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Ptolemaic Elephants in III Maccabees and the Social Stratification of the Kingdom of Kush

Trade helped to catapult early societies from hunter gatherers – living in small communities of friends and family – to living in sprawling urban environments of ideas and exchange. Socialization and the exchange of ideas – and war—molded our modern times into what it is now. Ancient Nubia found itself in a conundrum that would test their resolve. Ptolemaic-ran Egypt was at their border, forcing themselves in as conquerors, unapologetic towards the millennia old culture that contributed much to their society. With a truce made between the Greeks and Meroe, trade was inevitably enacted between the two power houses, helping to revolutionize Kush and propel them into an elite society that equaled other kingdoms on the world stage. Ptolemaic Egypt’s arrogance in thinking that because they needed war elephants, they had the right to barge their way into Nubia and conqueror their society, instead helped to advance the Nubians in ways that were not anticipated. New technologies were created, building projects flourished, bilingual communication and literary forms would come into existence, and luxurious goods for the elite became an everyday commodity. Ptolemaic Egypt’s desire for African elephants unintentionally grew the Meroitic economy, thus improving the social stratification system of the Nubians.

In ancient times, supremacy was held by those who could prove themselves on the battlefield. Military knowledge was key, and a mind that could out think one’s opponent made it possible for a person born from the lowest rank to be able to conquer the then known world. Warfare was the preeminent device used to force one’s will upon anyone unwilling, or unable, to thwart off an oncoming onslaught of rampaging carnage – leaving devastation in its wake. Tactical military superiority, the latest technological machinery, and a weapon of mass destruction unparalleled by any other army is what helped to propel the Ptolemaic army of antiquity into an army of proficiency and effectiveness in the history books. That weapon, the

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African elephant, was the tool used to help usher in a new way of fighting a war against opponents that never seen such a thing done before, on the African continent.

There are two different species of elephants on the African continent, the big Bush elephant and the smaller Forest elephant. Scholars have come to a consensus on which species was used for warfare, that being the Forest elephant, because of a record of a battle left by the 2nd century BCE historian Polybius. He describes how only a few of Ptolemy's elephants went close enough to enemy. The men who were seated on the backs of the elephants, in a tower fought with pikes and fought bravely at close quarters. The battle was savage, with many soldiers wounded and damaged. The elephants fought with tenacity, fighting forehead to forehead and with all of their strength. They locked tusks firmly and shoved with everything that they had, with great exertion, until the victor was able to push aside the loser's trunk. Once the elephant turned to get away, the other elephant gored him. Polybius described how Ptolemy's African elephants mostly refused to fight because the Indian elephants were too much of a challenge for them, causing the African elephants to turn and flee. Apparently, refusing to fight was something that the African elephant was known for doing. Once the elephants were in a state of confusion, the guards would be forced to give way because of the force of the confused beasts (Charles 307).

Polybius was under the false impression that there was only one breed of African elephant, and that it was smaller than the Indian elephant – which was known for being the archetype of the war elephant. But Polybius was mistaken because the Bush elephant is larger than its Forest cousin and the Indian elephant. In Ptolemy II and the hunting of African Elephants, Lionel Casson states:

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“There are two types of elephant in Africa, the big Bush elephant and the smaller forest elephant. Today the first is found scattered throughout sub-Sahara Africa and the second in a wide belt from Central Africa westwards to the Atlantic coast” (248).

The two breeds of African elephants could be found throughout Africa. Casson believed that Philadelphus’ hunting parties pursued the smaller of the two elephants, the forest elephants. These elephants paled in size and strength of their bush elephant cousins. The Indian elephant was indeed larger than the forest elephant.

