

REVOLT IN PTOLEMAIC EGYPT : NATIONALISM REVISITED

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*Breathes there a man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said
This is my own, my native land ?*

Sir Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805)

*What do they say to themselves
In their hearts every day,
Those who are far from Thebes ?
They spend the day dreaming of its name...*

Cerny and Gardiner, Hieratic Ostraca 38, 1 (12th century BC)

It is perhaps a little unfair wholly to identify love of one's homeland with nationalism, although many would be tempted to do so¹. But the famous lines of Scott and the less well known ones from Egypt 3000 years earlier may serve to introduce the conflict between the instinctive « promordialist » view that nations have always existed, and the modernist insistence of many sociologists and anthropologists, most influentially Ernest Gellner, that nationalism is, and can only be, an entirely modern phenomenon². « For Gellner », wrote Uffe Østergård, « nations and nationalism are the exclusive outcomes of and preconditions for industrial society. »³ « Nationalism », according to Kedourie in 1960, was « a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. »⁴

This modernist view came to dominate scholarly thinking in the 1980s and 1990s. Gellner's case was that the structures of society in pre-modern cultures created such a rigid dividing line between the political, military, religious or commercial elites and the food-producing masses that it was impossible for a truly nationalist ideology to develop. Others have seen different difficulties. Numbers, for example, are regarded as crucial by some analysts. Nations can only arise, according to Walker Connor, when « a sufficient portion of people has internalized the national identity so as to cause nationalism to become an effective force for mobilizing the masses »⁵. Benedict Anderson thought that print-capitalism was necessary for the rise of the nation⁶. Just as individuals in Anderson's community imagine the ties that bind them, so, Eric Hobsbawm argued, nationalism and its associated characteristics are a tradition invented to legitimate action and cement group cohesion. This was a strategy devised by ruling elites in the 19th century for the first time to counter the threats posed by the recent development of mass democracy⁷.

With the apparent triumph of the modernist position, all, or almost all, talk of nations and nationalism in the ancient world disappeared. As I observed in reviewing two excellent books on Ptolemaic Egypt, both authors dismissed nationalist sentiment as a factor in the many revolts against Ptolemaic rule entirely on the basis of Gellner's model⁸. This seemed

¹ On Sir Walter Scott and Scottish nationalism, see, for instance, D'Arcy (2005) ; Kelly (2010). On the praise of ancient Thebes, see Lichtheim (1980) 15–23.

² Gellner (2006) 1–14. For a clear introduction to the fine distinctions and different lines of modern thought about nationalism, see Özkirimli (2000).

³ Østergård (1992) 29.

⁴ Kedourie (1960) 1.

⁵ Connor (1994) 223–224.

⁶ Anderson (1991) 38–43.

⁷ Hobsbawm / Ranger (1983) 12 and 264–265.

⁸ Manning (2003) 164–165 (reviewed by McGing [2007] 160–162) ; Veisse (2004) 151 and 245 (reviewed by McGing [2006] 58–63). To be fair to Manning, he does assess Gellner's case, and accepts its general validity : see Manning (2003) 130–133. Interestingly, however, he modifies the rigidity of the stratification of elite

to me, and still does, an unnecessarily meek surrender to sociological dogma. The modernists have not « proved » anything. Gellner's contention, for example, that the rigid dividing line between elite and masses in pre-modern societies made ancient nationalism impossible remains just that – a contention. Hobsbawm may well have shown how modern elites used nationalist ideas to cement group cohesion, but it is merely an assertion that ancient elites could not have had the same idea. Rather than challenging this assertion, Classical scholars sacrificed nationalism on the altar of modern theory and all moved on to replace it with the concept of ethnicity⁹.

The topic is large and complicated ; this paper will seek only to highlight the possibility of some sort of nationalist discourse in the ancient world and reassert its potential relevance to Ptolemaic Egypt. Clearly definitions are at the heart of the matter. A stark refusal to define nations and nationalism as anything other than modern phenomena tends to involve an equally stark refusal to explain any ancient evidence (such as, for example, Perikles' funeral speech) that appears to use the language and concepts of nationalism : it is not modern, therefore it cannot be nationalism.

