

THE NILE CRUISE OF CLEOPATRA AND CAESAR¹

Nautical engineering witnessed some grand achievements under Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–205 B.C.).² Among those achievements was an enormous houseboat/cabin-cruiser, the detailed description of which by the near-contemporary Kallixeinos of Rhodes survives in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (5.204d–206c).³ In length, this *thalamegos* was said to be half a stadium; in width at its broadest, thirty cubits; and in height, together with the frame for its awning, just short of forty cubits. Athenaeus then expands on its catamaran-style hull(s) and magnificent appointments, both architectural and decorative, together with its multi-roomed and multi-storeyed luxuries. How long did it remain in service? In some scholarship it has passed into (implicit) orthodoxy that the boat (or a close double for which it served as the model) was the Ptolemaic 'state-barge' still in use in 47 B.C. when Caesar and Cleopatra are said to have navigated the Nile. Non-contemporary accounts, written more than a century and a half after the event, offer the only testimony for that putative voyage. Suetonius (*Iul.* 52.1) reports that the two traversed Egypt in a *navis thalamegus*—almost to Ethiopia, or would have done so had not Caesar's troops refused to follow; and Appian reports that Caesar 'ascended the Nile with four hundred ships, exploring the country in the company of Cleopatra and generally enjoying himself with her' (*BCiv.* 2.90; Loeb trans.). That is all the ancient sources have to offer.⁴ The perceived unreliability of these late accounts and the omission of the item in sources that might have been expected to register it have led some to dismiss altogether the historicity of the voyage,⁵ and others, for reasons imposed by the tight time-frame of datable events before and after the cruise, to reduce the opportunity for its enjoyment to a matter of

¹ I would like to thank Dr J. Lea Beness for her critical comments on an early draft of the paper, and Neal Boness (Rare Books, The Fisher Library, University of Sydney) for valuable bibliographical assistance. The editorship of Professor C. Collard and the advice of an anonymous reader have greatly improved the presentation. None of the above should, of course, be deemed responsible for any remaining flaws.

² For a convenient overview, L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1971), 108–12; id., *Ships and Seafaring in Ancient Times* (London, 1994), 81–2, 86–8, 134–7. See recently, for the problems posed simply launching these creations, A. W. Sleeswyk and F. Meijer, 'Launching Philopator's "forty"', *IJNA* 23 (1994), 115–18.

³ The chief study of the vessel remains F. Caspari, 'Das Nilschiff Ptolemaios IV', *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 21 (1916), 1–74. For the vessel's palatial qualities, M. Pfrommer, *Alexandria: im Schatten der Pyramiden* (Mainz am Rhein, 1999), 93–120. On the overall credibility of Kallixeinos' account, E. E. Rice, *The Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus* (Oxford, 1983), 144–8.

⁴ Lucan (10.192–331) alludes to (or poetically creates) Caesar's academic interest in the source of the Nile. Whether or not he went on to describe a Nile cruise in the lost part of Book 10, it is impossible to say. Appian promised a fuller coverage of the voyage in his forthcoming *Egyptian History*, but it is lost to us (cf. T. J. Luce, 'Appian's *Egyptian History*', *CPh* 59 [1964], 259–62, at 260).

⁵ L. E. Lord, 'The date of Julius Caesar's departure from Alexandria', *JRS* 28 (1938), 19–39; cf. J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Julius Caesar and Rome* (London, 1967), 145: 'Caesar's cruise is one exploded myth.'

weeks—or days.⁶ Most of those believing in the fact of the voyage seem to have little doubt as to its nature. So, Volkmann:⁷

In a state-barge whose dimensions reflected the Ptolemaic partiality for colossal structures (it was 300 feet long, 45 feet across the beam, and 60 feet high), they journeyed along the Nile, so that Caesar had an opportunity of inspecting the land and its Hellenistic pattern of administration.