The process of attaining a war elephant involved precision intricate skills. It was not intuitive at all. It took well thought out planning to acquire the intelligent beast, who would not go easily. Philadelphus was venturing on a very dangerous expedition in seeking to obtain African elephants. It took much planning and devising to effectively execute the steps necessary to capture the animals. Indians were the most successful at implementing the procedure to catch a wild elephant and then train them to be used in war. The people of Africa knew how to kill an elephant and strip it of its valuable tusks and meat, but capturing them alive and training them for war was not a part of the norm in their culture. The Indians became masters of the trade. Megasthenes, the envoy of Seleucus I to the court of Chandragupta, left behind a detailed description of what took place during the hunt. To be successful, there had to be a “spacious corral and a body of trained elephants” (Casson 249). In order for the corral to be effective, a circular trench was dug and a wall was formed out of its dirt. Then, three or four well-tamed female elephants were placed inside to lure in the wild elephants into the enclosure (Casson 249).

The African Forest elephant was not only used by Ptolemaic Egypt for war. After observing its effectiveness in war, the Carthaginians of antiquity incorporated the massive tanks into their armies as well. The famed Hannibal was known for using elephants in battle. He was

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even so bold as to venture across the Alps to reach Rome in a spectacular fashion. Another encounter between Hannibal and his mighty elephants against Rome took place at Zama in 202 BCE. It was the final battle near Carthage, known as the second Punic war. Scipio had encountered many of Hannibal's elephants. His elephant count was at 80, more than what he had in his previous battle. Scipio's experience with elephants prior to this battle helped to prepare him so that he would not make the same mistake twice. He placed his two legions in the center: "But instead of being drawn up in the usual formation, with the companies of the second line covering the intervals between those of the first line, and so on, the companies of the rear lines were directly behind those of the front line, leaving wide lanes between the cohorts or battalions" (Gowers 46). The Velites, lightly armed skirmishers, were placed in the "intervals of the front line with orders to open the action against the elephants and, if forced back, to retire either along the lanes to the rear or laterally, harassing the beasts as much as they could from the side" (Gowers 46). Hannibal gave the charge to his elephants, but Scipio was able to scare and reroute them by blasting horns and trumpets, causing them to rush into their own soldiers. The Carthaginians would go on to lose the battle. As for Rome, they would find use in keeping war elephants in the future.

The Romans learned many valuable lessons from fighting the Carthaginians war elephants. Their first encounter with them was a disaster that almost led to their annihilation. But the Romans, being the adaptive thinkers that they were, learned quickly from their mistakes. After capturing many elephants, they had their soldiers practice fighting and killing them, finding their weak points so that in battle they could prevail more easily. And so they did: "Hirtius tells a story which gives a vivid picture of the incidents which might and did happen in the course of a fight where elephants were used. A veteran of the Fifth Legion saw an elephant

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knock down, stamp and kneel on an unarmed camp-follower. He made for the elephant, which left the corpse, picked him up in his trunk and held him up in the air, as a preliminary to dashing him against the ground. Whereupon the old soldier with great presence of mind hacked with all his might with his short sword at the encircling trunk until the elephant...dropped him uninjured and made off, screaming, at best pace, to join the others” (Gowers 48).

In order for the Ptolemies to be ready to use their elephants for battle against an oncoming enemy, that enemy being the Seleucids, they had to have a system for acquiring elephants, which they had. They also had to have a prime location that would place them in a strategic position to strike. The Egyptian city of Memphis was that strategic position, made evident in a 218 BCE letter (P. Petr. II 20 col. iv), that refers to the “commandeering of a merchant galley moored at Ptolemais Hormos, the Fayum’s port on the Nile, by a local official on the grounds that ‘there was need of it for the voyage downstream to deliver hay to the elephants at Memphis’” (Casson 259). This documentation helped to assure that this location was more suitable than Alexandria. Memphis was a more strategic location, placing the elephants in a position to be easily accessible for the purpose of fighting off an attack by the Seleucids. An almost instantaneous round up of the soldiers to march through the desert would have been more feasible than from the location in Alexandria and its many delta waterways (Casson 259).

The Ptolemies ingenuity in being able to setup a network that captured, transported, and stored and trained elephants was an “extraordinary achievement,” says Casson. It was a massive enterprise that involved the use of Indian personnel to help train the local population, the Egyptians, who then used their skills to train the elephants to stand strong in battle. Engineers were used to construct boats needed to transport the elephants down the Nile and build ports along the route.

