The past half century has seen an outpouring of scholarship on the foreign policy of the early Ptolemies. Important studies have been produced by Édouard Will, Roger Bagnall, Werner Huss, and Brigitte Beyer-Rottho to mention only the most significant. As a result, the principal goals of Ptolemaic foreign policy have become clear. In order to forestall attack on the Egyptian core of their empire Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III sought to extend Egypt’s defensive perimeter in the Aegean while simultaneously disrupting cooperation between the Antigonids and the Seleucids by securing bases around the coasts of Anatolia and in the Aegean islands and supporting states hostile to Macedon in Greece. Understandably, the main focus of recent scholarship, therefore, has been western Asia and the Aegean. Early Ptolemaic policy in western Asia and the Aegean, however, is only part of the story of Egyptian foreign policy. Largely ignored has been early Ptolemaic activity in another theatre: Nubia. As was true in western Asia and the Aegean, the formative period for Ptolemaic policy in Nubia was the reign of Ptolemy II.

When Ptolemy II intervened in Nubia in the 270s BC, he was following in the footsteps of his Pharaonic predecessors, whose involvement in Nubia dated back to the beginning of Egyptian history. Like them, Ptolemy II found both opportunities and challenges in the region. As the title of William Y. Adam’s magisterial history of Nubia puts

---

1 I would like to thank Professor J.T. Roberts for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article. Unattributed translations are by the author. FHN = Tormod Eide et al., Fontes historiae Nubiorum: Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region between the Eighth Century BC and the Sixth Century AD, vol. 2 (Bergen, 1996), PP = W. Peremans and E. van ’t Dack (eds.), Prosopographia Ptolemaica (9 vols., Louvain, 1950–1981); Urkunden = Kurt Sethe, Hieroglyphische Urkunden der griechisch-römischen Zeit (Leipzig, 1904).
3 Adams 1977. At present evidence is lacking for the use in the Hellenistic period of two other routes to the African interior: the Nile to Niger trans-Saharan route whose
it, Nubia was Egypt’s “corridor to Africa”. Through Nubia, Egypt received a large variety of sub-Saharan African goods including gold, slaves, exotic woods, and ivory and other animal products that were essential to the lifestyle of the Egyptian elite and religious cult. Politically, however, Nubia, or more precisely, the Kingdom of Kush located in the central Sudan, was also Egypt’s principal rival for domination of the Upper Nile Valley and sometimes of Egypt itself. Traditionally, rulers of Egypt sought to secure access to the products of Nubia and security for Egypt by firmly occupying northern Nubia and forcing peoples further south in the region to recognize Egyptian suzerainty; and the evidence suggests that Ptolemy II followed a similar policy.

The potential for conflict in Nubia was real. The Hellenistic kings of Kush viewed themselves as the heirs of the Nubian kings of Egypt’s twenty-fifth dynasty. Like them, they styled themselves Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt, and they hoped to restore their ancestors’ preeminence in lower Nubia. Twice already in the fourth century BC kings of Kush had taken advantage of Egyptian weakness to attempt to reassert their authority in lower Nubia. So, early in the century, Harsiyotef had campaigned as far as Syene and asserted his authority over local rulers in lower Nubia. Again, shortly before, or possibly during, the reign of Alexander, Nastasen repeated Harsiyotef’s campaign, imposing his authority on local chieftains as far north as Abou Simbel. Not surprisingly, therefore, even before Ptolemy II intervened in Nubia, both Alexander and Ptolemy I had both involved themselves in the region, the former dispatching a scouting expedition during his stay in Egypt under the pretext of searching for the sources of the Nile; and the latter campaigning in Nubia, while he was still officially only satrap of Egypt.

Detailed reconstruction of Ptolemy II’s activities in Nubia is unfortunately not possible. As is true of so many aspects of Hellenistic history, the problem lies in the sources. These were once abundant and varied.