GOVERNANCE IN PTOLEMAIC EGYPT:
FROM RAPHIA TO CLEOPATRA VII (217 - 31 B.C.),
CLASS-BASED 'COLONIALISM'? [1]

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During the first hundred years of its existence, Ptolemaic Egypt was ruled by means of a system based on race under which the Greco-Macedonian minority oppressed and exploited the indigenous Egyptian majority. As an imperialist state, established after the subjection of Persian-ruled Egypt by Alexander the Great, it was ruled by foreigners for their own benefit alone. This situation changed during the second century when Egyptian resistance, which took the form of open rebellion after seminal events relating to the battle of Raphia, came to a head during the rule of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II.

   This paper suggests that, far from being a demented fool bent on personal revenge, this king was a shrewd politician who understood that the days of Greco-Macedonian domination were numbered. He took the necessary (if extreme) steps to safeguard his throne and dynasty. Ptolemaic Egypt was converted into a colony where power and influence no longer depended on race alone, but also on class, a situation demanded by the political realities of the time.

   A result of this re-assessment of Euergetes's actions and political acumen is a drastic revision, or even overturning, of the traditional evaluation of his position as statesman vis-à-vis that of the early Ptolemies, which requires an answer to one further question: why has he been denied such recognition up to now?

1.   *Introduction*

According to Green,

> Everything wrong with the Ptolemies is summed up in the gross person of Physcon [nickname of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II given by the Alexandrian mob, meaning 'fatso' or 'pot-bellied']: the unswerving pursuit of sensual gratification (through food, drink, sex or power), unhindered by any moral restraints, guilt, or fear of retribution; the acts of wanton, indeed sadistic, cruelty against his subjects; the treatment of a whole country as the monarch's vast private estate, to be milked for personal profit; the inability to see beyond the cycle of self-perpetuating rule that these assumptions engendered. There is also, less often noted, a strong and obvious component of fantasy, of megalomaniac unreality, due to the accident of Egypt's secure frontiers and virtual immunity to external invasion (1990:597).

This assessment is probably too one-sided and restricted in scope to explain how and why Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II's actions heralded a radical turning point in the relative positions of the Greeks and the Egyptians after 145 B.C. Hölbl maintains, for instance, that 'these actions were motivated by purely political reasons' (2001:203). Through what seem to be inexplicable deeds of revenge against his own people, this Greek king exterminated the immigrant Greek element, particularly the intelligentsia (Chauveau 2000:173). As a result many of the King's Friends and other powerful individuals disappeared, and their exit marked the end of Alexandria's creative period. Furthermore, the exclusive Greco-Macedonian hold on power in Egypt was ended, substituted by what Fraser holds to be a vastly inferior intelligentsia made up of the Alexandrian citizen-body of mixed race (1972:85).

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[1]   This article is based on an MPhil study completed at Stellenbosch University during December 2004.

Euergetes's slaughter of the intelligentsia can be interpreted as more than an indiscriminate act of vengeance for his earlier expulsion by the Alexandrians, as Fraser would have it (1972:86). Coming as it did after a long period of internal instability, it coincided with the disintegration of the Ptolemaic empire, which was aggravated by a surge in Egyptian self-confidence following their successful military deployment by Ptolemy IV at the battle of Raphia.

This paper traces the effect this Ptolemy's arming and enlisting of the Egyptians had on the morale of the indigenous population. Walbank stresses 'the arrogance of the 20 000 native troops who had for the first time been included in the phalanx' (1981:118). Furthermore, Euergetes's subsequent expulsion and massacre of the previous political and academic elite can be interpreted as political shrewdness in view of the changed political climate.

Racial domination was endemic during the rule of the first Ptolemies, but it is the contention of this research that a fundamental shift occurred from the time of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. He levelled the playing field between Greek and Egyptian to a considerable degree and from his time onwards, Egyptians played a significant if not pivotal role in the governance of Egypt. 'Egyptians finally succeeded for the first time in becoming members of the elite. This policy … opened up to Egyptians the possibility of promotion to the highest levels of the administration … (Hölbl 2001:189).