All of this was laying the groundwork that was to be an epic battle between two great rivals, vying for ultimate supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean region of the Ancient Near East. Fierce opponents, the two factions came about through the death of the great Alexander, who, not having any children to inherit his vast empire, divided it up between his brothers-in-arms. Seleucus I Nicator created the Seleucid Empire consisting of modern-day Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Ptolemy I Soter took control of Egypt.

It is important to point out that it was the founder of Ptolemaic Egypt, Ptolemy I, who ushered in the use of elephants in battle. Nevertheless, it wasn't until Ptolemy III did this method be put into place. Ptolemy III Euergetes, father of Ptolemy IV, documents in his *res gestae*, that he and his father were the first to begin acquiring elephants from Nubia for the purposes of war. Polybius came to the conclusion that the African elephants were more cowardly than the Indian elephant, not realizing that the breed of elephant that they possessed were the smaller elephants, not the larger and more powerful bush African elephant. So unimpressed by the forest elephant was Polybius that he recounted how even the odor of the Indian elephants frightened off the more feeble forest elephants (Charles 309). Yet, it is known that both Indian and African elephants are known to cohabit on friendly terms in the zoos (Charles 309). Thus, Polybius' description of the encounter between the two breeds of elephants are questionable because of the stated fact that the two can co-exist.

Ptolemy III's father, Ptolemy II, continued a campaign into Nubian territory began by Ptolemy I. Ptolemy I raided northern Nubia. He and Alexander the Great were seeking intelligence on the source of the Nile. It should be noted that an unforeseen benefit of these intrusions were the introduction of Greek objects to the Nubian population, objects that would become valuable items for the Nubian ruling elite.

Ptolemy II was able to do a new thing, something that was not previously done before by Ptolemy I or Alexander the Great. The poet Theocritus explains how Ptolemy II cut off the seventy-five-mile stretch of the Nile south of the first cataract from the Nubians, thus securing the gold mine east of the Nile in the Wadi Allaqi. Archeologically excavated coins and inscriptions reveals how Ptolemy II “garrisoned some of the old Middle Kingdom forts in the second cataract area, and suggesting that his authority temporarily, at least, reached the modern border between Egypt and the modern Republic of the Sudan at Wadi Halfa” (Burstein 45). Consequently, this encounter opened up the once remote region of Nubia for exploration and trade for the Greeks in a way not previously done before. This encounter gave Ptolemy II the access that he needed to acquire African elephants for his war machine (Burstein 45).

The climax of the efforts by Ptolemy to acquire elephants would lead to the battle of Raphia – a clash between two titans of the time, Ptolemy IV of Egypt and Antiochus III. The battle was very bloody. Yet there seems to be some discrepancies made in Polybius’ account. The confusion comes into play with the description of a turret being used on African Forest elephants. Charles says, “According to de Beer, the African forest elephant was ‘too small and seems never to have carried a castle’. Indeed, there is no literary evidence to suggest that Carthaginian forest elephants were ever equipped with turrets—historical accounts of the Punic Wars, such as those of Polybius, Livy, and Appian, never mention turreted elephants.”

On those grounds, it can be argued that turret-carrying Ptolemaic elephants were Indian elephants imported to Egypt. This raises the possibility that a portion of Ptolemy’s elephants were either shipped in or born into the Egyptian ranks by his father. If true, the implication would be extraordinary, considering the rarity of raising elephants’ in captivity. This raises the possibility that the elephants described as fighting bravely, and willingly fought

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‘forehead to forehead’ with the Indian elephants, were in fact Indian elephants themselves. This would explain Polybius’ statement about the elephants being able to interlock their tusks in duel strength, which would imply that the elephants were of similar stature (Charles 308-309).