On the other hand, the interpretative strategy that replaced nationalism with ethnicity has singularly failed to identify a meaningful difference between the two. This can be seen even in the work of Anthony Smith, whose book *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, published in 1986, offered what is probably still the most influential challenge to the modernist position. In 1991 Smith listed the following characteristics of national identity¹⁰ : (1) a named human population ; (2) an historic territory ; (3) common myths and historical memories ; (4) a mass, public culture ; (5) a common economy ; (6) common legal rights and duties. His definition of an ethnic community was alarmingly similar¹¹ : (1) a collective proper name ; (2) a myth of common ancestry ; (3) shared historical memories ; (4) one or more differentiating elements of a common culture ; (5) an association with a specific homeland ; (6) a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. Definitional confusions like this have inspired two extensive reassessments of the scholarship on nationalism and ethnicity. Together, David Goodblatt's *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism* and Aviel Roshwald's *The Endurance of Nationalism* – both published in 2006 – constitute the most sustained assault on both the exclusively modernist definition of nationalism and on the attempt to distinguish a nation from an ethnic group¹². Their conclusion that nationality and ethnicity have been used interchangeably, and are not sufficiently different to have heuristic value, is highly persuasive. If they are the same, of course, then why is ethnicity any less anachronistic than nationalism ? Their answer is that the concept is not anachronistic : nationalism, even in terms of contemporary sociological theory, did exist in the ancient world.

For present purposes I adopt Roshwald's definition of terms¹³ : « I will use the term “nation” to refer to any community larger than one of mutual acquaintance that claims some form of collective, bounded, territorial sovereignty in the name of its distinctive

groups, which lies at the very heart of the argument, and in accepting a degree of cultic, bureaucratic and military cohesion in Egyptian society undermines Gellner's basic position. For the intensity of the Egyptian sense of political community, see Goelet (2003) 20.

⁹ As noted by Walbank (2000) 19.

¹⁰ Smith (1991) 14.

¹¹ Smith (1991) 21.

¹² Goodblatt (2006) 1–27 ; Roshwald (2006) 8–44.

¹³ Roshwald (2006) 3. See also Goodblatt (2006) 26–27 : « By national identity I mean a belief in a common descent and shared culture available for mass political mobilization. By shared culture I mean that certain cultural factors are seen as criteria for, or indications of, membership in the national group. Which cultural factors are singled out as criteria or indicators may shift over time. Also, the kinship or the cultural factors or both may not in fact be shared. What counts is that people believe they are and are ready to act on that basis. Finally by nationalism I mean the invocation of national identity as the basis for mass mobilization and action. »

identity, or any population in its capacity as a society on whose behalf such claims are asserted. “Nationalism” refers to any ideology or set of attitudes, emotions, and mentalities based on the assertion of such claims (...). “Ethnic group” and “nationality” will be used interchangeably to refer to a population larger than an actual kinship group that considers itself – or is considered by a significant proportion of its members – to be bound by a common ancestry and historical experience, as manifested in shared cultural characteristics (including emotional attachment to a specific territory) that mark it apart from the rest of humanity. »

The candidates Goodblatt and Roshwald propose for « national » status in the ancient world are perhaps the most obvious ones : the Jews and the Greeks. They are the most obvious because they have left extensive literary traces of themselves and seem very interested in self definition ; it is difficult to talk about nationality or ethnicity solely from the material record. By the Hellenistic age (possibly before) the Jews had acquired a highly developed sense of their own god, religion, descent, history, language, culture and territory, none of which belonged to anyone else, although new members could be admitted. These are the commonly accepted identifiers of nationhood. The question arises whether the Jewish scriptures, on which we rely for our knowledge of Jewish society, can have been disseminated widely enough for the ideology to be considered nationalist. Goodblatt argues that public reading of scripture did spread the ideology throughout the community¹⁴. But Roshwald makes a crucial additional point. Even if the Jewish scriptures « represented the outlook of an alienated minority of priests and prophets, rather than the cultural mainstream of the society they lived in », it is still distinctively nationalist elements that they incorporated into their religious perspective¹⁵. This may not fit the criterion of mass mobilization required by some modernist definitions, but at the very least it must be explained how you can have nationalist rhetoric without nationalism itself.

When it comes to the Greeks, the *polis*, usually assumed to be too small to qualify as an imagined community, has stood in the way of accepting nationalism as a valid interpretative tool¹⁶. Much discussed passages of Herodotus and Isocrates point towards the possibility of a general Greek nationality:

It may have been natural for you to worry in case we came to terms with Xerxes, but we still think your fear reflects badly on you, because you are perfectly well aware of the Athenian temperament. You should have known that there isn't enough gold on earth, or any land of such outstanding beauty and fertility, that we would accept it in return for collaborating with the enemy and enslaving Greece. Even if we were inclined to do so, there are plenty of important obstacles in the way. First and foremost, there is the burning and destruction of the statues and homes of the gods ; rather than entering into a treaty with the perpetrator of these deeds, we are duty-bound to do our utmost to avenge them. Then again, there is the fact that we are all Greeks – one race speaking one language, with temples to the gods and religious rites in common, and with a common way of life. It would not be good for Athens to betray all this shared heritage. So if you didn't know it before, we can assure you that so long as even a single Athenian remains alive, we will never come to terms with Xerxes. (Hdt. 8, 144 ; transl. Robin Waterfield)