Whether intentional or not, the result of his violent acts of destruction was the final demise of race-based imperialism in Ptolemaic Egypt, and the advent of hierarchical, class-based colonialism. At this time for instance, 'there was also a general increase in intermingling and intermarriage between the races …' (Walbank 1981:120). It will, however, be argued that this 'equalisation' of the races did not occur as a matter of principle, but rather of necessity.

Lastly, the question is posed why history has judged the later Ptolemies and Euergetes II in particular so harshly while the early Ptolemies are generally perceived to be worthy of higher esteem.

2.   *Raphia, resistance to racist oppression and the process of change*

When they colonised Egypt at the time of Alexander, the Greeks had a strong sense of a separate identity, which they maintained through exclusive cultural and educational institutions. Green says that: 'The Greeks had long assumed in themselves … a cultural superiority over all alien societies … (1990:312). Under the first Ptolemies, the exclusivity gradually started to wane, until by the time of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II a large new group had sprung up, identified as 'the Alexandrians' – people of mixed Greco/Egyptian descent (Fraser 1972:48).

It is important to note that a change in the relative position of Greeks to Egyptians had started to occur long before Euergetes's time. Most authors agree that when Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and occupied Egypt, the local population welcomed the Macedonians as liberators. Calinescu, for instance, says:

The Greeks fought alongside the Egyptians [against the Persians]. It is not surprising therefore that, in the fall of 332 B.C., the Egyptians hailed the twenty-four-year-old Alexander the Great and his army of some forty thousand Macedonians and Greeks as liberators from Persian rule (2004:2).

At that stage Egyptian culture was alive and held in high esteem. In spite of that, Cleomenes, the first satrap to Egypt, soon disillusioned the Egyptians by acting like a dictator with no regard for the traditions and culture or welfare of the local population. In fact, his administration made a most unhappy impression on 'exactly those Egyptians – clergy and notables – who had the position and influence to resist' (Eddy 1961:268). Then, when Ptolemy I Soter first replaced and later eliminated Cleomenes, there was hope that he would rule in the interests of the people. At first, this promised to be the case and there was little evidence of resistance to Macedonian rule during the early years. But this does not mean that the resentment experienced by conquered peoples did not exist in early Ptolemaic Egypt.

In the years following Alexander's death, Egypt became the Promised Land for thousands of Greek immigrants seeking to escape the poverty of Greece. Eddy believes that the Ptolemies did not wish to inflict a harsh regime on the Egyptians, but that the newly arrived Greek immigrants held the Egyptians in contempt and treated them extremely badly (1961:270).

As is the case with all conquered nations, the Egyptians were simply in no position to resist because of the superiority of Macedonian arms. Collaboration held more promise of reward for ambitious Egyptians.

The Egyptian elite who chose not to collaborate with their colonial masters, were meanwhile keeping the flame of nationalism alive. In fact, there seems to have been Egyptian covert resistance from the beginning of Alexander's occupation (Eddy 1961:287). This resistance found expression in so-called resistance literature. The incipient resistance movement broke out into open rebellion from time to time, but it remained sporadic and badly organised throughout the third century.

The earliest proof of the resentment felt by the Egyptians towards their racist imperialistic rulers was the anti-Greek, anti-Macedonian manifestos from the middle Ptolemaic period (Green 1990:323). The authors of these documents are unknown, but they were probably religious leaders who started a propaganda war against the oppressors. Hölbl states that 'the real weakness of the kingdom's government as early as Ptolemy IV is most apparent in the continuous rebellions in Egypt' (2001:127). Green maintains that it only needed a weakening of control which occurred from the time of Ptolemy IV on (221-204 B.C.), to produce a whole string of violent native insurrections (1990:188). Eddy says about anti-Lagaid propaganda that 'as time went on antagonistic religious literature became more violent, and more inclined to prophesize their [the Ptolemies'] overthrow' (1961:289).