The likelihood that the elephants that did not turn tail and run being actual Indian elephants would make a huge statement. That would disqualify the African forest elephant from being any major factor in the battle. Actually, it could be deduced that the African elephant was more of a nuisance that clumsily ran into their own warriors and, simply put, made a mess of things. If, indeed, these were Indian elephants, or the offspring of Indian elephants born in Egypt, then that would make the African forest elephant obsolete in the true sense of the word.

Careful attention must be placed on the accuracy of the total number of elephants possessed by Philopator in 3 Maccabees. His intentions were to drug 500 elephants and drive them into the arena to kill the Jews. But that count has been hotly debated. The possibility of Philopator is unfeasible, so scholars have tried to devise a likely meaning by the number itself – 500. Philopator had 75 elephants at Raphia. Antiochus possessed, at the time of battle at Raphia, 102 elephants. Ptolemy II is reported to have had 300 war prepared elephants at his disposal (another figure that is questionable). Antiochus Epiphanes possessed 80 elephants. Antiochus Eupator had 32 elephants ready to place in the field at a moment’s notice. One possible solution to the astronomical number used by Philopator to exterminate the Jews would be in the use of the number 500 by those in antiquities, because the number 500 was commonly used by them. The geographer Strabo, for example, attributes 500 elephants to Seleucus I; Plutarch also attributes 500 elephants to him. But scholars have discovered that in India, Indian literature of the Hellenistic period tended to use the number 500 for any large quantity of wide things; these “wide things” included elephants. For example, King Ajatasattu is said to have visited the Buddha with 500

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concubines riding on 500 elephants. It is also said that the king of Brahmadata, king of Benares, possessed 500 elephants. Perhaps this mode of writing was taken on by the Greeks and was incorporated into their literary style (Croy 83).

Another point made by the author of 3 Maccabees has been called into question, rousing doubts of its reliability: the use of intoxicating drink on the elephants in order to excite them into stampeding the Jews. The illogic and redundant reasoning for it would seem counterintuitive because the elephants were already designed – trained – to wreak havoc at a moment's notice. Yet, there are cases of elephants purposefully being “drugged” to cause them to go haywire with rage, not just to simply destroy but, before the inevitable destruction, to cause fear. As in 1 Maccabees 6:34, the armies of Antiochus Eupator offer the elephants fruits of the vine to ready them to fight. Josephus says that Ptolemy VIII Physcon “made elephants drunk in preparation for trampling the Jews of Alexandria, who had been shackled and rounded up” (Croy 84). The second century CE writer Aelian sheds light on the practice of giving rice and cane wine to elephants. Be that as it may, there is no reason to doubt the feasibility of Ptolemy ordering the feeding of intoxicating drink to the elephants.

The irony of it all is that despite all of the multifaceted techniques used to assure that the elephants would utterly annihilate the Jews, they would instead turn on their own soldiers in a state of confusion and wreak havoc and chaos on them. A testament to the Alexandrian Jews that their god was on their side.

It was a common practice in antiquity to add incense to wine to add flavor to the taste. In 3 Maccabees 5:2 a soldier is to give “heaping handfuls of frankincense and much unmixed wine” so that the potent drink might “maddened” the elephants. Unmixed wine was wine that was not diluted by water, making it more intoxicating. Being that the wine was unmixed and contained

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frankincense made it an even more potent drink. The elephants became locked in a frenzied state, which was exactly what Ptolemy wanted it. Unbeknownst to him, the elephants would turn on his own men.

Finally, in 3 Maccabees there is an interesting story regarding elephants that are possessed by the ruthless Ptolemy IV Philopator, king of Egypt. Upset with the Jews for not allowing him entrance into their temple because it was against their law, Ptolemy then devises a plan to persecute and kill the Jewish people. Filled with rage, he summoned Hermon who kept the elephants. He ordered Hermon to drug all of the elephants “with large handfuls of frankincense and plenty of unmixed wine, and to drive them in, maddened by the lavish abundance of drink, so that the Jews might meet their doom” (O’Day 1587). The Jews did not die or be trampled to death by drunken elephants – they were saved by way of supernatural and divine intervention. This story illustrates how much of an asset elephants had become for the Ptolemys.

