THE SACRED CROCODILE OF JUBA II
OF MAURETANIA

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Introduction

Among the theories presented regarding the source and course of the Nile in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (5.51) was that espoused by King Juba II of Mauretania:

\begin{quote}
\textit{ut Iuba rex potuit exquirere, in monte inferioris Mauretaniae non procul oceano habet lacu protinus stagnante, quem vocant Niludem. ibi piscis reperiuntur alabetae, coracini, siluri. crocodilus quoque inde ob argu-mentum hoc Caesareae in Iseo dicatus ab eo spectatur hodie.}
\end{quote}

So far as King Juba was able to ascertain, [the Nile] has its origin in a mountain of lower Mauretania not far from the Ocean, and immediately forms a stagnant lake called Nilides. Fish found in this lake are the \textit{alabeta}, \textit{coracimus} and \textit{silurns}; also a crocodile was brought from it by Juba to prove his theory, and consecrated in the temple of Isis at Caesarea, where it is on view today.

Duane Roller has suggested that, in placing the crocodile in the Iseum, Juba was imitating the Carthaginian explorer Hanno.\footnote{D.W. Roller, \textit{The World of Juba II and Kleopatra Selene: Royal Scholarship on Rome’s African Frontier} (London 2003) 193.} Juba was well acquainted with Hanno and his achievements; he came across a copy of the explorer’s record of his voyage around Africa that had been transcribed into Greek from a Punic inscription and wrote a commentary on it, in addition to later using the work as a source for his treatise on Libya.\footnote{Amm. Marc. 22.15.8; Ath. 3.83c. On the different versions of Hanno’s account of his voyage that were circulating in antiquity, see D.W. Roller, “The West African voyage of Hanno the Carthaginian”, \textit{AncW} 37 (2006) 115-25, especially 115-18.} This record included Hanno’s report of an encounter with a strange race:

\begin{quote}
καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ νῆσῳ ἦν ἑτέρα, μεστῇ ἀνθρώπων ἄγριῶν. πολὺ δὲ πλείους ἦσαν γυναίκες, δασεία τ öz σώμασιν ὡς οἱ ἐρμηνεῖς ἐκά-
\end{quote}
On the lake was another island full of wild men. By far the majority of them were women with hairy bodies. The interpreters called them ‘gorillas’. When we chased them we were unable to catch the men for they all fled from our hands since they climbed up steep rocks and pelted us with stones. However, we captured three women who bit and scratched those who led them and did not want to follow. So we killed and flayed them and took their skins to Carthage.3

Interestingly, Hanno’s account does not detail what was done with the skins once he and his men arrived back in Carthage. However, according to Pliny the Elder (NH 6.200) they were dedicated to the goddess Juno, whom the Carthaginians worshipped as Tinnit:

penetravit in eas Hanno Poenorum imperator prodiditque hirta feminarum corpora, viros pernicitate evasisse; duarum Gorgadum cutes argumenti et miraculi gratia in Iunonis templo posuit, spectatas usque ad Carthaginem captam.

Hanno penetrated as far as these regions, and brought back an account that the bodies of the women were covered with hair, but that the men, through their swiftness of foot, made their escape; in proof of which singularity in their skin, and as evidence of a fact so miraculous, he placed the skins of two of these Gorgades in the temple of Juno, which were to be seen there until the capture of Carthage.

The extracts from the Natural History detailing Juba’s and Hanno’s actions are very similar; in the space of a paragraph, Pliny details the expedition, the wildlife discovered during the course of the expedition and their subsequent dedication in the temple of a pre-eminent female deity. However, there are also significant differences. While Hanno is explicitly described as having dedicated the skins (cutes), Juba is described as having dedicated the crocodile itself and no mention is made of the creature having been killed, skinned or stuffed first. This discrepancy, combined with the fact that Hanno’s own

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account makes no mention of the dedication of the gorilla skins, calls into question the validity of Roller’s explanation for Juba’s curious dedication. Hanno’s gorillas were remarkable because of their close resemblance to humans, while their most significant difference was their hairy skin, and it was in this difference and the hairy skin that embodied it that their value lay. However, the crocodile from Lake Nilides had no intrinsic value. Rather, it was the presence of the creature that was significant, linking Lake Nilides with the River Nile and through this, Mauretania with Egypt. These links had previously been promoted by an epigram attributed to Crinagoras that is thought to have been written to commemorate Juba II and Cleopatra Selene’s dynastic marriage. An alternative explanation is that, rather than imitating Hanno’s dedication, Juba was in fact imitating the dedication of the crocodiles that were found in the temples of Sobek in the Fayum in Egypt.

