Behind the votive throne dedicated by an unnamed Axumite negus lay an imposing basalt stele inscribed in Greek, as Cosmas Indicopleustes observed when he went to Adulis in the sixth century AD. The language of the inscription has been universally agreed to be authentic, and so the text transports us back into a remote and unfamiliar epoch in the history of ancient Ethiopia. The subject is the military prowess and overseas conquests of a Hellenistic king, whose name, given with full family details, guarantees that he is Ptolemy III of Egypt, also called Euergetes, who ruled from 246 to 221 BC. The royal house of Egypt took its origins after the death of Alexander the Great from one of his successors called Ptolemy, whose father Lagos supplied the traditional dynastic name of Lagid for all the Ptolemies who ruled Egypt. The inscription is
written in the third person but presumably reflects the public image of himself that Ptolemy wished to project, and it boasts of extensive campaigns abroad from Thrace to Mesopotamia. Cosmas’ transcription of the text naturally does not provide any indication of the line divisions of the original, but he observed that the stele was broken off at the bottom and thus lacked its concluding part. But, as we have noted earlier, Cosmas was under the mistaken impression that the text inscribed on the stele had been continued into the Greek text that he found written on the throne that stood in front of it.

The Ptolemaic inscription provides a tantalizing glimpse into the extravagant claims of Ptolemy III in foreign policy—claims that need to be understood in the context of his administrative and personal struggles in Egypt. It furnishes details, many of questionable veracity, concerning his conflict in Asia Minor and Syria with the king Seleucus II, whose royal line represented another of the successors of Alexander. Ptolemy’s war with Seleucus is generally known as the Third Syrian War. In addition, and most remarkably, the inscription reveals the exploitation of Ethiopia to secure local elephants for military use abroad. Here is what Cosmas read on the basalt stone:

Great King Ptolemy, son of King Ptolemy and Queen Arsinoe, who are brother and sister gods, themselves the children of King Ptolemy and Queen Berenice, who are savior gods, a descendant on his father’s side from Heracles, son of Zeus, and on his mother’s side from Dionysus, son of Zeus, having assumed from his father a royal dominion of Egypt,
Libya, Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Lycia, Caria, and the Cyclades islands, led an expedition into Asia with a force of infantry, cavalry, a fleet of ships, and elephants from Troglodytis and Ethiopia. These animals his father and he himself first hunted out from these places and brought to Egypt for use in war. Having become master of all the land west of the Euphrates—Cilicia, Pamphylia, Ionia, the Hellespont, Thrace, and of all the armed forces in those lands as well as Indian elephants, and having brought the monarchs in all those places into subjection to him, he crossed the Euphrates river and subdued Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Susiana, Persis, Media, and all the remaining territory as far as Bactriana. He recovered all the holy objects that had been carried away from Egypt by the Persians, and he carried them back to Egypt with the rest of the treasure from the region. He sent his forces by way of canals that had been dug. . . .

The text breaks off abruptly after these grandiloquent claims to world conquest, from Thrace on the western shore of the Bosporus all the way to the heartland of the Persian empire as far as modern Afghanistan (Bactriana). It is tempting to believe that Ptolemy wanted this commemorative inscription erected in such a remote spot as Adulis both because this was a region in which he and his father had hunted elephants for military use, and also because he could thereby stake a claim to such a remote territory by frightening off others who might
wish to control the area. Certainly the Nubian lands that extended southwards from the Thebaid and the first two cataracts of the Nile could not have been formally subject to the Lagid rulers of Egypt, but they were clearly accessible to them, most probably from the Red Sea but possibly, for seafarers in the Indian Ocean, from the east coast of Africa opposite the Gulf of Aden. Hellenistic settlements on the Red Sea coast at Philotera and Ptolemaïs Thérôn ("of the Hunts") are both connected with the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the father of Ptolemy III, and although their foundation cannot be dated with precision, both were clearly designed to facilitate the hunting of elephants.¹

There remains, of course, the possibility that the Adulis stele was brought to the south at some later time from another place farther to the north, but there can be little doubt that it was already located on the site where Cosmas saw it at the time when the Axumite throne was constructed. This is because the Ptolemaic inscription on the stele so obviously inspired the later text on the throne. Although Adulis is wholly unknown to the historical record for the time of Ptolemy III, it would be perfectly reasonable, in view of its importance for the ivory trade in the Augustan age and later, as reflected both by Juba II and the author of the Periplus, to imagine elephant hunting as widespread in the region during the third century BC.²

