Chapter 10

Revolts under the Ptolemies: A Paleoclimatological Perspective

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The river, since it will not have sufficient water, will flood, but (only) a little so that scorched will be the land... but unnaturally. For in the time of the Typhonians people will say 'wretched Egypt, you have been maltreated by the terrible malefactors who have committed evil against you.' And the sun will darken as it will not be willing to observe the evils in Egypt. The earth will not respond to seeds...

The Oracle of the Potter

Valuable insights and a comparative framework have been offered by scholars such as Brian McGing to further our understanding of some of the most important events in Ptolemaic history, namely the intermittent revolts and other forms of social unrest that punctuated the history of Ptolemaic Egypt, 305–30 BCE.1 There is much we know about this unrest, beginning with a basic chronology from literary and documentary sources. Often, however, we lack certainty of the exact timing and spatial evolution of these events. For we are dealing not only with singular self-contained events, but with consecutive and sometimes overlapping series of social disturbances of varying intensities and durations, some long-lasting, others short-lived, with different geographic extents, documented in varying degrees of fidelity throughout the centuries of Ptolemaic rule.

Our goal in this chapter is to outline the main explanations offered to date for the causes of unrest in the Ptolemaic period, before proceeding to contribute a new perspective that implicates volcanically-induced shocks to the agriculturally-critical summer Nile flood as potential triggers in many revolts.

To date, while the causes of unrest have been debated, they are understood by most scholars as springing from nationalism, economic problems or some combination of these and other factors. Ethnic tension there surely was, and it is well documented. Such tension was likely exacerbated by the new fiscal system that organized tax collection according to ethnic/occupation groups, and one money tax, the salt tax, privileged “Hellenes” as a separate class. But whether national feeling among a majority of Egyptians had evolved toward an abstract conception of “Egypt” is an idea that must be engaged with critically, and so too the role of ethnic tensions as a trigger, as opposed to an exacerbating factor, for revolt and other forms of local, regional or statewide unrest.

The largely accepted historical arc of the rise and decline of the Ptolemaic state is based on the Greek historian Polybius. That framework posits that during the reign of the first three Ptolemaic kings, 305–222 BCE, Egypt was generally stable, and politically and economically successful. Beginning with the reign of Ptolemy IV in 221 BCE, the dynasty began to decline, effectively becoming a Roman protectorate after Antiochus IV’s second invasion in 168 BCE. Egypt was formally made a Roman province after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BCE. The cause of Ptolemaic decline has often been discussed, and it is generally thought that state power waned because of a combination of internal problems (ethnic and potentially nationalist tension between Greeks and Egyptians; over-extraction of resources leading to rebellion, currency inflation), the depravity of the kings themselves, and the increasing political and military domination of the Mediterranean by Rome. Polybius adds political neglect, moral decay, and Ptolemy IV’s love of opulence and a succession of kings (some of them quite young) after him who were in the grip of nefarious courtiers. Added to this combination of stressors, it has been suggested by several scholars that a sense of Egyptian nationalism that rose up at opportune moments to attempt to throw off Ptolemaic oppression was also a driver of internal unrest (Green, 1991:364; McGing, 1997).

### Narrative Sequence of Social Unrest

The first sign of documented unrest in Ptolemaic Egypt comes at the beginning of the Third Syrian War fought against the Seleukids (Veïsse, 2004; Grainger, 2010:163–64). According to Justin, *Epit.* 27.1.9, a “domestic sedition” required

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3 Polybius 5.34 describes the political decline of the Ptolemies beginning with Ptolemy IV. For a good historical overview, see Hölbl (2001, esp. p. 127ff.).