well as the possibility that the territories had both defensive and offensive potential then it makes

28 Ellis, 1994, p46

29 Pol.5.34

30 Hölbl, 2001, p53

the examples to be discussed below easier to understand.

Fragmented as the evidence is the Third Syrian War is central to any attempt to determine the aims and ambitions of the Ptolemaic and Seleukid Empires. That this was the third such conflict in the little over thirty years since the deaths of the two dynasties' founders tell us of the lack of any stable peace between the two powers at this time. Whereas the previous rounds of conflict had focused on the regions where these two powers came into contact this war would range much further, reaching as far as Babylon.

It is difficult to describe such a move into the heart of an opponent's territory as in line with a defensive policy. Scholars who do generally believe in a defensive Ptolemaic policy have had to look for alternative explanations for the actions of Ptolemy III. The expedition into Mesopotamia can, for Hölbl, be “more accurately described as an exercise in plundering and pillaging”³¹. This may well have been a reason for the attack but it could just as well be the end result of the plan rather than its intention. Another approach to the expedition is similar to what has been mentioned above in relation to the career of Ptolemy I, that is to label the situation an aberration in an otherwise consistent policy. Grainger says that in pushing so far into the Seleukid Empire Ptolemy “discarded his dynasty's restraint” and may even have envisioned becoming a new Alexander³². Perhaps, just over thirty years since the death of the last of the companions of Alexander those ambitions had never truly disappeared but instead were just awaiting an opportunity.

The events of the Third Syrian War naturally draw the attention of those who argue for a change of view on the Ptolemies and the Hellenistic balance of power. Burstein's reading of events would suggest that large parts of our surviving evidence are based on pro-Ptolemaic accounts which sought to downplay the scale of Ptolemy's ambition once it was clear that any higher goals had not been achieved³³. Should this be true Burstein believes it would call into question the “scholarly consensus” on Ptolemaic imperial policy³⁴. An alternative is presented by Coşkun who following his reassessment of the Third Syrian War and the War of the Brothers gives as one of the war's causes “Euergetes' desire for military glory and territorial expansion”³⁵. Much depends then on the perception of Ptolemy's expedition and the potential motivations for it.

A large number of the existent references to the war carry a basically similar outline of events. In Appian, Polyaeus, Porphyry and Justin, Laodike is involved in some version of a plot which results in the death of Berenike and her son and this is followed by Ptolemy's arrival³⁶. In some accounts Berenike is able to gain support in the Seleukis and this smooths Ptolemy's arrival as cities

31 Hölbl, 2001, p50

32 Grainger, 2010, p161

33 Burstein, 2016, p85

34 Burstein, 2016, p83

35 Coşkun, 2018, p229

36 App.Syr.65-66; Polyaeus.Strat.8.50; Porph. BNJ 260 F49a; Justin.27.1

go over to him, however, Berenike and her son had been murdered by that time. Burstein's suggestion that much of the source material ultimately rests on the historian Phylarchus who may have taken a pro-Ptolemaic view could offer an explain for this line in our accounts³⁷. The idea that Ptolemy arrived in order to assist his sister comes across as a more favourable public explanation for his invasion than simple outright aggression. Perhaps a more direct Ptolemaic version of the stories is found in the papyrus W.Chr.1 which has a Ptolemaic fleet called in to support Berenike and being welcomed before the expedition goes up to see the queen³⁸. That Ptolemy acted to aid his sister and then launched his attack on the Seleukid Empire to avenge her death is mentioned by both Polybius and Appian³⁹. Justin builds on this theme by saying that such was the anger of the inhabitants of Syria at the murders, this time committed by Seleukos II, Ptolemy was easily able to become master of the realm before having to turn back⁴⁰.

The presentation of Ptolemy's actions as justified revenge following a series of murders would at the same time be a useful excuse and a way of not portraying the war as an attempted conquest which ultimately failed. Another important element of the stories is presented by Polyaeus who has Ptolemy arrive after the death of Berenike and maintain the pretence that she continues to live and dispatch letters which eases his progress and grants an effortless march⁴¹. Such an account suggests that Ptolemy needed the potential legitimacy that Berenike and her son could bring in order to carry out his invasion. This argues that after several decades of existence there was enough loyalty in these empires that conquest could only hope to succeed with a veneer of legitimacy, which Ptolemy attempted to secure, and that this expedition was not merely a raid for plunder.