The titulature and filiation of Ptolemy on the inscription, including the names of his incestuous parents (they were brother and sister) as well as the names of their own divinized parents, is exactly as contemporary convention prescribed. Similarly conventional is the use of the adjective megas, "great,"
with Ptolemy’s name. This self-aggrandizing adjective deserves special emphasis here because it was not forgotten later by the Ethiopian rulers in the region, who revived it. The cultic designations for brother-sister gods (theoi adelphi) and savior gods (theoi sôtères) are no less accurate than Ptolemy’s titulature in reflecting contemporary usage. They properly convey the cultic honors that were given to the royal family at the time. Egyptian rulers appear to have practiced incest without embarrassment and to have celebrated this liaison in deification after death.\(^3\)

The more remote divine ancestry that the inscription provides for Ptolemy—descent from the mythological gods Heracles and Dionysus—may well explain a puzzling item in Cosmas’ account of the throne. There he reports that on the back behind the seat, two male images appeared, presumably of divinities and connected in some way with the inscribed text. Cosmas identifies them as Heracles and Hermes, whom his companion interpreted to be symbols of power and wealth, but Cosmas himself speculated most unconvincingly that Hermes ought rather to be understood symbolically as a representation of the divine Word.\(^4\)

The two figures on the back of the throne might at first be thought to represent Heracles and Dionysus because they are the two that were named on the Ptolemaic inscription. But that text had, after all, been inscribed at least three or four centuries before the throne. It still remains possible, however, that the two figures were put there to represent a parallel claim to divine ancestry on the part of the king at Axum, whose inscription is the one that actually appears on the throne. When we turn to that text in the next chapter, it will become apparent

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that the Axumite ruler must have had the boasts of Ptolemy in mind, because we know that the pre-Christian rulers of Axum had Greek equivalents for their own pagan gods. So the images of two gods on the back of the throne could well owe their origin, in a remote way, to the two who are named in Ptolemy’s inscription.

The emphasis on elephants in this text seems to reflect its placement in a part of East Africa where both elephant hunts and trade in ivory were common. That does not of course mean that Ptolemy and his father, or their surrogates, necessarily did their hunting in the immediate vicinity of Adulis. The reference to Trogodytis (more correctly Trogo­dytis) as well as to Ethiopia indicates that the hunting went on across a very large territory well to the east of the Nile in East Africa. The territory of Trogodytis first appears in the fifth century BC in Herodotus, who called its inhabitants Trogodytes, “cave dwellers,” known for running fast, eating snakes, and squealing like bats. He located them vaguely in Ethiopia, but four centuries later the geographer Strabo placed them clearly between the Nile and the Red Sea, and it was in the intervening period between these two writers that Ptolemy III made his allusion to Trogodytis as a region for elephant hunting. The name of Ptolemaïs of the Hunts, which lay on the west coast of the Red Sea, presumably reflects the activity and roughly the chronological period to which Ptolemy refers. In the days of the Periplus, a little less than a century after Strabo, the elder Pliny wrote that the Trogodytes, “who live on the border of Ethiopia,” made their living exclusively from hunting elephants.
A few documentary texts on papyrus provide tantalizing glimpses into the elephant industry of this period and the compensation paid to those who worked in it. Two are dated to the last years of the reign of Ptolemy III, and one explicitly mentions elephant ships at Berenice, including a ship that had sunk—presumably from its heavy load. An old canal was reopened linking the Nile and the Red Sea to facilitate contacts across the region, and conceivably this was the canal to which Ptolemy alludes in the enigmatic last words that survive from the inscription on the Adulis stele. 8

The register of overseas territories that Ptolemy inherited from his father, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, is impressive and, to a large extent, supported by textual evidence: Libya (i.e, Cyrenaica), Phoenicia, Syria (so-called Coele or “Hollow” Syria adjacent to Phoenicia), Cyprus, as well as Lycia and Caria in Asia Minor, and the islands of the Cyclades from which Mediterranean piracy could be held in check. 9