Initially, Egyptian religious resistance to Hellenism was based on two concepts: insistence on the continuity of divine kingship by a native Pharaoh, rather than a Greek one, and insistence on the maintenance of justice and morality. The *Papyrus Dodgson* written in Demotic at some native shrine between 200 and 150 B.C. is a case in point. The second anti-Hellenic 'Sesostris Legend' also dates from around 200 B.C., contemporaneous with two anti-Greek apocalypses, the *Demotic Chronicle* and the *Oracle of the Potter* (Eddy 1961:290-292). These outspoken pieces of rebellious literature, though still essentially religious in their condemnation of the Ptolemies, also contain secular grievances and demand Egyptian institutions, their opposition resembling modern nationalistic agitation. As Eddy points out, they 'curse the city of the Greeks, the hated capital, Alexandria' (1961:292).

Religion thus became the rallying point in the resistance to Egypt's foreign rulers. To the Egyptians, the Egyptian king was a god, and the arrogance of the colonial rulers in trying to

pass themselves off as pharaohs gave justification on religious grounds to the opposition to Hellenic imperialism (Eddy 1961:vii).

The religious reaction of the Egyptians to Greek imperialism culminated in a series of rebellions that were sustained over a long period of time. 'Mutual hatred of Greek and Egyptian grew intense' (Eddy 1961:257). Green concurs and points out that, during the violent insurrection that erupted against Ptolemaic rule, 'the priests, like their Orthodox counterparts in the Greek War of Independence, played a leading role' (1990:192).

The apparent stability of the third century therefore did not last. There is evidence of unrest in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy III Euergetes, and native revolts took place during the reigns of the fourth and fifth Ptolemies. The internal disruption lasted for most of the second century (Samuel 1993:176). Green describes the reaction of the 'imperial minority of Graeco-Macedonian administrators' to this threat as being nearly entirely military: 'The key to their continued rule … lay, of necessity, in the maintenance of a large standing army and paramilitary police force' (Green 1990:187).

By 217 B.C., Egypt had lost her colonial territories in Thrace and Asia Minor, and only a few of the Cycladic islands in the Aegean remained subject to her. In fact, Ptolemy IV felt distinctly threatened even at his home base in Alexandria. Like many imperialists before and since, he was forced to arm the subject race to repel a foreign threat.

In this case, the Egyptians were called upon to assist Ptolemaic Egypt in its life-and-death struggle with Antiochus III at Raphia in 217 B.C. Although the battle was won and the threat of defeat subsided, this action changed the self-image of the Egyptians.

At Raphia Ptolemy IV made the 'mistake' of arming and enlisting the Egyptians in a successful effort to save his empire. The effect was that they suddenly realised that the Greeks were not intrinsically superior to them in warfare – it was rather a case of tactics and sophisticated weaponry making the difference. This increased self-esteem among the oppressed caused a profound change in their attitude to their Greek overlords. Polybius, who visited Alexandria at this time, describes the implications:

> Immediately after this Ptolemy (IV) became involved with the war against the Egyptians. For this king, by arming the Egyptians for the war against Antiochus (III) took a decision that, though acceptable for the present, involved a miscalculation for the future. For they were elated by the success at Raphia and could no longer endure to take orders, but looked out for a figure to lead them as they believed they were now able to fend for themselves. And that is what they achieved not long after. Polybius V. 107, 1-3 (Austin 1981:371).

After 217 B.C., the relative positions of the Greek and Egyptian residents of Alexandria therefore changed dramatically, with the Egyptian element strongly asserting itself after the return of their troops from Raphia. Chua, referring to modern examples, states that the 'most ferocious kind of backlash is majority-supported violence aimed at eliminating a market-dominating minority' (2003:5).

As imperialism has such a blighting effect on the confidence of the oppressed and exploited native populations of colonised peoples, the significance of the events relating to the battle of Raphia can hardly be exaggerated. This alienation and undermining of confidence is attested to in all colonial situations, not least in the recent history of South Africa. The South African author Mphahlele talks about 'this double personality as a colonised man' (quoted in Watts 1998:69). What occurred at Raphia was therefore, in

Mphahlele's parlance, a decolonisation of the Egyptian mind (quoted in Watts 1998:68), with the Egyptians gaining confidence in their ability to wage war. Thereafter the resentment against the dominant Greco-Macedonians broke out into open rebellion, and the small (mostly priestly) elite that had kept the spirit of rebellion alive was now joined by the masses in the streets of Alexandria. The relationship between Greek and Egyptian had changed definitively and fundamentally.