Ptolemy II’s need for elephants compelled him to establish contacts with his southern rivals. More than just elephants, the Greeks gained access to “a ready supply of African products, including hardwoods, incense, gold, slaves, ivory, and even animals for Egyptian temples and Ptolemy’s zoo (including a rhinoceros), the reports Ptolemaic explorers and hunters prepared revolutionized Greek knowledge of the African interior,” says Burstein. They accurately mapped the principal tributaries of the Nile – the Atbara, Blue Nile, and White Nile.

In turn, the Nubians used Greek architects and masons to build temples, adopt the use of war elephants, and construct a Greek influenced water sanctuary. A set of Greek flutes were discovered in a tomb at Meroe – a rare find that could possibly reveal that Greek musicians performed for the elites of Meroe. Other discoveries consisted of “luxury goods for the elites—

goose-head wine strainers, drinking cups, buckets basins—fragments of wine amphorae, which are found in palace complexes and royal or noble tombs at Meroe and Napata” (Burstein 48-49).

Meroe’s economy was greatly boosted by the need of Ptolemy II for elephants. Being cut off from the supply of India’s elephants forced Ptolemy to secure elephants elsewhere. The port of Ptolemais Theron, “Ptolemais of the Hunts,” was used to funnel through the elephants arriving from Nubia. Even more importantly, this port was used for the trade of other goods. One specific item of importance for both Greek and Nubian partners was the trade in ivory. Even after the elephant trade came to an end between the two, an act that negatively impacted the Nubian economy, the trade in ivory resumed. To attest to that fact, a great triumphant processional was held in Alexandria, around 275 or 274 BCE. To highlight the need and significance of the Nubian population to the Hellenized Egyptians, Nubian gift bearers could be viewed carrying 600 elephant tusks. Vernacular tax receipts also attested to the vastness of the trade between the two states in the dealing in ivory tusks. It came with a price, which was evident in the great decline of the elephant population around the Red Sea region, further negatively impacting the Meroitic economy (Torok 105-106).

Lest the spirit of resistance be diminished by the desire for gain, it is necessary to highlight the uneasy contention between the two powers – the Greeks entering Nubia as conquerors, and the Nubians resisting any form of subjugation. Just as any people would naturally fight against an invading force into their homeland, so did the Nubians. They were reported to have “resisted Ptolemaic commercial and military policy in Nubia” (Snowden 29). In fact, the Nubians were a thorn in the side of the Ptolemaic Egyptians because they would perform whatever deed deemed necessary to fight against subjugation. That battle could come in the form of allying with the very Egyptian insurgents who themselves warred against the

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Nubians at times before the coming of the Greeks; or, the Kushites would besiege the Ptolemies position in and around Upper Egypt. These acts of defiance would earn an appreciation and respect from the Ptolemies, a respect that is evident in the fact that Nubian soldiers could be found in the ranks of the Ptolemaic Egyptian armies: “It is not unlikely that respect for the courage and reputation of Ethiopian warriors gave rise to a Ptolemaic policy of recruiting southern mercenaries” (Snowden 29).

For good or for ill, the Greek’s knowledge of the interior region of Nubia expanded exponentially during this period. Pliny’s reports of certain adventurers who dared to explore this region helps to give insight into Nubian society. The explorers include Timosthenes who commanded the Navy of Philadelphus. He travelled from Syene to Meroe. Dalion was the first Greek to penetrate Ethiopia beyond Meroe. The second century navigator, Eudoxus of Cyzicus, is reported to have “noted the similarities in the language spoken by the inhabitants along the coasts of east and west Africa” (Snowden 29). Diodorus, whom himself had spoken with Meroitic ambassadors living in Egypt, gave the most detailed account of Ptolemaic treaties concerning Nubia in *De Mari Erythraeo* of Agatharchides.