This version was followed closely by Lindsay:⁸

[Cleopatra took Caesar] along the Nile for some distance on a state-barge. The Ptolemies had a liking for big structures. The barge in this instance was 300 feet long, 45 feet wide across the beam, and 60 feet high. Caesar had a chance to get a glimpse of the Egyptian agricultural and administrative systems.⁹

It seems clear where lay the source for the second passage. At further remove, the source for the dimensions of the vessel is obvious. Lewis, with direct reference to Athenaeus (but citing no sources for the actual cruise), makes this scene of royal progress upriver a dramatic climax to his *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt*. The ship is described as:

a royal houseboat of enormous size and incredibly luxurious in its appointments. Even allowing for exaggeration . . . by the anecdotist Athenaios . . . we must still picture a leviathan of a vessel, propelled by several banks of oarsmen; it was fitted out with—in addition to bedrooms and salons—colonnaded courts, banquet halls, a winter garden, shrines of Aphrodite and Dionysos . . . and decorated with lavish employment of cedar and cypress woods, varied paints, and gold leaf.¹⁰

Athenaeus has become, for Lewis, a source (albeit one to be used with caution) for Cleopatra's resources. Hughes-Hallett demonstrates just how firmly entrenched the

⁶ See the thorough discussion of H. Heinen, *Rom und Aegypten von 51 bis 47 v. Chr. Untersuchungen zur Regierungszeit der 7. Kleopatra und 13. Ptolemäers* (Diss. Tübingen, 1966), 148–50; cf. M. Grant, *Julius Caesar* (London, 1969), 201–2; J. Lindsay, *Cleopatra* (London, 1971), 56–7; A. Aly, 'Cleopatra and Caesar at Alexandria and Rome', in *Roma e l'Egitto nell' antichità classica. Atti del I Congresso Internazionale Italo-Egiziano* (Rome, 1992), 47–61, at 48.

⁷ H. Volkmann, *Cleopatra. A Study in Politics and Propaganda*, trans. T. Cadoux (London, 1958 [Munich, 1953]), 74.

⁸ Lindsay (n. 6), 57.

⁹ Generally speaking, authors focused on Caesar rather than Cleopatra tend to play down the episode (thereby minimizing any sense of Caesar's irresponsible dalliance in Egypt during a period of Mediterranean-wide warfare). M. Gelzer (*Caesar. Der Politiker und Staatsmann* [Wiesbaden, 1960], 235 = Eng. trans. P. Needham, *Caesar. Politician and Statesman* [Oxford, 1968], 255) allows report of a 'splendid Nile cruise', but stresses its probable political element. Grant ([n. 6], 201–2) is torn. Perhaps already in mind was the forthcoming monograph on Cleopatra (in which any doubts about the voyage or its nature would be stilled): 'Sentimental or prurient ancient historians at this point bestow upon Caesar and Cleopatra a holiday cruise of two or even three months up the Nile, with every conceivable trapping of exotic luxury. But recent scholarly research has prosaically cut the trip down to a duration of scarcely a week. Indeed the interlude may never have occurred at all. But perhaps it did, because a peaceful parade to demonstrate the amicable relations between Egypt and Rome was not out of place. Besides, Caesar was due for a holiday . . .' (noting that within a fortnight of his victory over Ptolemy XII in March, 47, 'he seems to have departed Egypt'). The biographers of Caesar are not *always* so cautious. Chr. Meier (*Caesar* [Berlin, 1982], 486 = Eng. trans. D. McLintock, *Caesar* [London, 1995], 408 and 412) allows Caesar to have stayed 'for weeks afterwards. . . . During this time he sailed up the Nile with her in her large and superbly appointed barge, which was decorated with fine frescoes [mit herrlichen Fresken geschmückten Luxusjacht]. . . .'

¹⁰ N. Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Oxford, 1986), 155–6.

imaginative tradition has become. Overall, she is intent on peeling away the romantic overlays; she nevertheless does not doubt that ‘some sort of river-trip’ took place, and becomes a prisoner of the very tradition she so thoroughly challenges. She suggests that ‘it would not have been the sybaritic private cruise about which later writers were to enjoy fantasizing, but a procession charged with political meaning’, allowing that ‘all possible pomp and splendour’ were a necessary part of such an exercise:

Her barge may have been faced with ebony, trimmed with gold and hung with purple silk, as story-tellers were later to assert; if it was, its splendour was designed not for Cleopatra’s own sensual pleasure but as a symbol of her royal magnificence.¹¹

