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## THE VISIT OF THE ROMAN EMBASSY TO EGYPT IN 200 BC. AN INTERPRETATION OF LIVY'S ACCOUNT

*Abstract.* – In Book XXXI of his *History of Rome from Its Foundation*, Livy mentions the visit of Roman envoys to Egypt, dated to 200 BC. According to the historian, the Romans expressed their gratitude to the Ptolemies for the support they provided to the Republic during the most critical period of the Second Punic War. This expression of gratitude can be interpreted as a subtle hint that Egypt's later foreign policy had been detrimental to Roman interests. This stance allowed Rome to effectively abandon Ptolemy V to his fate during the Fifth Syrian War.

*Key words.* – State of the Ptolemies, Fifth Syrian war, Second Macedonian war, Roman diplomacy, Livy

The year 200 BC proved to be pivotal in shaping the future political landscape of the three major Hellenistic powers: the state of Ptolemies, the Seleucid Empire, and Antigonid Macedonia. This year marked a decisive turning point in the Syrian War (202–195 BC) with the crushing defeat of the Ptolemaic army by Seleucid king Antiochus III at the Battle of Panium;<sup>1</sup> it also saw the beginning of the Second Macedonian War (200–197 BC), which significantly weakened the power and influence of the third of the aforementioned Hellenistic states.<sup>2</sup> This latter conflict indirectly relates to the episode we are concerned with, briefly described in Book XXXI of Livy's *History of Rome from Its Foundation*.

In 201/200 BC, the Romans began diplomatic preparations for their upcoming war against Macedonian king Philip V. Specifically, they sought to persuade the Seleucid king Antiochus III to refrain from interfering in the conflict<sup>3</sup> and, with minimal effort, to refresh their

<sup>1</sup> On this war in general and on the Battle of Panium in particular, see: Grainger 2010, 245–272; Johstono 2018, 162–187.

<sup>2</sup> On this war, see: Hammond – Walbank 1988, 416–447; Eckstein 2008, 273–305; Worthington 2023, 102–150; Iliev 2023, 87–108.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Walbank 1967, 533–534; Ager 1996, 166–167; Hölbl 2001, 137.

friendly relations with Ptolemaic Egypt (see below). As part of this strategy, a Roman embassy visited Alexandria in 200 BC, consisting of Gaius Claudius Nero, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, and Publius Sempronius Tuditanus (Polyb. XVI. 27; Liv. XXXI. 2. 3–4).<sup>4</sup> Livy, who paid particular attention to this episode, reports it as follows:

“Interim ad Ptolomaeum Aegypti regem legati tres missi, C. Claudius Nero, M. Aemilius Lepidus, P. Sempronius Tuditanus, ut nuntiarent victum Hannibalem Poenosque et gratias agerent regi quod in rebus dubiis, cum finitimi etiam socii Romanos desererent, in fide mansisset, et peterent ut, si coacti iniuriis bellum adversus Philippum suscepissent, pristinum animum erga populum Romanum conservaret.”<sup>5</sup>

Of particular interest is the Roman envoys' mention of Egypt's services to the *quirites*<sup>6</sup> during their struggle with Hannibal, i.e., the Second Punic War (218–201 BC).<sup>7</sup> In essence, the envoys emphasized that Egypt had supported Rome not throughout the entire conflict but only during the Republic's most critical period (see below). Otherwise, the passage in Livy's work might have read: “...et gratias agerent regi quod etiam in rebus dubiis, cum finitimi socii Romanos desererent, in fide mansisset...”. To understand the subtlety of this diplomatic maneuver, it is necessary to briefly discuss Egypt's position during the Second Punic War.

At first glance, it seems that in its relations with the key participants of the conflict (Rome and Carthage) Egypt, as in the First Punic War,<sup>8</sup> pursued a policy of unconditional neutrality. For instance, in 216 BC, Ptolemy IV granted political asylum to Decius Magius, the leader

<sup>4</sup> On the various hypotheses regarding the more precise dating of the visit by the aforementioned embassy to Alexandria, see. Walbank 1967, 533–534; Briscoe 1973, 56–58; Will 1982, 119–121; Meadows 1993, 40–60; Ager 1996, 165–167; Lampela 1998, 77–86; Hölbl 2001, 137; Huss 2001, 496–497; Eckstein 2008, 276–278; Zanin 2024, 171–172, 206–218, 331. On the hypercritical doubt about the historicity of this episode, see. Grainger 2017, 178.