Surprisingly, the inscription returns to elephants in its account of Ptolemaic control of Thrace, where the writer takes care to distinguish the elephants found there as Indian, which were markedly larger animals than the so-called forest elephants that the Ptolemies hunted in Africa. In fact, a decree from Samothrace, honoring a Ptolemaic general, confirms Egyptian control of the Hellespont and Thrace, although it makes no reference to elephants. 10 They presumably arrived there with Alexander’s army on its way back from India under Antigonus the One-Eyed during his brief hegemony over Asia Minor and Greece at the end of the fourth century BC.
The occasion for inscribing the stele that Cosmas describes can be determined with considerable precision. Ptolemy's titulature at the beginning lacks the epithet Euergetes ("benefactor"), which we know to have been attached to his name no later than September of 243, whereas the war that took him into Mesopotamia began soon after the death of Antiochus II in 246. Antiochus had been married to Ptolemy's sister Berenice, but not long before he died he divorced his Egyptian queen in favor of the Syrian Laodice. The new queen was established in Ephesus, while the former one remained at Antioch in Syria. Hence, when Antiochus died and was succeeded by Seleucus II, Ptolemy took the opportunity to launch a war to avenge the repudiation of his sister and to weaken Seleucid control in the East wherever possible. Ptolemy arrived in 246 at Seleucia, the port of Antioch, to great fanfare, according to a famous papyrus document that describes the ceremony, and we know that he then made his way as far as Babylon, where he had to turn back. The invasion of Mesopotamia and the arrival in Babylon are not only attested in ancient literary texts but in a cuneiform document, now in the British Museum, that is a fragment from a Babylonian chronicle. Ptolemy's retreat to Egypt appears to have been, at least in part, caused by sedition at home, but he was certainly back in his kingdom well before he received the title of Euergetes.

Accordingly the events in the Adulis text must be placed between late 246 and 244 BC. There is every sign of gross exaggeration in celebrating Ptolemy's war. The references to Lagid control in Asia Minor do not represent conquests of Ptolemy III himself, but of his predecessors in the third

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THE THRONE OF ADULIS

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The Adulis text is thus highly tendentious, possibly one of many efforts to fortify the Egyptian monarchy in the face of the uprising that forced Ptolemy to return to Egypt. By asserting himself in Ethiopia he may have seen a means of securing his southern frontier as well as his control of ports on the Red Sea. The basalt on which the inscription was cut presumably came from the highlands around Axum, which is rich in this volcanic stone, and it argues strongly against any suggestion that the inscription might have been brought to Adulis from somewhere else.

Four centuries, more or less, must have passed between inscribing the basalt stele of Ptolemy III and the dedication of the Axumite marble throne in front of it. Nothing is known of Adulis in those years apart from the ivory trade that is documented in the *Periplus*, which confirms the continuation of elephant hunting in the highlands of Ethiopia. There is no further trace of Ptolemaic presence in the city. The later kings of Hellenistic Egypt would undoubtedly have found it inaccessible at a time when the kingdom of Meroë in upper Nubia, between the fifth and sixth cataracts and corresponding roughly to modern Sudan, became increasingly strong and aggressive as a power to the south of the Ptolemies. Meroë's dominion went back to the seventh century BC, but it grew prosperous from caravan trading in metal, glass, and ivory. Although it had no outlet on the sea, it maintained a grip on products that found their way to the merchants on the coast.

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Even Augustus was obliged to turn his attention to Meroë, to which he sent an expedition under C. Petronius, the prefect of Egypt, soon after assuming sole authority at Rome as Princeps, and this happened very soon after he had already sent an unsuccessful expedition under Aelius Gallus, the previous prefect of Egypt, into South Arabia. He realized at that early time in his principate that the economic and political fortunes of both sides of the Red Sea were closely linked. The kings of Axum were soon to discover that the burgeoning Meroitic empire, encompassing the upper Nile as well as the Blue and White Nile, was as much of an obstacle for Ethiopia’s access to Egypt as it had been for Augustus in trying to organize Egypt as a Roman province. Like Augustus, the Ethiopian ruler had also eventually to turn his attention to South Arabia. We shall see that the Ethiopian king who celebrated his achievements alongside Ptolemy’s almost half a millennium later at Adulis boasted that he had to confront his northern neighbors along the Nile at the very same time as he laid claim to territories in the peninsula on the other side of the Red Sea. This was not only warfare on two fronts, but warfare on two continents. Bringing troops from one to the other involved crossing the Red Sea, and naturally for a king at Axum the best harbor lay in the Gulf of Zula near Adulis.