This significant shift coincided with, and was probably instrumental in, sparking a long-drawn-out civil war that eventually resulted in the breakaway of Upper Egypt. From 207 B.C. to 186 B.C., separate pharaohs of Nubian origin governed Upper Egypt. In Lower Egypt, including the Delta, this coincided with the onset of almost endemic brigandage (Walbank 1981:119).

By 161 B.C., the power balance had changed dramatically. Bagnall informs us that 'with increasing Egyptian resentment of the superior position of the Greeks, probably fuelled by the hard times of the 160s, it was sometimes dangerous to be a Greek among Egyptians' (2004:232). An example of this is the following quote from a Greek complaining in the so-called 'Petition about an Assault' (161 B.C.):

> To Dionysios one of the friends and strategos, from Ptolemaios son of Glaukias, Macedonian … [They] tried to force their way in, so that with this opportunity they might plunder the temple and kill me because I am a Greek, attacking me in concerted fashion. UPZ 1 8 (Bagnall 2004:232).

In the end, however, the solution to the increasing racial friction was simple and unplanned: it consisted of the increasing assimilation of the middle and lower Greek social strata in Alexandria into Egyptian customs, particularly through intermarriage. Divisions between Greek and Egyptian became increasingly blurred and the nationalistic violence of the second century gradually subsided (Green 1990:323).

According to Fraser, the innumerable riots and disturbances in Alexandria during the second and first centuries B.C., after the new racial amalgam was created, were all political in origin, and no longer the result of racial friction (1972:82).

Price (2001:317) warns, however, that the co-existence of cultures in Alexandria should not be seen as an indication of liberal pluralism. Greek culture was still dominant, but 'Greekness' was no longer the only way to achieve position, wealth and power. What had changed, was that a middle class consisting of a mixed race of Egyptian-Greeks had sprung up who had a share in the economy, and thus something to lose.

At this time there occurred a momentous event that bore this reality out, and hastened and supported the shift in power relations between the races in Egypt. It was the destruction of the expatriate Greek community of Alexandria by Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II.

3.   *Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II: Revengeful maniac or shrewd politician? Changing Ptolemaic Egypt from a race-based to a class-based colony*

The early history of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II is convoluted and, in some instances, bizarre.[2] His rejection by the Alexandrian mob and the support of the Greek expatriate community for, first, his brother, Ptolemy VI Philometer, and, later, for his first wife (his brother's widow), Cleopatra II, are generally quoted as the reasons for his vicious (and some even say demented) reactions. Although these matters certainly contributed greatly to motivate his actions of revenge, it is the contention of this research that this explanation overlooks the fact that Euergetes II was, above all else, an exceedingly competent and effective politician. His ostensibly insane actions (such as his marriage to Cleopatra III, his murder and dismemberment of his own son and other atrocities) were calculated also to serve his political programme and goals, for his first priority was to retain power and his second to ensure the survival of his dynasty. Green says that 'despite his [Ptolemy VIII's] obnoxious and obsessional character, he was no fool' (1990:538) and continues, 'his more obnoxious qualities hindered neither his capacity for survival nor his very considerable administrative talents' (1990:537).

Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II was recalled from Cyrene in 145 B.C. to take up the vacant throne of his brother, Ptolemy VI Philometer, who had died in an equestrian accident during a military campaign. This was the second time he was on the throne and this time round he was in control for thirteen years, until he was again expelled from Alexandria in 132 B.C. It was during these thirteen years of his second rule that Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II initiated the actions that changed the face of Alexandria, and indeed of imperial Egypt.