<sup>5</sup> Liv. XXXI. 2. 3–4: “Meanwhile, C. Claudius Nero, M. Aemilius Lepidus and P. Sempronius Tuditanus were sent on a mission to Ptolemy, king of Egypt, to announce the final defeat of Hannibal and the Carthaginians and to thank the king for having remained a staunch friend to Rome at a critical time, when even her nearest allies deserted her. They were further to request him, in case Philip's aggressions compelled them to declare war against him, that he would maintain his old friendly attitude towards the Romans” (transl. by rev. C. Roberts).

<sup>6</sup> In this case, while formally addressing the underage Ptolemy V, the Romans were thanking the state of Ptolemies as a whole, since the events in question took place during the previous reign of Ptolemy IV (see further). A similar situation is observed in the example of the gratitude received by Ptolemy III from the Romans for the policy of his father and predecessor, Ptolemy II, during the First Punic War (Zelinskyi 2020, 150–154, 449–451, not. 1318–1343; cf.: Zelinskyi 2017, 155–163).

<sup>7</sup> On this war, see A Companion 2011, 223–392.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Lampela 1998, 56–63; Zelinskyi 2017, 155–163.

of the pro-Roman faction in Capua (Liv. XXIII. VII. 4–10, X. 3–13; Sil. Ital. XI. 225–258, 369–384),<sup>9</sup> and in 214 BC, to Zoippus – a Syracuse nobleman aligned with Carthage (Liv. XXIV. XXVI. 1, 6–9; cf.: Polyb. VII. 2).<sup>10</sup> Between 215–210 BC, the government of Ptolemy IV rejected an offer from the king of Syracuse, Hieronymus, to form a triple or even quadruple anti-Roman alliance consisting of Carthage, Egypt, Syracuse, and Macedonia (Polyb. VII. 2. 2; cf.: Liv. XXIV. XXVI. 1, 7),<sup>11</sup> and likely agreed to a Roman request to sell them a large shipment of grain (Polyb. IX, 11a;<sup>12</sup> Liv. XXVII, IV, 10). However, like his father, Ptolemy IV refrained from attempting to seize the Carthaginian coastal region west of the so-called Altars of the Philaeni, which had previously belonged to the Ptolemies (Strab. XVII. III. 20).<sup>13</sup> In particular, according to Polybius, the border between Carthage and Ptolemaic Cyrenaica remained unchanged during the Second Punic War (Polyb. III. 39, X. 40).

However, starting from 209 BC, the situation began to change somewhat. For three years (209–206 BC), Egypt consistently played the role of one of the intermediaries striving for an end to the First Macedonian War<sup>14</sup> (Polyb. XI. 4–6; Liv. XXVII. XXX. 3–5, XXVIII. VII. 13–15; App. Mac. 3; Dio Cas. XVII. 58–59)<sup>15</sup> and did not shy away from overtly anti-Roman rhetoric (Polyb. XI. 5–6; App. Mac. 3). The result of Egypt's efforts was the conclusion of a separate peace between the Aetolian League and Philip V in 206 BC (cf.: Polyb. XVIII. 38. 8; Liv. XXXI. I. 8–9, XXIX. 16, XXXI. 18–19, XXXIII. XIII. 11; App. Mac. 3–4; Dio Cas. XVII. 59).<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Alexandrian diplomats deprived their ally, Rome, of a valuable military partner that the quirites needed in their struggle against Macedonia.<sup>17</sup> The immedi-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lampela 1998, 62–63; Hölbl 2001, 133; Huss 2001, 419.

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that, along with Zoippus, the young brothers of the Syracusan king Hieronymus also received political asylum in Egypt (Polyb. VII. 2. 2, see also: Huss 1976, 175; Lampela 1998, 59–60).

<sup>11</sup> See also: Walbank 1967, 32; Huss 1976, 165, 172, 174–175; Lampela 1998, 59–60; Hölbl 2001, 133.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Huss 1976, 165–167; Lampela 1998, 60–62.