So far has our city left other men behind with regard to wisdom and expression that its students have become the teachers of others. The result is that the name of the Hellenes no longer seems to indicate an ethnic affiliation but a disposition. Indeed those who are called « Hellenes » are those who share our culture rather than a common biological inheritance. (Isoc. Panegyricus 50)

¹⁴ Goodblatt (2006) 28–48.

¹⁵ Roshwald (2006) 18.

¹⁶ See Finley (1986) ch. 7 « The Ancient Greeks and their Nation ».

On the whole, the scattered nature of Greek society has militated against a nationalist reading : the vagueness of the territorial, cultural and linguistic boundaries of « Greece » tend to be seen as problematic¹⁷. However that might be, and in spite of the interpretative difficulties of the Herodotus passage, it is certainly the case that at one level it combines kinship and culture in a call on the masses, couched in a manifestly nationalistic rhetoric, to defend the homeland¹⁸. Edward Cohen in his book *The Athenian Nation* (2000), followed by Roshwald, has argued that Athens itself could be seen as a « nation »¹⁹. It was big enough to be an imagined community (and was not, as the Athenians themselves may have liked to think, a « face-to-face » village society), and they presented themselves as bound by common kinship, territory and culture. This again is undoubtedly the language of nationalism, and there is no better example of it than Pericles' funeral speech (Thuc. 2, 35–46), as the following excerpts demonstrate :

(36) I shall begin by with our ancestors : it is only just and proper that they should have the honor of the first mention on an occasion like the present. They dwelt in the country without break in the succession from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valour (...). (37) Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states ; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few ; that is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences ; if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit ; nor again does poverty bar the way : if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his position. The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. (...) But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. (...) (38) Further, we provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round. (...) (39) In education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger. (...) (41) Such is the Athens for which these men, in the assertion of their resolve not to lose her, nobly fought and died. (...) (42) There is justice in the claim that steadfastness in his country's battles should be a cloak to cover a man's imperfections, since the good action has blotted out the bad, and his merit as a citizen more than outweighed his demerits as an individual. But none of these allowed either wealth with its prospect of future enjoyment to unnerve his spirit, or poverty with its hope of a day of freedom and riches to tempt him to shrink from danger. No, holding that vengeance upon their enemies was more to be desired than any personal blessings, and reckoning this to be the most glorious of hazards, they joyfully determined to accept the risk, to make sure of their vengeance and to let their wishes wait. (...) Thus choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face, and after one brief moment, while at the summit of their fortune, left behind them not their fear, but their glory. In the fighting they thought it more honourable to stand their ground and suffer death than to give in and save their lives (...) (43) You must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and feed your eyes upon her from day to day, till love of her fills your hearts. (transl. R. Strassler)

The attachment to the land, the love of country, the pride in one's own and distinctive political system, religious practice, education, public entertainment, private leisure activities – all this is paraded to promote the mobilization of the masses in defence of their homeland. Even if you regard this as the construct of a small elite, it seems absurd to argue that a nationalist discourse – of some sort – is not in play here.

¹⁷ Gellner (2006) 1.

¹⁸ For detailed discussion, see Hall (2002) 189–193.

¹⁹ Cohen (2000) 79–129 especially ; Roshwald (2006) 22–30.

I have thought it worth emphasizing the state of the question, and the vigorous case that has been made for ancient Jewish or Athenian nationalism. For if nationalism can be argued to exist even in a single ancient context it clearly becomes a valid question to ask of other peoples and places. Do we have reason to suggest that there might have been such a thing as an Egyptian nation that could be mobilized into action by the consciousness of its nationhood? Our sources make this a rather harder task to investigate than when talking about the Jews and Greeks. The surviving Egyptian voice is, in comparison with Greek literature, a very different one. And the vast papyrological documentation of the Ptolemaic period originates, not exclusively but largely, in colonising circles.

The notion of the « lord of the two lands » (Upper and Lower Egypt) whether as a title for gods or pharaohs, certainly defines the land of Egypt and its ownership²⁰. « Perhaps the most striking feature of Egyptian civilization », François Hartog has claimed, « is its autochthony. »²¹ I am not sure to what extent this was a conscious claim, but as Hartog continues, « as far back as they looked into the past the Egyptians did not see anyone but themselves and the gods ». With regard to a sense of community, throughout Egyptian history the sources display a consciousness of foreign invasion, and many of the narratives celebrate the heroes and glorious past of pharaonic Egypt²².