The sacred crocodiles of Sobek

The sacred crocodiles of the Sobek temples were regarded as something of a phenomenon throughout the ancient world. Before Octavian’s annexation of Egypt in 30 BC they were discussed in works as diverse as Herodotus’ *Histories* (2.69) and Aristotle’s *On the History of Animals* (9.1). The earliest surviving record of a Roman citizen travelling to Egypt, a papyrus letter dating to 5 March 112 BC, contains an itinerary that includes a visit to Petesouchos and the sacred crocodiles at Arsinoe, also known as Crocodilopolis.

It is entirely possible that Juba, raised in Octavian’s household in Rome with access to the finest tutors money could buy, such as Alexander Polyhistor and Athenodorus of Tarsus, came to know of the sacred crocodiles of Sobek by reading about them. However, what is more probable is that

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4 For the use of Roman temples as repositories for unusual objects, see P. Rehak, ‘Livia’s dedication in the Temple of Dius Augustus on the Palatine’, *Latomus* 49 (1990) 117-25, especially 119.
7 *P. Tebt* 33; for tourism in Egypt during the Roman period, see J.G. Milne ‘Greek and Roman tourists in Egypt’, *JEA* 3 (1916) 76-80.
8 Suet. *Gram.* 20: Alexander Polyhistor taught at least one member of Octavian’s household, a young boy called Hyginus who originated from either Alexandria or
Cleopatra Selene, also a member of Octavian’s household from 30 BC until 25 BC, after which she and Juba were married and resident in the client kingdom of Mauretania, drew his attention to them.

**Cleopatra Selene**

Cleopatra Selene was the daughter of Cleopatra VII and Marcus Antonius, the Roman triumvir, and thus a member of Egypt’s ruling Ptolemaic dynasty. The Ptolemies had a long history of both supporting and worshipping the sacred animals of Egypt; the practice was begun by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, when he sacrificed to the Apis bull and other native Egyptian deities in order to make his rule acceptable to the Egyptians (Arr. *Anab.* 3.1.4). Ptolemy I Soter is known to have built a temple dedicated to Soknebtunis, one of Sobek’s local manifestations, at Tebtunis. This temple was later enlarged and completed by Ptolemy XII. There are other indications that the Ptolemies honoured the sacred crocodiles, in addition to the more prominent deities such as the Apis bull. According to Plutarch in *On the Wisdom of Animals* (Mor. 976 C; cf. Ael. *NA* 8.4):

> πάλαι δ’ ιστοροῦσα, Πτολεμαίου τοῦ βασιλέως παρακαλομένου, τὸν ίερὸν κροκόδειλον μὴ ἐπακούσαντα μηδὲ πεισθέντα λυπαροῦντι καὶ δεομένῳ τοὺς ίερεὺς δόξαν προσημαίνειν τὴν μετ’ οὐ πολὺ συμβάσαν αὐτῷ τοῦ βέου τελευτήν.

They have long been telling the tale that when King Ptolemy summoned the sacred crocodile and it would not heed him or obey him in spite of his entreaties and requests, it seemed to the priests an omen of his death, which came about not long after.

Since Plutarch does not specify which of the Ptolemies the king in question was, it is impossible to date this episode precisely. However, it does indicate that the Ptolemies were in the habit of making offerings to the sacred crocodiles as well as to the Apis bull; there is a relief at the Temple of Horus and Sobek at Kom Ombo showing Ptolemy IX sacrificing to Sobek. Cleopatra VII took her predecessors’ predilections for native Egyptian culture and religion to extremes. In addition to being the first member of the Ptolemaic dynasty to learn the Egyptian language, she took great care to portray Spain, and would later become the librarian of the Palatine library; Plut. *Publ.* 17.5: Athenodorus dedicated a book to Octavia.
herself as Isis.\(^9\) In view of this, it seems likely that she would have followed her ancestors Ptolemy I Soter, Ptolemy IX and Ptolemy XII in honouring the sacred crocodiles and encouraged her children to do the same.

Cleopatra Selene referred back to her Ptolemaic heritage throughout her and Juba’s joint rule of Mauretania, most notably by giving their son and heir the name Ptolemy.\(^{10}\) As mentioned previously, there was an Iseum at Caesarea that received royal patronage. The provision of an Egyptian temple in one of the cities of Roman Africa seems innocuous enough when viewed in isolation. However, when considered in conjunction with the fact that Cleopatra Selene also issued coins bearing Greek legends and Egyptian motifs, Caesarea was extensively decorated with Egyptian sculpture and Juba’s scholarly treatises were heavily influenced by previous works of Ptolemaic scholarship, it is apparent that Mauretanian culture was heavily influenced by Egyptian culture.\(^{11}\) Thus Cleopatra Selene is the most likely source for information regarding the sacred crocodiles of Sobek that would have led Juba to dedicate the Nilides crocodile in the manner that he did. However, there is another alternative.