<sup>13</sup> See also: Zelinskyi 2020, 55–57, 280–282, n. 251–258. On the circumstances of the loss of this territory by Ptolemy II, see Zelinskyi 2020, 89, 331, not. 570. On the lack of interest in it by Ptolemy III, see Zelinskyi 2020, 166.

<sup>14</sup> Along with the king of Egypt, the mentioned mediators also included: Rhodes, Chios, Athens, Byzantium, Mytilene, and the minor northern Balkan dynast Amyntander of Athamania, see Ager 1996, 157–161; Habicht 1999, 190–192; Worthington 2023, 86–87, 91.

<sup>15</sup> On this conflict, which was the part of the Second Punic War, see for example: Hammond – Walbank 1988, 391–410; Eckstein 2008, 77–118; Worthington 2023, 65–94; Iliev 2023, 35–48.

<sup>16</sup> See also: Ager 1996, 157–161; Lampela 1998, 69–73; Huss 2001, 420; Eckstein 2008, 91–118; Grainger 2017, 202; Worthington 2023, 92.

<sup>17</sup> See Worthington 2023, 92–93. Given the pro-Roman policy pursued by Egypt in 216–210 BC (see above), I consider M. Holleaux's opinion on the deliberate anti-Ro-

ate consequence of these actions by Egypt<sup>18</sup> was Rome's conclusion of an unfavorable peace treaty with Philip V in the following year, 205 BC (Polyb. XVIII. 1, 14; Sallust. Hist. IV. 67; Liv. XXIX. XII. 8–16, XXXI. I. 8, XXXI. 19, Sil. Ital. XV. 317–319; App. Mac. 4. 4).<sup>19</sup>

All of the above serves as a justification for the statement made by the Roman envoys who arrived in Alexandria in 200 BC. By emphasizing Egypt's loyalty to Rome only during the most critical period of the Second Punic War – that is, from 216 to 210 BC (*cf.* n. 7), they implied that they had not forgotten the subsequent actions of Alexandrian diplomacy, which were objectively aimed against Rome.<sup>20</sup> This hint was made particularly clear by the presence of Publius Semprius Tuditanus in the Roman embassy, as he had been directly involved in the military and diplomatic issues related to the separate Macedonian–Aetolian peace (Liv. XXIX. XII).<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the underlying reminder by the Roman envoys of the events that had cast a shadow over Roman–Egyptian relations was far from accidental. Let us bear in mind that the main objective of the Roman embassy of 201/200 BC in the East was to secure the neutrality of Antiochus III in the upcoming Second Macedonian War and to confirm the former friendship with Egypt. It seems that Rome's 'maximum' program involved facilitating the end of the Fifth Syrian War, coupled with a demonstration of Roman influence to the Seleucid king and the protection of Ptolemaic interests (*cf.*: Polyb. XVI. 27; App. Mac. 4; Just. XXX. 3. 1–4, XXXI. 1. 1–3).<sup>22</sup> The 'minimum' program, however, involved reaching an agreement on neutrality with Antiochus at the expense of Egyptian interests. In the end, the Roman en-

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man nature of Alexandria's subsequent actions (Holleaux 1921, 77; *cf.*: Balsdon 1954, 31) as unjustifiably categorical. Rather, in this case, it should be said that the Roman interests were either consciously or unconsciously ignored (*cf.*: Huss 1976, 167–171; Lampela 1998, 69–73; Eckstein 2008, 203). Paradoxically, Alexandria neglected Roman interests solely in favor of its own junior political and economic partner, Rhodes (*cf.*: Habicht 1999, 190; Eckstein 2008, 94–95, 195–196. On the negative influence of Rhodes on Ptolemaic foreign policy during the reign of Philopator, see Zelinskyi 2020, 195–199).

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that during the reign of Ptolemy IV, Egypt's foreign policy was managed by the trusted official Sosibius (Habicht 1999, 190; Huss 2001, 460; Grainger 2010, 219–220; see also below).

<sup>19</sup> Balsdon 1954, 31–32; Lampela 1998, 69–73; Grainger 2017, 203; Worthington 2023, 93–94; Zanin 2024, 16, 171, 174; also *cf.* not. 15.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the opposite viewpoint was expressed by W. Huss (Huss 2001, 420–422).