Queen Cleopatra II (widow of his brother, Ptolemy VI Philometer) hesitated in deciding how to react to the return of Euergetes II. She had the support of influential Greeks as well as of the majority of the troops and their commanders, the Jews Onisias and Dositheos. This did not add to any confidence Euergetes II might have had in the loyalty of either the Greek elite or the army. Another prominent military figure, Galaistes, a supporter of Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II, was opposed to the return of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. Galaistes made the mistake of making it known that he had the son of Ptolemy VI Philometer, considered by many to be the true heir, under his protection. Upon his return, Euergetes II immediately deprived Galaistes of his position and the latter fled into exile in Greece.

Chauveau maintains that the threat to Euergetes's throne posed by a potential usurper was a serious one and was linked to the destruction of the expatriate Greek elite of Alexandria:

> Galaistes … attempted to enlist the support of the army, which was on the brink of mutiny because of a delay in the receipt of their pay. The reaction of the new king … was dreadful. A merciless repression descended upon his opponents in the capital: nearly all the intellectuals of the Museum were forced into exile, leading to a long-

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2   From July 168 B.C. till the autumn of 164 B.C. Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II ruled Ptolemaic Egypt jointly with his brother Ptolemy VI Philometer and his sister Cleopatra II (also the wife of Ptolemy VI). From 163 to 145 B.C., Ptolemy VI and his wife/sister Cleopatra ruled without Ptolemy VIII. Between 145 B.C. and 132 B.C. Ptolemy VIII was back on the throne and he soon married his sister, Cleopatra II, and soon after, in 141/140 BC., he also married Cleopatra II's daughter, Cleopatra III and like Cleopatra II he elevated her to the position of Queen. During 132 B.C. he and Cleopatra III were expelled by Cleopatra II but by 127/6 B.C. he and Cleopatra III were back in power. By 124 B.C. they were reconciled with Cleopatra II and they jointly ruled till Ptolemy VIII Eurgetes's death on 28 June 116 B.C. (Hölbl 2001:194-204).

standing eclipse in the city's reputation as the sanctuary of lettered and learned Hellenism (2000:15).

Huss concurs that the Galaistes affair was the immediate cause of the persecution of the king's opponents in Alexandria, but adds some very significant further motivations for Euergetes II's actions:

> Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II also started to rage against the Greek intelligentsia in Alexandria. Personal and internal political reasons, rather than cultural reasons, induced the king to ban them. These personal reasons stemmed from matters which arose during his previous periods in charge: the domestic-political reasons were based on his decision to concentrate power on local citizens, far more than his predecessors had done (2001:602-603).[3]

Hölbl agrees that,

> [M]any of the Greek intellectuals were driven out of Alexandria … While Euergetes II was harsh in his persecution of those who opposed his accession to the throne, he sought to win over the people of the Ptolemaic kingdom with amnesty decrees … in addition, Egyptian temples and priests received a guarantee of their rights and revenues (2001:194-195).

Green informs us that 'Polybius, who probably visited the city in 140/39 with Scipio Aemilianus … found the Greek and Jewish population of Alexandria "virtually wiped out"' (1990:538).

On 11 November 132 B.C. civil war again erupted between the supporters of Euergetes II and Cleopatra II. According to Hölbl, the royal palace was set on fire and Euergetes II fled with his wife, Cleopatra III (2001:197).

Cleopatra II took over Alexandria and Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II had to retreat to Cyprus. Once again, the city's population sympathised with his sister (Huss 2001:610). Chauveau goes so far as to say that Cleopatra II was able to expel Euergetes II and Cleopatra III to Cyprus with the support of the Alexandrians (2000:15). According to Hölbl 'Cleopatra II was acclaimed sole queen in Alexandria. Euergetes was stripped of his royal powers and his statues were destroyed' (2001:197).

Euergetes II had clearly not been able to rid himself completely of his Greek Alexandrian enemies through the purges of 145 B.C. When he returned to power in the city some years later, this was encouragement enough for him to do the job properly and spare nobody.

4.   *Back on the throne for the third and last time: Implementation of the new strategy*

By 129/128 B.C. Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II was in control of the Fayum but he could not succeed in re-conquering Alexandria. The supporters of Cleopatra II no doubt resisted strenuously, as they knew what to expect from Ptolemy VIII if he took the city. By 128 B.C. Cleopatra II's position had, however, become hopeless. She fled to Syria. Through clever political and foreign policy measures, Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II succeeded in depriving

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[3]   My own translation.