**Strabo of Amasia**

Due to the frequent references to Juba II throughout Strabo’s *Geography*, Roller has suggested that a close friendship existed between the king and the geographer.\(^{12}\) He posits that this friendship originated while the pair were both living in Rome before Strabo’s trip to Egypt between 26 and 24 BC and Juba’s departure for Mauretania in 25 BC, although this is disputed by Daniela Dueck, who considers their contact to have been negligible and dates Strabo’s trip to Egypt to between 29 and 26 BC, stating that Strabo only returned to Rome in 20 BC, long after Juba had gone.\(^{13}\) However, one definite point of commonality between them is that Timagenes of Alexandria

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\(^{9}\) On Cleopatra learning the Egyptian language, see Plut. *Ant.* 27.4-5; on Cleopatra as the New Isis, see Plut. *Ant.* 54.6 and Dio Cass. 50.5.3; see also most recently S. Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt* (Oxford 2008) particularly 138-39.

\(^{10}\) On a coin minted in 20 BC to celebrate Cleopatra Selene’s marriage which refers specifically to her genealogy, displaying the legend ΒΑΣΙ ΚΛΕΟ ΚΛΕΟΠΑ ΘΥΤΑ, see J. Mazard, ‘Un denier inédit de Juba II et Cleopatre-Selene’, *GNS* 31 (1981) 1-2.

\(^{11}\) On the artistic and cultural program of Juba and Cleopatra Selene, see Roller (note 1) 119-62.

\(^{12}\) Roller (note 1) 69.

\(^{13}\) D. Dueck, *Strabo of Amasia: A Greek Man of Letters in Augustan Rome* (London 2000) 88; Juba is not included in her list of influential Romans with whom Strabo may have been acquainted.
tutored both Strabo and Nicolaus of Damascus, and the latter tutored Cleopatra Selene and her brothers at the court of Cleopatra VII at Alexandria (Plut. Ant. 72).

Strabo is known to have travelled to Egypt in the retinue of Aelius Gallus, the second prefect of the newly-acquired province. While there, Strabo journeyed up the Nile and followed in Lucius Memmius’ footsteps, visiting Petesouchos at Arsinoe. He subsequently described the process of feeding the sacred crocodiles in detail (17.1.38). If Roller is correct and the two scholars were indeed friends and correspondents, it is entirely feasible that Strabo related a version of his visit to the sacred crocodiles to Juba, who would presumably have been interested in part due to his wife’s heritage and in part due to his own scholarly inclinations. Although Strabo appears to have been largely unfamiliar with Juba’s scholarship, he does seem to have been aware of Juba’s theory regarding the course of the Nile and the crocodile that supposedly proved this theory, writing of Mauretania that ‘the rivers are said to contain crocodiles, as also other kinds of animals similar to those in the Nile.’15

Conclusion

I have argued that when Juba II dedicated a crocodile from Lake Nilides to the Temple of Isis in Caesarea, he was not imitating Hanno’s dedication of gorilla skins to the Temple of Tinnit in Carthage, as suggested by Roller. Rather, he was alluding to the sacred crocodiles of the Sobek temples of the Fayum in Egypt. The sacred crocodiles were regarded with fascination throughout antiquity, and as a well-educated man, married to an Egyptian princess and likely in contact with a fellow scholar who is known to have visited them and later written about the excursion in detail, it is inconceivable that Juba was ignorant of their existence.

In addition to proving his theory that the source of the Nile was found in Mauretania, thus linking Mauretania and Egypt geographically, the dedication of the crocodile to Isis honoured his wife, Cleopatra Selene, her mother, Cleopatra VII and the New Isis, and Juba and Cleopatra Selene’s heir, Ptolemy. Although Egypt had been annexed by Octavian and became a Roman province, this explicit linking of the Mauretanian royal family and the

15 Strabo 17.3.4: τούς δὲ ποταμοὺς ἔχειν φασὶ καὶ κροκοδείλους καὶ ἄλλα γένη ζώων ἐμφαρη τοῖς ἐν τῷ Νέλῳ.
kingdom itself to Egypt added prestige to both, in addition to celebrating Juba as an explorer and scholar.

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