CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MUTUAL TROUBLES AND A NEW AGENDA

The victory of Antiochos IV in Egypt in 168 had unsettling results in both kingdoms, though more so in the Ptolemaic state than in his own. Both dynasties had, by this time, quite separately from the repeated wars between them, reached a position when the occupation of the throne was in dispute, though in 168 the issue had become much more urgent in the Ptolemaic kingdom than in the Seleukid. These dynastic disputes were wounds which were self-inflicted in both kingdoms; but the problems they produced were magnified by the results of this latest war; and it was the internal dynastic disputes which eventually contributed very strongly to the next round of fighting.

The Sixth War had seen a clear escalation of the damage inflicted or intended by both sides. It had been the intention of the Ptolemaic regents to destroy the Seleukid kingdom. They may not have formulated their aim in quite those terms, but that would have been the necessary result if they had succeeded in repossessing Koile Syria (which would have included the re-acquisition of city of Seleukeia-in-Pieria). Antiochos IV had not at any time intended to inflict that sort of permanent damage on the Ptolemaic state—that is, it had not been his intention to annex the kingdom, beyond Pelusion, but, until the Roman intervention rescued him from the dilemma he had got into, that would have been the result of the invasions, given the obstinacy of the Ptolemaic government. Had Popillius Laenas not turned up, Antiochos would have had to besiege and capture Alexandria, and then either annex Egypt, for none of the Ptolemaic authorities was prepared to accept any lesser terms he might suggest, or establish a very close suzerainty over a rump royal government.

Popillius Laenas’ achievement, therefore, had been to rescue both kingdoms from their war. By insisting on Antiochos’ withdrawal he had preserved the Ptolemaic kingdom, but at the same time he had insisted that the Ptolemies recognize the reality and permanence of the conquest of Koile Syria. This was not done for altruistic motives, of course, but rather from a wish to maintain the separation of the two states. Rome had no wish to see them united into a single kingdom, which would make the joint state far too rich and powerful an entity, and so far too threatening,
for the Roman Senate to accept. And yet, another result of the Sixth War, precisely because such an outcome was so feared and forbidden by Rome, was to put that very idea on to the political agenda. The Ptolemaic regents had gone as far as intending the destruction of the Seleukid state; Antiochos, by his military triumph, had shown that the destruction of the Ptolemaic kingdom was possible; the union of the two was therefore quite possible. Given the obvious and overwhelming power of Rome, such a union was something both Seleukids and Ptolemies inevitably contemplated. From the time of the Sixth War onwards, therefore, the new agenda for the Syrian wars was precisely that: the union of the two kingdoms; it was also a policy against which others worked—notably, of course, Rome, but also more local elements in each of the kingdoms. It was the impossibility of recruiting all these participants into agreement which brought final destruction to the kingdoms.

For the present, immediately after the Seleukid withdrawal, the kingdoms turned away from their mutual antipathy and attended to their internal problems, which had been both inherited from the events before the war and aggravated by it. Egypt, still hardly recovered from the great native rebellions, had been further damaged by the two Seleukid invasions, by the civil strife ignited by them, and was to be damaged still more by the distrust sown between the two kings. A joint monarchy was always liable to be difficult to operate, though many examples showed that it was perfectly possible, but the two kings began in mutual antipathy. Further both kings had had their brief periods of sole power during the war and it seems certain that both wanted to resume that position.

For a time after Antiochos IV’s withdrawal, however, the kings were compelled to work together. No doubt there were pressures on them to cooperate, not least from their sister, who was almost a third joint monarch. Ptolemy VIII Euergetes was some years younger than his brother, and his period of sole kingship during the war had been even more nominal than that of Ptolemy VI. So real, visible, disputes between them did not arise until Euergetes was old enough, at about sixteen years (in 164), to act for himself.

Another factor in compelling royal cooperation was unrest in the chora, in which troubles in both Upper and Lower Egypt are known. There are signs of trouble in the Fayum, the large reclaimed area thickly

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2 Viesse, 27–45, details the numerous problems of the 160s.