Foreigners and the return of native rule feature in the three oracles associated with the Ptolemaic period, the *Oracle of the Lamb*, the *Oracle of the Potter* and the *Demotic Oracle*²³. In the best known part of the *Oracle of the Potter* the Agathos Daimon will leave Alexandria and go to Memphis; Alexandria will become a drying place for fishermen, because Agathos Daimon and Knephis have gone to Memphis²⁴. The *Demotic Oracle* looks to a time when a man from Herakleopolis will rule after the foreigners (the Persians) and the Greeks, and the prophet of Harsaphes will rejoice²⁵. And in the *Oracle of the Lamb* (P.Rainer Cent. 3), after 900 years an indigenous saviour king will overthrow the foreigners, ransack Nineveh, take control of Syria and bring back the cult statues.

As Dielmann and Moyer suggest, the conflation of different imperial pasts, Assyrian, Persian, Seleucid, points to « the idea and trauma of foreign invasion and occupation »²⁶. This all used to be described, as in the title of Lloyd's 1982 article, as anti-Greek propaganda, but some have doubted it²⁷. It is not easy to see how it could be anything other than anti-Greek, even if not rabidly so, but for my present purpose the important thing is the sustained notion of what Gellner called « a quite outstandingly intolerable breach of political propriety » for nationalists, when the rulers of the political unit do not belong to the same nation as the majority of the ruled²⁸.

Of course, we do not know how widely dispersed the oracles were, and thus to what extent, if any, they mobilized nationalist sentiment, although it would be foolish to underestimate the ability of oral and widely illiterate societies to disseminate written information²⁹. The same problem applies to Manetho. It is difficult even to establish Manetho's actual words, but we can see the general shape of the work. It was based on traditional Egyptian king-lists, interspersed with stories derived from Egyptian narrative literature³⁰. The story of the Hyksos / shepherd kings who wanted to eradicate Egypt and ruled for 511

²⁰ On the « two lands », see most recently Haring (2010) 218.

²¹ Hartog (2000) 385.

²² Dielmann / Moyer (2010) 436.

²³ See Lloyd (1982) 33–55; Dielmann / Moyer (2010) 439.

²⁴ The standard text is Koenen (1968) 178–209; see also Koenen (1984) 9–13.

²⁵ See the translation quoted in Lloyd (1982) 42.

²⁶ Dielmann / Moyer (2010) 439.

²⁷ Johnson (1984) 107–124.

²⁸ Gellner (2006) 1.

²⁹ See in general Thomas (1989); Thomas (1992).

³⁰ Dielmann / Moyer (2010) 442.

years before a native king from the Thebaid revolted and expelled them – recorded in Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1, 73–92 – highlights the common theme of foreign invasion and occupation. Was Manetho an identifiably nationalist writer? Dillery thought that « while not strictly an oppositional work, it is not a product of collaboration either »³¹. The attempt to establish on a firm basis the succession of pharaohs right back to Hephaestus obviously reflects an Egyptian consciousness and a tie with the land that could be part of a nationalist agenda. But we are so far away from being able to establish exactly how and what Manetho wrote that it is always going to be difficult to assess the degree and nature of the Egyptianness he represents.

These are rather slim pickings for someone seeking the ancient Egyptian nation. We may know that Egypt had a highly distinctive culture, particularly with respect to religion and language, with kings tied to a territory from time immemorial and at least some strand in society that did not like foreign rulers. But we cannot really see if the Egyptian people at large made these claims for themselves and used them for a nationalist agenda. So when you do have evidence for the mobilisation of the Egyptian masses, in the stories of revolt against Ptolemaic rule, it is only natural to test the nationalist hypothesis. Two examples will suffice.

First, Polybius' well known explanation for Egyptian truculence in the years after the battle of Raphia in 217 (Pol. 5, 107)³² :

Πτολεμαίῳ γε μὴν εὐθέως ἀπὸ τούτων τῶν καιρῶν συνέβαινε γίνεσθαι τὸν πρὸς τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους πόλεμον. ὁ γὰρ προειρημένος βασιλεὺς καθοπλίσας τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους ἐπὶ τὸν πρὸς Ἀντίοχον πόλεμον πρὸς μὲν τὸ παρὸν ἐνδεχομένως ἐβουλεύσατο, τοῦ δὲ μέλλοντος ἡετόχησε· φρονηματικθέντες γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ περὶ Ῥαφίαν προτερήματος, οὐκέτι τὸ προσταττόμενον οἰοί τ' ἦσαν ὑπομένειν, ἀλλ' ἐζήτουν ἡγεμόνα καὶ πρόσωπον, ὡς ἱκανοὶ βοηθεῖν ὄντες αὐτοῖς. ὃ καὶ τέλος ἐποίησαν οὐ μετὰ πολλὸν χρόνον.