When did this picture first become embedded in the tradition? The cue seems to have been Suetonius’ reference to a *navis thalamegus*, gratuitously translated as ‘her state-barge’ in both the Loeb and Penguin editions.¹² And the association with Philopator’s floating palace seems to have been supplied in the sixteenth century by Laevinus Torrentius: ‘according to Athenaeus, Ptolemy Philopator possessed such [a boat]’, adding the familiar dimensions. It was not intended, nor did it immediately take hold, as a definitive observation, but gradually the association established itself.¹³ None of the early commentators, as far as I can see, equated the two *thalamegoi*—with good reason. While Philopator’s extravagant creation was singularly spectacular, it was not, of course, the only *thalamegos* in service; Appian (*Praef.* 10) reports that Ptolemy II Philadelphus possessed eight hundred, gilded both prow and stern (but fit, at the same time, for military service). Cabin-cruisers were customarily used for government business and religious ceremonial.¹⁴ Strabo reports that a short distance out of Eleusis near Alexandria a canal led to Schedia where was found an anchorage for the *thalamegoi* used by the *hegemones* (that is, government officials) travelling to Upper Egypt (17.1.15 [= 799–800c]). And, of course, there were the pleasure-craft. Strabo also reports (*loc. cit.*) that fun-seekers held feasts on *thalamegoi* in the shade of the tall bean fields in the delta marshes. These vessels were also used in more mundane ways; for example, in the carriage of freight.¹⁵ (Thus, any definition of *thalamegoi* which

¹¹ L. Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra. Histories, Dreams and Distortions* (London, 1990), 76–7.

¹² Glossed as ‘a state-barge fitted with cabins’ by H. E. Butler and M. Cary, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli Divus Julius* (Oxford, 1927), 111; and more carefully rendered as ‘un navire pourvu de cabines’ in the Budé translation of H. Ailloud (*Suétone. Vies des Douze Césars* 1 [Paris, 1931]). The literal meaning was always clear enough—in *qua structi erant thalami et cubilia instar domesticorum* (J. Geel [ed.], *Scholia in Suetonii Vitas Caesarum* [Leiden, 1828; repr. Amsterdam, 1966], 84).

¹³ See the appendix below.

¹⁴ Diod. Sic. 1.85.2; P.Rylands, 4.558 (257 B.C.); P.Tebtonis 3.1.802, 7 and 9 (135 B.C.); Casson (n. 2, 1971), 341–2, nn. 66 and 68; Rice (n. 3), 144–5.

¹⁵ Although grain freighters used in the Hellenistic era were more commonly the *kerkourkoï* or the smaller *kerkouroskaphai* (on which see H. Hauben, ‘Le transport fluvial en Égypte ptolémaïque les bateaux du roi et de la reine’, in *Actes du XV^e Congrès international de papyrologie* [Bruxelles, 1979], 68–77, and D. J. Thompson, ‘Nile grain transport under the Ptolemies’, in P. Garnsey et al. [edd.], *Trade in the Ancient Economy* [London, 1983], 64–75, 190–2), *thalamegoi* might also carry wheat (see, for example, P.Lond. 7 [the Zenon Archive], 1940.2, line 58, dating to 257 B.C.). These river-boats might serve multiple purposes. If the reference at P.Ryl. 4.558, lines 1 and 8 is, as seems likely, a reference to the same boat, then it could also be put to the service of human transport, with minor modifications for comfort and/or privacy (lines 2–3); cf. PSI 4.332.10 and 16 (257/6 B.C.) for a *thalamegos*, possibly again the same ship, as freighter. For later periods, see BGU 3.802, 1.16; 4.11; 12.11; 14.24 (A.D. 42), registering a *thalamegos* engaged in the transport of lentils; P.Oxy. 14.1650, col. 2 (1st/2nd century A.D.)—wheat; P.Oxy.Hels. 37.2 (A.D. 176)—empty jars; P.Oxy. 14.1738.2 (3rd century)—timber; P.Ross.Georg. 5.55.4 (3rd

allows only luxury yachts and pleasure craft is unnecessarily, and even misleadingly, restricted.)

