CHAPTER TEN
THE REVERSAL, THE PTOLEMAIC COLLAPSE

From the time the issue of the possession of Koile Syria and Palestine arose, Ptolemaic Egypt had been the more powerful of the two states contending for the prize. Its fleet patrolled the eastern Mediterranean from the Aegean to Cyrenaica; its army was powerful enough to deter Seleukid attacks in Syria, or defeat them. Its policy was to maintain that position, and so its strategic policy was defensive in general, though offensive in detail. The major test of this policy came in 246, when the Seleukid kingdom collapsed; Ptolemy III paraded through the kingdom’s centre, and must have been tempted to seize large areas, but then he withdrew. He left the kingdom broken into fragments, some of which were annexed, though none of them were large, or even vital.

The result of this success was complacency, and the result of that complacency was near defeat in the Fourth Syrian War. After the victory in the battle of Raphia, however, the Ptolemaic regime could once more resort to its policy of maintaining its supremacy by doing as little as possible, much assisted by the indifference of Ptolemy Philopator, and the necessary unadventurousness of Sosibios’ regime. It had been a very close battle, but complacency was clearly justified: if utterly unmilitary kings like Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV could win battles and break kingdoms, the Ptolemaic state was hardly threatened.

Yet, if the peace treaty is considered without reference to what Antiochos had done militarily before the battle, he could point to the retention of Ptolemaic territory and claim overall victory. The Seleukid kingdom, by contrast with the Ptolemaic, was in the hands of a vigorous and capable king, and his defeat had not shaken his regime at all. The contrast may be epitomized in the kings’ different reactions to having an overbearing minister controlling affairs: Antiochos got rid of his, Ptolemy allowed Sosibios to continue in office. Not unconnected with this, in the next decade and a half, the positions of the two kingdoms were reversed; by the end of that time the Seleukid kingdom was stronger than ever, and the Ptolemaic kingdom was in desperate straits.

For the moment, however, Ptolemy basked in his victory. He spent several months in Koile Syria dealing with the negotiations for peace
and sorting out local problems. The people of the towns and cities he re-occupied are said to have demonstrated their attachment to the Ptolemaic royal house, though the enthusiasm may also have been aimed at deterring punishment, for none of the ‘liberated’ towns had resisted conquest very strongly. An inscription set up in the Bekaa by an Alexandrian, dedicated to ‘King Ptolemy and Queen Arsinoe, the Philopator Gods’ is an indication, but to be on the safe side the dedication added Sarapis and Isis to his gods. Then Philopator went back to Egypt, where he enjoyed further celebrations, and was generous to his army, but then he sank back into lethargy, leaving the work to one who clearly enjoyed it, Sosibios.

Complacency was further justified because the peace agreement meant that both kings had pledged their honour to maintain the peace between them. Antiochos could no longer attack Ptolemy’s lands. Neither could Ptolemy attack Antiochos, of course, though this was not the main issue. The character of Ptolemy gave further assurance of Egypt’s peaceable intentions, plus the fact that a good deal of Ptolemaic attention was fixed on events in Greece, where a very complicated situation had developed and where several wars being fought simultaneously. Antiochos was not so intimately involved in affairs in Greece and the Aegean. So, free of worries about Egypt and not involved in Europe, Antiochos was now free to indulge in other adventures. The peace between the kings, of course and as usual, did not extend to the areas of diplomacy and intrigue, and in the next decade both rulers used their influence and their wealth to attempt to undermine the other’s policies. Antiochos’ first priority after the peace with Ptolemy was to deal with Akhaios.

Akhaios’ kingdom was a state which was constantly fighting for room. He was at peace with Attalos I only for a short time, he attempted to intervene in a war in the Aegean, he sent his army on a campaign into Pisidia and Pamphylia. In all these enterprises, he had little to show for all his efforts, though Polybios suggests greater success, probably the result of Akhaiid propaganda. His main difficulty was the smallness of his military manpower base. In his campaign into Pisidia, for example, he

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1 Polybios 5.86.8–10; cf. Walbank 1.615–616.
3 W. Huss, Untersuchungen zur Aussenpolitik Ptolemaios IV, Munich 1976.
4 An example is Polybios’ report that Akhaios ‘subjugated … most of Pamphylia’, (Polybios 5.77.1), but no other evidence exists for his rule there, and an alternative interpretation is that the Pamphylians combined into an alliance which froze him out (J.D. Grainger, The Cities of Pamphylia, Oxford, 2009).