In Egypt war broke out, immediately after the point in time we have reached, between Ptolemy and his Egyptian subjects. Ptolemy's decision to arm the Egyptians for the war against Antiochus had been sound under the circumstances, but in the long run proved to be a mistake. Filled with confidence after their victory at Raphia, the Egyptian troops refused to take orders from Ptolemy and, feeling that they were capable of looking after their own interests, began to search for someone to lead them and champion their independence. Which they finally achieved not long afterwards. (transl. Robin Waterfield)

It would need considerable ingenuity to argue that Polybius had something in mind other than ethnic tension as a factor in the revolt Ptolemy IV faced. There were 20 000 Egyptians at Raphia (5, 65, 9) and their role in the victory gave them a sense of communal confidence as Egyptians, so that they stopped taking orders from their Greek officers and looked for their own leader. They found one and he led them into revolt. That is Polybius' explanation for what happened. What rhetoric this leader used to bring the Egyptians with him beyond that of Egyptian solidarity and refusal to accept Greek control, we do not hear. Economic oppression may well be an element, but it is not, in Polybius' stated view, what sparked the problem. I think we are compelled to accept that, whether he got it right or not, Polybius presents this as a concrete example of Egyptian group consciousness and the dislike for foreign authority that we saw rather more elusively in the Egyptian literary sources.

Second, in the great revolt of the Thebaid from 206–186 led by Haronnophris and Chaonnophris, we do not have any such clear statement of what impelled the rebels. But it is harder to deny nationalist sentiment than it is to allow it. The texts from rebel areas are

³¹ Dillery (1999) 112.

³² See McGing (1997) 278–283.

all dated to the regnal years of the new pharaohs, whose names indicate that they were presenting themselves as the messianic restorers of legitimate royalty, expelling the enemies of Osiris and ushering in a new golden age³³. There could hardly be a clearer nationalist message. Veïsse accepts all this, but argues that it does not say anything about the motivation of the partisans of the revolt. But all rulers need the validation of their subjects and they seek it in the identities they create. And the identity Haronnophris and Chaonnophris create is an explicitly nationalist one.

In addition all texts from rebel areas were written in Demotic, which at least brings to mind the use of Hebrew in the revolts of the Jews against Roman rule³⁴. Greeks become very scarce in the Thebaid, the priesthood goes along with the rebels, and as Veïsse suggests it may be that the new pharaohs redirected the taxes to their own account thus restoring administrative normality³⁵. The secession of the south of Egypt lasted for twenty years, in which time the new government defied the best generals and armies of the Ptolemaic state. That personal opportunism and other group motivations were involved can be documented, but at root this looks like a highly successful revolt, driven by among other things nationalist sentiment directed against the foreign rule of the Ptolemies.

What I have tried to do in this paper is report the challenge to the modernist case which denies the possibility of nationalism before the 18th century, and emphasize the possibilities that emerge. No one is seeking to deny that the modern world is very different from the ancient. Ancient societies were not modern nation-states, they did not have public education or the printing-press or the internet or any number of other modern means of communication. All this creates a sort of universal nationalist discourse that was not there in the ancient world. The argument is simply one about possibilities. Scholars have demonstrated that modern models of nations and nationalism, stripped of some of their most extreme circularity, can be applied meaningfully to ancient communities. Was Egypt a « nation » ? Perhaps the case cannot be proved, but nor can it be dismissed. I believe that when it comes to revolt in the Ptolemaic period the evidence requires us to apply the nationalist model as part of our attempt to understand what was going on. It does not explain everything or all instances of resistance to Ptolemaic rule. But to deny it altogether is to look on the subject with one eye closed.

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³³ See Clarysse (1978) 243–253 ; Clarysse (1995) 3–18 ; McGing (1997) 285–289 ; Veïsse (2004) 95–99.

³⁴ On Hebrew as a national language, see Schwartz (1995) 3–47 ; Goodblatt (2006) 49–70 ; and as a symbol of nationalist resistance, Cotton (1999) 225.

³⁵ Veïsse (2004) 98.

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