Ptolemy VI had been very successful in his military operations inside Egypt, and in his diplomacy in Rome and Syria and Koile Syria. But there were a long list of loose ends which would ultimately undo all his work: he had refrained from killing his brother Euergetes; he had sponsored Alexander Balas as king in the Seleukid kingdom, but Alexander was less than energetic, and two of the sons of Demetrios I had escaped the cull of his relatives; Rome, when the Senate could pay attention, was not going to be pleased to see the increase in Ptolemy’s power. He still controlled the three posts in the Aegean—Itanos, Thera, Methana—which could allow him to interfere in what was now already a Roman area if he chose.

For the present Rome had other preoccupations: the Third Punic War broke out in 149, Macedon rebelled in 148, and the Akhaian League was proving recalcitrant, while the war in Spain was a continuing drain on Roman strength. So for several years the crisis in the western Mediterranean allowed the parallel crises in the east to go on without Roman interference. It may be possible to put it another way: it was Rome’s preoccupation which had allowed the various players in the east to indulge in their own crisis; this formulation, however, besides being far too Roman-centred, would presuppose that Rome had been interested earlier, for which there is little evidence; also, the crisis in the east had been going on and developing from 154 or even earlier, with only marginal attention from Rome even before it was engulfed in more immediate problems. The affairs of the eastern Mediterranean were more or less autonomous at this period—and, of course, Rome had no interest in, or apparently no knowledge of, affairs even further to the east.

The crisis in the east was much more serious, in fact, than the wars of Rome in the west. The civil war in the Seleukid kingdom gave the vigorous Parthian king, Mithradates I, the opportunity to invade Media. He had been preoccupied by a war with Baktria until about 150, and coins from Ecbatana indicate that Alexander still controlled that city
and its mint in 148.\(^1\) Further, a dedication to Herakles Kallinikos (‘the victor’) was carved in that year above the road through the pass of Bisitun which leads from Babylonia through the Zagros Mountains to Iran.\(^2\) Yet such a dedication—by a subordinate of a satrap whose victory was celebrated and commemorated—also indicates that there had been fighting on a fairly large scale in Iran, where the main enemy was the Parthian king.

This monument indicates that the Seleukid government as a whole did not neglect Iran, for the satrap Kleomenes clearly had enough forces to hold his own at first. But Alexander as king had other concerns in the west of his kingdom, which may well have prevented him from attending to the east, though his reputation for pleasure-seeking and laziness suggests he left more distant concerns to others.

For Alexander Balas, however, the main problem was the gathering strength of Demetrios, the eldest surviving son of Demetrios I. Based at Knidos in Karia, he had by 148 collected a considerable force of mercenaries. Aged no more than thirteen in 148, Demetrios was presumably assisted, if not controlled, by others who knew where the soldiers could be hired and could provide the necessary force and command skills. The source of his finance was partly a considerable sum in gold which his father had sent with him, though it may be that the mercenaries were persuaded to enlist largely on a promise of later payment. This recruitment must have begun soon after the death of Demetrios I in 150, and by spring 147 the new army of Demetrios the Younger was ready. That is, his existence and growth had been a constant threat to King Alexander in Syria since his victory, and had pinned him down in Syria in anticipation of being attacked.

Demetrios had contracted with a Cretan force during 148, which was commanded by a mercenary captain called Lasthenes. This army landed in Kilikia next year.\(^3\) Other preparations had also been made—there had been plenty of recent examples of how to do this. The governor of Koile Syria, Apollonios Taos, came out in Demetrios’ favour.\(^4\) Alexander had been in Phoenicia, probably at Ptolemais-Ake, when Demetrios

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