Cleopatra II of the support she sought in Syria and he took Alexandria somewhere between 8 August 127 B.C and 20 August 126 B.C. (Huss 2001:614).

This gave the king the opportunity to take his revenge by meting out punishment with remarkable brutality. Among other reprisals, he is said to have had the gymnasium surrounded and set on fire while a great many *ephebes* were inside, killing many of them (Hölbl 2001:200). But the troubles persisted, however. Chauveau states that:

> Local antagonisms degenerated into near civil war and an unending series of provocations and reprisals resulted. Peasants fled from their villages and, often in order to survive and to defend themselves, organised themselves into gangs of brigands. Financial ruin confronted the fiscus and the fiscal functionaries and tax farmers took to imposing all sorts of exorbitant taxes and failed to respect even the right to asylum in temples (2000:16).

Agriculture first deteriorated and then came to a virtual standstill, as fields were no longer cultivated, the prices of basic staples soared and these products became unobtainable to the ordinary person. All this resulted in bringing the entire country to the brink of economic and social collapse.

Under these circumstances, the king decided, in another astute political move, to recall his sister (Chauveau 2000:16). In 124 B.C. the various parties were reconciled and 'the bizarre triple monarchy [of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, Cleopatra II and Cleopatra III] was continued' (Hölbl 2001:201).

By now Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II had changed the political landscape of Alexandria, and indeed of Egypt. No longer would an expatriate Greek minority rule Egypt. What we would call affirmative-action measures and empowerment of the previously disadvantaged were implemented and, for the first time in Ptolemaic history, we see the advancement of Egyptians into senior positions in the government of Egypt.

Egyptians were now afforded the opportunity, under certain conditions, to be tried by indigenous judges in cases of dispute with Greeks. The respective jurisdictions of the Greek and Egyptian courts were spelled out, and the kind of jurisdiction to which a case was subjected was now determined by, significantly, the language of the document in contest (Hölbl 2001:202).

The Egyptian elite, and in particular the priesthood, were singled out for advancement, as the priests had assisted Euergetes II throughout the civil war (132-124 B.C.) during which he regained the throne. Some Egyptian believers even saw him as a kind of Messiah, a fact that Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II utilised to the utmost (Huss 2001:618-619), because it gave him a distinct advantage over his sister. According to Hölbl 'the higher and lower priesthoods were to receive still greater advantages. Renovation of temple precincts and sanctuaries was encouraged. As a devout pharaoh in the ancient Egyptian style, Euergetes II promoted the animal cults' (2001:202).

Huss (2001:618) states that Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II seems to have been the first king who defended the indigenous population in a systematic way. The periods of crisis experienced by the Ptolemaic kingdom from the end of the third century to the 160s were directly responsible for changes to the composition of the senior levels of government administration and influence. Euergetes's pro-Egyptian stance was largely the result of the rivalry with his brother and sister, and not of any anti-Greek sentiment on his part. As his siblings' support came mainly from the Jewish and Greek segments of the population, he

naturally regarded these communities as his potential enemies. Euergetes II therefore took the politically expedient decision to put the power of the state behind the numerically strongest segment of the population in order to prevail against the minorities who opposed him. He therefore placed Egyptian priests, officers and mixed-race officials in ruling public positions (Huss 2001:618-619).

It could be argued that Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II now governed Egypt in co-operation with certain priesthoods. The king felt he could rely on the priests, landowners and educated among the indigenous Egyptian population. 'At this critical moment in Ptolemy VIII's reign, Egyptians thus finally succeeded for the first time in becoming members of the elite' (Hölbl 2001:198).