Two variant applications of Athenaeus' testimony in conjunction with Cleopatra's supposed Nile cruise can be seen to coexist. One school treats the evidence as if it is directly relevant to the resources at Cleopatra's disposal;¹⁶ the other knows that it is not but uses it anyway.¹⁷ These alternatives coexisted at least by 1914. In Weigall's account of Cleopatra's 'royal dahabiyeh or houseboat', the vessel is, apparently as a matter of fact, of immense size, propelled by many banks of oars, equipped with colonnaded courts, banqueting salons, sitting rooms, bedrooms, shrines dedicated to Venus and Bacchus, and so on.¹⁸ The accompanying footnote provides a rationale for the use of this description: 'The thalamegos described by Athenaeus was not that used on this occasion, but the description will serve to give an idea of its luxury.'¹⁹ Few, even of the better-informed accounts (as seen above in note 17), have been able to resist the association. Sadly, the cautious apparatus, as represented by Weigall's footnote, has been an omission in all too many.²⁰ Such an application of Kallixeinos' portrait makes for colourful detail, but its use is neither required nor vindicated by the (only) two relevant sources, themselves under suspicion. If anything, the evidence of Athenaeus counts against it. He appends, at the close of Kallixeinos' description of the grand *thalamegos*, the observation that the wealth of Egypt was dissipated by Cleopatra's father Ptolemy Auletes (5.206c–d); that is, for all Athenaeus' report informs us, the

century)—corn (?); Casson (n. 2, 1971), 342. A useful survey of the evidence for cabined craft will be found in Caspari (n. 3), 11–17.

¹⁶ For example, Volkmann (n. 7), 74; Lindsay (n. 6), 57 (elaborated above). See also L. Foreman's report (*Cleopatra's Palace* [New York and Toronto, 1999], 102) of 'a trip that was at once a victory celebration, a tour, a political mission, and a honeymoon. They travelled aboard Cleopatra's state barge, a floating palace of cedar and cypress that was probably some three hundred feet long, fitted out with gardens and columned walkways, a dining hall, and even shrines to the gods.' Then follows an imaginative itinerary—which has featured in many accounts; see, for example, Lewis ([n.10], 155–6)—presented as fact. (On the other hand, the accompanying artwork which serves to 'illustrate' the episode presents an imagination off on another tack altogether. Henri-Pierre Picou's *La Galère de Cléopâtre* [1875], now in the Musée Goupil, conjures a river craft, sumptuously fitted out, but technologically modest, about sixteen metres from prow to stern and cabin-less.)

¹⁷ For example, A. Weigall, *The Life and Times of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt* (Edinburgh and London, 1914), 128 (elaborated below). O. Wertheimer, *Kleopatra. Die genialste Frau des Altertums* (Zürich, Leipzig, and Wien, 1947), 139–43 suggests that an idea of the nature of Cleopatra's *Staatsschiff* might be gained from the 'available description of a similar vessel . . . to which Cleopatra's was not inferior', following up with the familiar description—and a reconstruction of the itinerary. E. Bradford (*Cleopatra* [London, 1972], 81–2) is aware that Athenaeus' account provides only a parallel, but has no doubts that Cleopatra's barge was lavish (and is also willing to allow the representativeness of the available example). M. Grant, *Cleopatra* (London, 1972), 80–2 is just as aware of the lack of specific information, but demonstrates the same temptation to fill the gaps: 'Cleopatra's state barge, on which she travelled with Caesar, was probably almost as luxurious as the most romantic imaginations have pictured. Magnificent Nile pleasure boats were a Ptolemaic speciality and a description of [Philopator's *thalamegos*] gives some idea of what Cleopatra's ship must have been like.' (Then follows a gloss of Athenaeus' description.)

¹⁸ Weigall (n. 17), 128. There is something of a similarity here, to say the least, with the abbreviated gloss of Athenaeus' evidence which Lewis would later pass on.

¹⁹ Weigall's (unelaborated) confidence that Philopator's boat was *not* in service is interesting.