<sup>21</sup> *Cf.*: Briscoe 1973, 57; Lampela 1998, 81, n. 23; Eckstein 2008, 111–112; Worthington 2023, 92–93; Zanin 2024, 171–172, 174.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandria had to appeal to Rome twice for protection, sending embassies in 204/203 and 202/201 BC (Polyb. XV. 25. 14; Just. XXX. 2. 8, see also: Huss 2001, 477, 496–497; Eckstein 2008, 204–205; *cf.*: Zanin 2024, 208–209, 214–215).

voys were forced to settle for the latter option (cf. n. 3), but they managed to maintain their dignity in Alexandria. Indeed, it is precisely this issue of maintaining face that is addressed in the fragment of Livy under discussion.

Arriving in Egypt after visiting Antiochus (Polyb. XVI. 27; cf.: not. 3), Nero, Lepidus, and Tuditanus could only inform the guardians of the young Ptolemy V (cf. n. 1) that the Egyptian question had been used as a bargaining chip during the Roman negotiations with Antiochus. However, they could not say this explicitly, as it would have rendered their diplomatic mission in Alexandria meaningless from the outset. Eventually, a satisfactory solution for Rome was found. The envoys from the Tiber subtly reminded Alexandria of the unfriendly actions it had taken between 209 and 206 BC, which had significantly diminished Egypt's earlier services to Rome. Thus, it appeared that Rome had the moral right to defend its own vital interests before Antiochus, regardless of the inconveniences this might cause to an unreliable ally. At the same time, the envoys proposed to Alexandria the continuation of former friendly relations in light of the upcoming war between Rome and Philip, who was hostile to Egypt (*see* n. 23): precisely the mission they had come to the Nile to accomplish. Given the extremely complex military-political situation in which Egypt found itself at that time,<sup>23</sup> the guardians of Ptolemy V had no choice but to be satisfied with Rome's declarative offers.

Unfortunately for Egypt, the Roman political circles were quick to adopt the stance that Nero, Lepidus, and Tuditanus had set out for Alexandria. This is evident from Rome's position regarding Egypt during the period 200–196 BC. Throughout this time, the interests of Ptolemy V were defended by the Romans only either as a residual or purely nominally (cf. Polyb. XVI. 27, XVIII. 1, 47–52; Liv. XXXIII. II. 3–4, XIV. 2–4, XXXIX–LI; App. Mac. 3. 2; App. Syr. 2–4; Just. XXXI. 2–3).<sup>24</sup>

Thus, thanks to account of Titus Livius, we can judge the high level of diplomatic sophistication possessed by certain representatives

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<sup>23</sup> This refers to the practical implementation of the agreement between Antiochus III and Philip V on the division of Ptolemaic possessions outside Egypt (SEG, 51, 1496; Polyb. III. 2, XV. 20, XVI. 1, 10, 24; Liv. XXXI. XIV. 5; App. Mac. 4–5; P. Trog. Prol. XXX; Just. XXX. 2. 8; Porphyry. Fragm. 45 = Hier. Com. In Dan. XI. 13–14). On the problem of the historicity of the mentioned agreement, see Will 1982, 114–118; Kashcheev 1993, 30–31, 220–224; Lampela 1998, 76–77; Ma 1999, 74–82; Hölbl 2001, 135–136; Huss 2001, 487–488; Eckstein 2008, 221–281; Grainger 2017, 116–119, 120–121, not. 55–62; Rossini 2023, 133–170; Zanin 2024, 206–208; cf.: Zelinskyi 2020, 497, not. 1726.

<sup>24</sup> See also: Balsdon 1954, 39–41. On the alternative judgments regarding of the roman role in the events of 200–196 BC, see\*: Will 1982, 120–121, 132–133, 186–190; Lampela 1998, 76–110; Hölbl 2001, 137–140; Huss 2001, 496–501.

of the Roman nobility. By skillfully using the opportunity presented by Alexandria's shortsighted actions during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator, the Romans not only ensured they had the freedom to act during the diplomatic mission of 201/200 BC but also secured a highly advantageous moral position in their subsequent relations with the state of the Ptolemies.

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