Before presenting the main characteristics of Philadelphus’ foreign policy I would like to contemplate one of the oddities of studying the foreign policy or ‘empire’ of the Ptolemies.1 Quite differently from the empire of the Seleucids, the interests of the Ptolemies outside Egypt are often observed and analysed as separate from their activities in Egypt, even when scholars such as Tarn or Rostovtzeff have tried to explain Ptolemaic foreign policy with terms such as offensive or defensive imperialism.2 Few works on the Ptolemaic state have included a study of its foreign possessions and dependencies and even fewer have used the evidence found outside Egypt to help build the picture of an empire that stretched far beyond the boundaries of Egypt. The administrations of Syria or Cyprus are seldom considered as part of a Ptolemaic state, and are instead often included in the study of Ptolemaic foreign policy. And yet the English editor for Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches has chosen, rather significantly, to translate Hölbl’s excellent monograph as The History of the Ptolemaic Empire, recalling Mahaffy’s title in 1895 The Empire of the Ptolemies. If the narrative development of Hölbl’s work does offer a comprehensive overview of Ptolemaic activities outside Egypt, in other words of their foreign policy, evidence for the royal cult in Methymna or Cyrene, or material related to the Ptolemaic court active in Cyprus, are hardly exploited in constructing what we are to understand by the Ptolemaic ‘state’ or ‘kingdom’. There is a difficulty in finding the right terminology for defining the political and cultural extension of the Ptolemies beyond the Egyptian realm. This difficulty is very well illustrated in Polybius’ famous account on the foreign policy of the first three Ptolemies. Ptolemaic foreign policy is transcribed in terms of action by verbs, and not by a noun that would identify a united area.3

1 I would like to thank Paul McKechnie for inviting me to the conference. It was a great disappointment not to have been able to attend and I am grateful to Pat Wheatley for reading this paper in my absence, and to the participants for their comments.
2 Tarn at Adcock 1928, 699; Rostovtzeff 1941 vol. 1, 29.
3 Polybius 5.34.2–9; this geopolitical perspective may have led Polybius to omit Cyrenaica: Pédech 1964, 552. Compare with Strabo 17.1.5: ‘the early writers gave
they had been always able to menace the kings of Syria both by sea and land, by ruling over Coele-Syria and Cyprus, and their sphere of control also extended over the lesser kingdoms of Asia Minor and the islands, since they were masters over strong places and harbours all along the coast from Pamphylia to the Hellespont and the neighbourhood of Lysimachia; while by their rule over Ainos, Maroneia and other cities even more distant, they exercised a supervision over the affairs of Thrace and Macedonia.

They govern, they rule (κυριεύοντες); their influence expands as far as (παρέκειτον, which also conveys the idea of ‘establishing contacts with’) regions where they are the masters (δεσποινοντες); they exercise a supervision over affairs (ἐπήδευσαν… πράγματα) thanks to their command / their rule (κυριεύοντες). Polybius clearly divides the areas of Ptolemaic influence into three groups: the possessions (Coele-Syria and Cyprus) whose aim is to threaten the Seleucid empire and secure access to Egypt both by land and by sea; the Ptolemaic thalassocracy (from Pamphylia to Hellespont; Lysimacheia and the Aegean islands) and the expansion to Thrace and Macedonia. The vocabulary used by Polybius indicates that their influence was determined by different objectives and expressed different forms of power, and that control over regions such as Asia Minor and Hellespont resulted in the implementation of relationships with local rulers. It is interesting that the word ἀριθμός, which could be tolerated as a compromise between ‘state’ and ‘exercise of power’, and is in fact partly used in relation to Lesbos when designated as τῶν ὑπαριθμάτων, is only used by Polybius to describe Ptolemaic rule in Egypt itself. F. Millar pointed out that in the case of Rome, the name Egypt to only the part of the country that was inhabited and watered by the Nile, beginning at the region of Syene and extending to the sea; but the later writers down to the present have added on the eastern side approximately all the parts between the Arabian Gulf and the Nile (the Aethiopians do not use the Red Sea at all), and on the western side the parts extending as far as the oases, and on the sea-coast the parts extending from the Canopic mouth to Catabathmus and the domain of the Cyrenaecans. For the kings after Ptolemy became so powerful that they took possession of Cyrenaecas itself and even united Cyprus with Egypt. The Romans, who succeeded the Ptolemies, separated their three dominions and have kept Egypt within its former limits’ [translation from Loeb edition].