Hölbl goes on to explain how this new policy of entrusting the administration of the state to the upper class of the Ptolemaic kingdom opened up to Egyptians the possibility of advancement to the highest levels of the administration, a practice continued by his successors well into the first century. This brought many high-ranking Greeks increasingly under the command of Egyptians, which in turn engendered important changes in attitude. 'A notable instance of Euergetes's favourable policy towards native Egyptians was the marriage (in 122 B.C.) between the high priest of Ptah, Psenptah II, and Bernike, who was close to the royal house and probably a relation [of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II] (Hölbl 2001:198).

Hierarchy based on class, the means by which the heterogeneity of the Egyptian colony could be managed, became the central feature of rule in Egypt from the time of Euergetes II. No longer was it essential to be Greek to succeed in post-Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II Egypt. The elite ruled, whether Greek or Egyptian. And it is this change from a race-based imperial style of rule (Ptolemy I to Ptolemy VI) to a class-based hierarchical colonial style (Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II to the end of the dynasty) that saved Euergetes's throne and safeguarded his dynasty for a further one hundred years. Far from being the actions of a madman bent on revenge, this was a calculated course intended in the first place by Ptolemy VIII to rid himself of his enemies, and secondly to steer a new course in the governance of Ptolemaic Egypt.

Now we see a hierarchical structure based on class rather than on race alone, determining the power realities of Egypt – colonial, rather than imperial, in essence. Cannadine maintains that the relationship between coloniser and colonized could be based either on race or on class. Classicists in the postcolonial/postmodern era placed undue stress on race, to the exclusion of the equally important issue of class distinction. I would like to apply this argument to Egypt under Ptolemaic rule. While the race-based perspective might have been valid in describing the statecraft of the first six Ptolemies, it becomes inadequate and incorrect when considering the prevailing mode of management in Egypt from the time of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II.

Collaboration, rather than marginalisation, forms the new style of governance, together with the preservation of traditional local rulers and the harnessing of traditional religious and other societal elements to serve Ptolemaic self-interest. This approach to governance was much more sophisticated and modern that that of the first six Ptolemies and was echoed in modern times in the case of India vis-à-vis the British (Cannadine 2002:58–64).

5.   *The effect of modern imperialism and colonialism on our understanding of the Classics*
      and Ptolemaic Egypt in particular

Nearly all of the Ptolemies were cruel and arbitrary on the one hand, educated and erudite on the other. Why then has history in general and Classicists in particular, been so harsh in their judgment of Euergetes VIII and the later Ptolemies while the early, racist imperialists were often held in high esteem?

I believe that an important factor in this misjudgment is the fact that most scholars have until recently ignored the effect of the Western powers' own recent imperialist and colonialist past on our understanding of governance in antiquity. More than twenty years ago, Will appealed to scholars to change their perception that ancient imperialism and colonialism should be seen only from the point of view of a citizen of a colonising power. In the post-war world of decolonisation, he says, Western scholars can no longer look at a colonial world with the same 'good conscience' they once had, confident that European domination was good for the ruled as well as for the rulers, and that Greek rule was good for the Egyptians. What is required of the modern scholar is a self-reflexive, rather than an unthinking, use of the perspectives offered by the historian's contemporary world (quoted in Bagnall 1997:226).

Martin Bernal's publication of the first two volumes of his monumental work, *Black Athena* (1987 and 1991), caused more than a ripple in classical circles, coming as it did while the postmodern/postcolonial debate was at its height. Bernal's work signaled a warning to classical scholars that their own recent history of imperialism might have influenced them in their depreciation of the non-Roman/Greek ancient civilizations, causing an overestimation of the importance of the Roman/Greek contribution to modern Western civilisation. This would demand a re-assessment of Greco-Macedonian rule during the Ptolemaic era.

Bernal proposes that modern eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires were created, expanded and run by several generations of imperialists who, in essence, were racists. '[T]he intensity and pervasiveness of Northern European, American and other colonial racism since the 17th century have been so much greater than the norm that they need some special explanation' (1987:201). He maintains that most of the 18th-century English-speaking thinkers were racists. 'They openly expressed popular opinions that dark skin colour was linked to moral and mental inferiority' (1987:203). The politicians, classicists and leaders of the time applied this racial prejudice to the ancient Egyptians. By the 19th century, '[t]he extraordinary growth of racism … included the increasingly pejorative "racial" classification of the Chinese and Egyptians' (Bernal 1987:239). For him it follows that the racist approach of the founders, rulers and thinkers of the modern empires also ensured that the view of classicists of this period would be similarly tainted by Western imperialist racism. According to Vanusia, 'Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* has radically transformed the nature and status of research concerning Classics in the nineteenth century' (2003:92).