²⁰ Volkmann ([n. 7], 74), apparently aware of doubts concerning the source tradition (Lord is cited on 230) and presumably of Weigall's (limited) caution with regard to the relevance of Athenaeus' testimony (Weigall is cited on 228), presses on with direct recourse to Athenaeus' data (without direct reference). Volkmann does not as a rule cite sources; but it may be noted that a discussion of Athenaeus is absent from the survey of sources appended to his bibliography.

outstanding assets of the Ptolemies had been lost by the time Cleopatra ascended to the throne.²¹ If Suetonius and Appian are to be trusted on this item, they report an impressive flotilla with military backup. They provide no details of (and little clue to) the personal circumstances in which Cleopatra and Caesar travelled.

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APPENDIX: INTERPRETING *THALAMEGUS* AT SUET. *IUL.* 52

The earliest interpreters of Suetonius *Iul.* 52.1 do not seem to have spotted there the potential later recognized. Both Filippo Beroaldo (1493) and Marc Antonio Sabellicus (1506) were reading *nave thalamoque*, rather than *nave thalamego*. Thus neither realized that he was dealing with a particular ship-classification.²² That oversight had been made good at least by the time of an edition published in Antwerp in 1578 with notes by Laevinus Torrentius, preferring the now unquestioned reading of the text: *Qualem, teste Athenaeo, Ptolemaeus Philopator habuit, longitudine semistadii, latitudine XXX cubitorum, altitudine paulo minus XL.*²³ This, I imagine, represents the crucial stage in the interpretation of Suetonius' evidence, though the association with Philopator's boat was clearly not intended to carry the weight it subsequently did. Torrentius added, by way of providing a parallel Latin usage, the observation that Seneca (*Ben.* 7.20.3) called such a vessel a *navis cubiculata* and offered as another parallel the elder Pliny's reference (*NH* 7.110) to a *vittata navis* despatched by Dionysius to convey Plato to Sicily. The Senecan reference was doubtless intended by Torrentius to convey the image of a leisure craft (Seneca's meaning is clear); that of Pliny, no doubt, the image of ceremonial display.²⁴ Isaac Casaubon, publishing his notes on Suetonius seventeen years later, does not seem, despite a strong interest in Athenaeus (Casaubon published his notes on Suetonius in 1595; his edition of Athenaeus followed two years later, his full-fledged 'Animadversiones' in 1600), to have found the Philopator parallel worthy of rehearsal. He noted, on the other hand, that 'the Egyptian kings' had eight hundred such vessels (an observation drawn, as noted above, from App. *Praef.* 10, referring in fact to Ptolemy Philadelphus), and provided cross-references, among them the Senecan passage, which suggest that he envisaged *thalamegoi* as often-luxurious leisure-craft.²⁵

By the time the first English translation appeared in 1606, Cleopatra's vessel was thus understood in terms of type as a 'barge or galley called Thalamegos', the intention to convey a classification rather than the name of an individual ship being made clear in the accompanying note repeating the information that 'the Egyptian kings' had

²¹ The significance of that observation has been recognized in a different context by T. R. S. Broughton, 'Cleopatra and "The Treasure of the Ptolemies": a note', *AJPh* 106 (1985), 115–16.

²² *Suetonius Tranquillus cum Philippi Beroaldi et Marci Antonii Sabellici Commentariis* (Venice, 1506), 33.

²³ J. T. Graevius, *C. Suetonius Tranquillus ex recensione J. G. Graevii cum eiusdem Animadversionibus* (Trajecti ad Rhenum, 1672; reissued 1691, 1703), s.v. *Iul.* 52.

²⁴ Both parallels were to be remembered, the former proving the more influential. The train of Seneca's thoughts was clear from their context. *cubiculatae* were coupled with *lusoriae*, light leisure craft (on the primary meaning, together with its later development to cover working and military craft, see Casson [n. 2, 1971], 333–4, 340), both of which Seneca classified amongst the *alia ludibria regum in mari lascivientium*.