It is during this period that a major milestone was struck, that being the “first titulary of a Nubian ruler to contain the imitation of a contemporary Egyptian Horus and Throne name” (Torok 106). The Greek, Hecataeus, was able to obtain this information from the Egyptian’s archives documenting that a Meroitic king, Aktisanes, who was the first to perform this ritual among the Nubians, thus signifying the revival of the Kushite interest in Egyptian kingship and shows that the Kushites had written records on the grand occasion (Torok 106).

Meroe’s economic growth during this time is evident in the fact that preserved on stray blocks is Aktisanes’ titulary. A temple of Amun of Thebes and Amun of Napata at Gebel Barkal

bears witness to the fact that a renewed interest in Egyptian literacy had begun. Torok states that “an archaizing tendency manifested by the adoption of Egyptian religious texts of the Saite period” (107) clearly shows how obvious the renewed interest in Egyptian literacy had become, that royal titulary was even mixed together with Egyptian Third Intermediate period inspirations with the imitation of early Ptolemaic titles. This can be seen by the astronomical text Bergarawiya and the “titularies Aktisanes” direct successors Aryamani, Kash(...), Irike-Piye-qo, and Sabrakamani, on the other hand (Torok 107).

Pottery design by the Kushites was influenced by the trade of goods the Greeks, a fact that is easily recognizable through study of the many artifacts discovered in Meroe Pottery and finewares clearly reveals Greek impressions adapted by Nubians to form a unique style for the people of that region. The combination of Egyptian, Achaemenid and Hellenized elements demonstrates the ingenuity of Meroitic artisans. One such example could be found in the discovery of bronze winged sphinx figure found in a house in Meroe City, the remains from a censer, the type that resembles the great Tukh el-Karamus treasure (Torok 107). Bowls such as these were frequent and common in Meroe.

Contact with the Ptolemaic Egypt, and the innovations made within Meroitic society, can be seen in the changes made to the burial methods and designs of the tombs during the third century BCE. Found in Begarawiya are “high artistic quality and iconographical innovativeness” of chapel reliefs, and the “...astronomical ceiling from Begarawiya...speak even more eloquently than the imports” because it shows that the high level contacts thoroughly infiltrated the culture and way of thinking by the people and artisans of Meroe (Torok 111). It shows the willingness of the people to adopt certain cultural aspects of the Greeks, without fear or prejudice. It shows the nobleness of the Nubian people to enhance their culture by the means of a

once foreign invader so that their civilization could be even greater in their own eyes and by what they deemed fit to be appropriate for their society.

The diversity of goods received by the Kushites, in exchange for elephants and slaves, cannot be understated, because the wealth of archaeological finds clearly shows how much prosperity was gained. But wealth and prosperity goes beyond mere precious stones and pottery, because before the Greeks came there is no record of the Nubians training elephants for warfare. The Nubians, therefore, acquired a skill that was highly sought after in the ancient world. Yet, at the expense of trivializing the need for precious stones and pottery for the Meroitic society, the importance of that commodity much be mentioned. The Kushites received silver, glass, and bronze from the Greeks, a fact discovered by archaeologists' excavating nearby tombs (Ahmed 305). A noteworthy consequence of the contact between Meroe and Ptolemaic Egypt was the introduction of the *saqia*. This device enabled the Meroites to increase the area of arable land to support an increased population (Ahmed 305).

In conclusion, Ptolemaic Egypt's need for elephants created opportunities for Nubian society to develop its infrastructure, increase its economy, and acquire luxury goods from the Greeks. The Greeks came in as conquerors but both society's would benefit through commerce and trade. African elephants helped to innovate how the Ptolemaic Egyptian army performed warfare. And Ptolemaic Egypt devised an intricate method of rounding up and transporting African elephants from the interior of Africa to Egypt. The complexities of societies are revealed by the intricate partnership between the conquering Greeks and subjugated Nubian civilization. Though both warred with each other at times, they also were able to benefit from the different resources and innovations that were unique to each group. And, on certain occasions, both

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groups fought along side each other to further the influence of the Egyptian empire, thus leading to an improved Nubian social stratification that is evident in archeological remains.

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