Ptolemy may have had to tread carefully in his presentation of his actions and in order to gain support in the region but the same nuanced message was unnecessary back home. The Adulis inscription described the invasion in the words of Hölbl as “a pharonic enterprise in the manner of the eighteenth dynasty”⁴². Back in Egypt Ptolemy had no need to present specific justifications instead he could be the conquering Pharaoh that subdued every country up to Baktria. The message is similar to that found in Catullus 66 which is believed to have been based on a work of Callimachus⁴³. There too Syria is conquered, the Euphrates crossed and India viewed, and all with barely any losses⁴⁴. Based on these fragments of evidence whatever happened Ptolemy gloried in it.

What we can reconstruct of events also points to conquest. The sheer speed of events during Ptolemy's expedition is something that has been noted by Coşkun⁴⁵. Both previous kings had died in

37 Burstein, 2016, p79

38 W.Chr.1

39 Pol.5.58; App.Syr 65-66

40 Justin.27.1

41 Polyaeus.Strat.8.50

42 OGIS 54, Hölbl, 2001, 49

43 Burstein, 2016, p81

44 Catull.66; Hölbl, 2001, p50

45 Coşkun, 2018, p198

246BCE and yet in that same year Ptolemy III was not only prepared for war but was able to reach Babylon by the beginning of the following year⁴⁶. The speed suggests plans were already in motion for a significant deployment somewhere, perhaps in the Aegean⁴⁷. Ptolemy's subsequent march would certainly have been made easier if Coşkun is correct in moving forward Seleukos II defeat at Ankyra⁴⁸. Coşkun also doubts a central element of the Ptolemaic story, namely that the invasion was carried out in Berenike's name. Pointing out that this is not how the story is presented in the Adulis inscription nor would it be likely to have been believed in Antioch where there must surely have been a decent chance that news of the deaths leaked out⁴⁹. Side-lining the need for a pretence, Ptolemy, already prepared for a campaign, may have saw an opportunity in 246BCE and seized it. Nor does it seem that the invasion was as smooth as some sources suggest. Babylonian accounts presented by Clancier talk of fighting in the city in January 247BCE⁵⁰.

Ultimately whichever version of events is supported the implications for this current discussion are much the same. Whether Ptolemy was responding to calls for assistance from Berenike and her supporters or took advantage of Seleukos' absence and defeat in Asia Minor you are left with a king who saw an opportunity and took it. The final result of the war, with the Ptolemies having taken coastal positions such as Ephesus and Seleukia-in-Pieria, fits the pattern of a thalassocracy concerned primarily with the gradual collection of ports. However, if the final result fits a defensive pattern its conduct does not. Ptolemy's seizing of the opportunity in front of him and his later presentation of this at home as a glorious conquest fits the mode of action seen with the earlier successors of Alexander.

Ptolemy III's expedition into Mesopotamia was not an isolated incident. In the Sixth Syrian War(170-168BCE) a similar situation occurred, this time with the roles reversed as a Seleukid king campaigned in two successive years in Egypt and reached the walls of Alexandria. In the decades between these events Antiochus III had conquered Koile-Syria having made, according to Polybius, an agreement with the Antigonid king Philip V to divide up the Ptolemaic empire⁵¹. The nature and reality of such an agreement has been disputed but either way following the Fourth and Fifth Syrian Wars the Seleukids achieved the goal of conquering the territories Seleukos I originally thought belonged to him⁵². This however, did not stop the wars.

As with the previous examination of the actions of Ptolemy III the key questions here are around the perception and possible motivations for the invasions of Antiochus IV. Once again there are parallels with that prior situation as interpretations can differ from the possibility of outright

46 Clancier, 2012

47 Coşkun, 2018, p199

48 Coşkun, 2018

49 Coşkun, 2018, p215-218

50 Clancier, 2012, p20

51 Pol.15.20

52 Magie, 1939

conquest to an essentially defensive and limited enterprise, this time with the Seleukids being the defensively minded party. The latter approach is in part expressed by Morgan and Grainger who see the Roman terms imposed after the Day of Eleusis as essentially fulfilling some of Antiochus' defensive needs and extracting him from a difficult situation⁵³. This view finds support in Polybius and Diodorus. Polybius has Antiochus as "eager to defend" Syria while Diodorus positions the Ptolemaic court as planning to recover the lost territory⁵⁴.

However, things had changed since the Third War and along with a need for security guarantees for Koile-Syria Grainger has Antiochus hoping to use the Seleukid family connection in Alexandria which began with the marriage of Kleopatra following the Fifth Syrian War to have Egypt as a sort of client state⁵⁵. Client status is a form of domination and it is interesting that from this war onwards Grainger suggests the idea that the two kingdoms were now seeking to absorb each other as the threat of Rome loomed ever larger over them both⁵⁶. While not disagreeing I would contend that the possibility of one kingdom conquering the other had existed since the beginning. That Antiochus' aim was, at least, to force the Ptolemies into client status is a view supported by Hölbl and Rostovtzeff⁵⁷.