²⁵ *C. Suetonius Tranquillus cum Isaaci Casauboni animadversionibus* (Geneva, 1595; repub. Argentorati, 1647), s.v. Suet. *Iul.* 52.

eight hundred.²⁶ An understanding of Cleopatra's river-boat simply as one of many devoted to leisure seems to have prevailed in the seventeenth century. When Samuel Pitiscus published his commentary, no special significance was seen in Athenaeus' evidence. The latter's citation, as one of two parallel passages, was relegated to a single line suggesting the consultation of 'Athen. V & Max.Tyr. dissert. 31'.²⁷ His readers were informed that a *navis thalamegus* was the Greek term for a ship on which (or in which) there was a *thalamus*. Pitiscus also offered a reference to Strabo, who had noted an anchorage for *thalamegoi* just out of Alexandria (on which see above), and the opinion, shared with predecessors, that Seneca designated such ships *cubiculatae*.²⁸

In the early nineteenth century, Torrentius' thoughts on the matter were given new currency in the commentary of Baumgarten-Crusius: 'there was moreover a certain large "thalamegus" which, according to Athenaeus, Ptolemy Philopator ordered built, such that one would think within its *thalamum* that one was within the palace itself [followed by Athenaeus' dimensions]'.²⁹ The association between Philopator's *thalamegos* and the ship on which Cleopatra and Caesar travelled was thus established (though it was one, as seen above, which competed with other parallels).

²⁶ P. Holland (trans.), *Caius Suetonius Tranquillus. The historie of twelve Caesars Emperors of Rome* (London, 1606), s.v. *Iul. 52*.

²⁷ *Caii Suetonii Tranquilli et in illa commentarius Samuelis Pitisci* (Trajecti ad Rhenum, 1690), s.v. *Iul. 52*. The Maximus of Tyre reference is to *Dissert. 30.3.65–77* (Teubner, 1994). An eighteenth-century commentary on the same reveals the established stock of references to Seneca, Athenaeus, and Appian; *Maximi Tyrii Dissertationes*, from the editions of J. Davis (1703) and J. Markland (1740), annotated by J. J. Reiske (Leipzig, 1774), 7.

²⁸ This association with leisure (and in particular Seneca's classification of *cubiculatae*), already marked by a number of commentators, was to prove influential. Thus in another early English translation, the term was rendered 'pleasure-boat' (J. Clarke, *C. Suetonii Tranquilli XII Caesares. The Lives of the Twelve First Roman Emperors* [London, 1732], 29). Caspari ([n. 3], 15), by way of providing background to his study of Philopator's craft, adds, among references to other *thalamegoi*, that such a pleasure craft (*Lustjacht*) was employed by Caesar and Cleopatra. In A. Bouché-Leclercq (*Histoire des Lagides 2* [Paris, 1904], 215), the vessel is a *bateau de plaisance*. Citing the latter, J. Carcopino ('César' in G. Glotz [ed.], *Histoire Ancienne 3* [Paris, 1936], 2.2, 878–9) expands: 'dont la chambre nuptiale formait le plus bel ornement'. The rendition may well be *à propos*, if not with regard to an actual episode in 47 B.C., then with regard to what Suetonius intended to convey. It certainly suits the context in which Suetonius places the item: a register of Caesar's sexual liaisons.

When C. Torr wrote his *Ancient Ships* (Cambridge, 1895), none of the papyrological evidence covered above was, of course, available. *Thalamegoi* were regarded as synonymous with luxury. Drawing on the Seneca passage (in which *thalamegi* are not mentioned), Torr asserted the term *thalamegos* was interchangeable with *cubiculata* and *lusoria* (123–4). Despite the subsequently available evidence, it is this association which has enjoyed the more abiding influence on the literary tradition concerning Cleopatra.

²⁹ D. C. G. Baumgarten-Crusius, *C. Suetonius Tranquilli Opera Omnia ex editione Baumgarten-Crusii* (London, 1816; repr. 1826), s.v. *Julius 52*: 'Erat autem "thalamegus" navis quaedam ingens, qualem Athenaeo teste Ptolemaeus Philopator aedificandam jussit, ut ea intra thalamum ipsaque in regia esse sibi videretur: magnitudine erat semistadii, latitudine 30. cubitorum, altitudine paulo minus 40.' The Baumgarten-Crusius commentary makes explicit reference to Torrentius' notes. It also abandons the Senecan reference in favour of the less successful parallel drawn from Pliny: *De simili nave Plinius lib. VII. cap. 30*.