The same issue preoccupied postcolonial/postmodern historians, political activists and particularly literary theorists. Edward Said in his seminal publication of 1978, *Orientalism*, accuses the West of looking at the Orient – whether modern or ancient – through prejudiced eyes. He defines Orientalism as 'the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient … as a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 1995:3). According to Said, this prejudice and discrimination against, and oppression of, the Orient by the West is a direct result of imperialist racism which ensures that modern classicists are equally biased and negative towards the 'Orient' and favourably disposed

towards 'Western' ancient Greece. Vanusia concludes that 'Said's work implies [that] Philhellenism is coincident with Orientalism to the extent that it succeeds in detaching Greece from the Orient, despite all the evidence to the contrary… Said's work suggests that Philhellenism and Orientalism were mutually reinforcing ideologies, but this is the less surprising since European imperialism and colonialism served as the context for both phenomena' (2003:90).

Applying Said's logic to the study of Ptolemaic Egypt, it can justifiably be concluded that, until very recently, scholars' views of Ptolemaic Egypt were biased in favour of the ruling Greeks. In particular, the imperialistic and race-based nature of the rule of the first six Ptolemies was regarded as acceptable, as it brought the civilising occidental influence of Greece to the 'lesser', oriental Egyptians. The later Ptolemies were regarded with some distaste as they had 'let the side down' by accepting the 'Alexandrians' as their equals and introducing Egyptians into the upper echelons of power.

According to Vanusia, 'any account of Hellenism and of the reception of the Hellenic past in the modern period remains substantially incomplete without an understanding of European colonialism in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries' (2003:88), because an 'acknowledgement of the imperial experience in Europe and the U.S.A. has the potential radically to transform the very nature of the questions that are put to Classics and to the distant past as well as to the recent colonial era' (2003:95).

Hall believes that there is now a much greater sensitivity amongst classicists that has largely resulted from the work of Bernall and Said:

> Increasingly political sensitivity in certain quarters to the problematic legacy of European imperialism, racism, and chauvinism has also at long last begun to produce academic work which admits to a latent ethnocentrism in almost all European historiography, ancient and modern (2002:134).

In an era of decolonisation, different approaches to the colonial world have developed and offer the vital contemporary perspective needed. As Bagnall puts it, now that Asia and Africa have been decolonised it is time to metaphorically decolonise Ptolemaic Egypt (1997:226).

6.   *Conclusion*

Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II understood that the days of race-based imperial rule, supported by expatriate Greek intellectuals, were finally over. If he wanted to retain his throne and dynasty, he had to take a drastically different course of action. This involved changing the whole basis of his rule and devolving power on two groups who were previously disadvantaged and largely despised. These were the local Egyptian elite and the 'Alexandrians', those Greeks who had intermarried with the Egyptians and could hardly any longer be regarded as Greeks in the true sense of the word. Euergetes II realised that true power had now shifted decisively to these two groups and that it was only by obtaining their support that he could continue to rule and retain his dynasty. In this process the governance of Egypt changed from race-based imperialism to class-based colonialism – what Cannadine would call hierarchical rather than racial domination.

Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II broke the imperialistic umbilical cord by means of several actions. He severed physical links with Greece through his withdrawal from the last Egyptian Greek possessions, namely Thera, Itanos and Methana, which also spelled the end of the

empire. He expelled and/or exterminated the expatriate Greeks. Instead, he embraced the local Egyptian population, their religion, culture and values. In these different ways he finally broke the stranglehold of Greekness in the colony of Egypt, and, in its place, established what in modern parlance we would call 'local rule'. No longer attached to Greece, either physically or spiritually, Egypt at last adopted all the essential characteristics of a colony under self-rule.

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