The possibility that Antiochus was aiming for some form of domination over Egypt rather than just plundering or acting merely from defensive needs is a way in which this incident is treated differently from the war discussed above. I would argue that there was not really much difference between the actions of Antiochus IV and Ptolemy III. Due to the greater extent of our sources we do get one explicit statement of grand ambitions, surprisingly given subsequent events, from the Ptolemaic court. Diodorus tells us that the two chief ministers responsible for launching the war claimed they would not just reclaim the lost territory but take all of Antiochus' realm⁵⁸. This statement should perhaps be treated with caution as Diodorus places the incident in a context of two inexperienced ministers making extravagant and ill-conceived claims which will quickly be revealed as hollow boasting. If there is some truth to the story, then we have an occasion when even from a disadvantageous position claims of all-out conquest were publicly stated.

Much as we saw when Ptolemy III's campaign was presented as an act of revenge for his murdered sister, Antiochus too seems to have operated under a pretext. A number of sources saw through Antiochus' claim to be assisting his nephew, the rightful king. Diodorus, Livy and Porphyry all state Antiochus was using the young Ptolemy merely as a cover to conquer Egypt⁵⁹. Livy specifically says this pretext was used in Antiochus' communication with the Greek world. It is within the

53 Morgan, 1990, p38; Grainger, 2010, p308

54 Pol.28.1; Diod.Sic.30.2

55 Grainger, 2010, p289

56 Grainger, 2010, p290

57 Hölbl, 2001, p147; Rostovtzeff, 1941, p65

58 Diod.Sic.30.16

59 Diod.Sic.31.1; Livy 45.11; Porph. BNJ 260 F49a

context of such a communication strategy that we should place Polybius' record of Antiochus' remark to ambassadors that "the kingdom belonged to the elder Ptolemy"⁶⁰. Such statements may have been necessary not because outright conquest was unthinkable but because Antiochus wished to present as mild a face as possible to the Greek world while hoping to avoid provoking Rome⁶¹. In areas where there was less need for the Seleukid king to provide a pretext we get a blunter view with 1 Maccabees simply stating that "he decided to conquer Egypt and rule that country as well as Syria"⁶².

It is also possible to see an Antiochus who was well prepared for his attempts on Egypt. Fischer-Bovet credits Antiochus with a good level of preparation⁶³. Pointing to the fact that both Antiochus' incursions were successful, barring Alexandria which was an obstacle no invader had yet faced, and efforts were made to win over the inhabitants while Seleukid control was felt in a number of areas⁶⁴. Lorber notes that the available Egyptian evidence indicts that this presence was not welcomed in many cases⁶⁵. This was perhaps not the whole story. Lorber's analysis of the Ptolemaic style bronzes minted by Antiochus suggests they were used to pay Egyptian rebels in contact with the Seleukids and Livy's account has Antiochus being welcomed in parts of the country⁶⁶.

A significant question for assessing Antiochus' motives is the question of whether or not he had himself crowned in Memphis. Porphyry states clearly that Antiochus proceeded to Memphis and was crowned in "the ancestral custom of the Egyptians"⁶⁷. In much the same way that Ptolemy III struck at the symbolic heart of Seleukid rule with his attacks on Seleukia and Babylon this would have been a significant blow to the prestige of the Ptolemies. Fischer-Bovet backs up her view that Antiochus was crowned in Egypt with a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus dated using the Seleukid era under the name King Antiochus⁶⁸.

Whatever Antiochus' intentions Roman intervention soon put an end to the invasion. The Roman factor alone is good enough reason to explain any possible need for a pretext, the emphasis on defensive needs and the possible desire to leave the Ptolemaic court in existence but subordinated to the Seleukids. Despite this unfavourable geopolitical environment there are good indications that Antiochus was prepared to go further and that people at the time, and later historians, saw through the pretexts.

The actions of Ptolemy III and Antiochus IV fit better with the first generation of Alexander's successors than with any notions of a balance of power. When considered next to the ideological

60 Pol.28.23

61 Hölbl, 2001, p147

62 1 Macc.16

63 Fischer-Bovet, 2014, p236

64 Fischer-Bovet, 2014

65 Lorber, 2007, p39

66 Lorber, 2007, p41; Livy 45.12

67 Porph. BNJ 260 F49a

68 Fischer-Bovet, 2014, p227

and iconographic elements that point to the importance of both Alexander and the idea of conquest as well as a reassessment of one the dynastic founders such actions no longer need to be seen as isolated and unusual. Instead they accord with the values and practices of a world which never truly forgot the ambitions and scale of the life of Alexander the Great.

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