

**CLAUDIUS PTOLEMY AND SELF-PROMOTION:
A STUDY ON PTOLEMY'S INTELLECTUAL MILIEU
IN ROMAN ALEXANDRIA**

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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

The main objective of this dissertation is to study the relationship between the mathematician Claudius Ptolemy and his social and intellectual context in the Roman Alexandria of the second century CE. Against the *communis opinio* (and the much more common silence) on this issue, my main conclusion is that Ptolemy consciously engaged in the competition for a place in the *paideia* of his time, both by using techniques related to the rhetorical practices of his time, and by seeking the support of a powerful patron. Indeed, I argue that the dedicatee of many of Ptolemy's works, a certain Syrus, may be identified with a powerful Roman with links to Alexandria and with probable mathematical interests. Unlike Galen, an author for whom such a scenario has been shown and studied in modern bibliography, Ptolemy does not offer direct insights on his writing context. However, this is normal in Greek mathematical authors, who tend to write in a highly formulaic style specific of this kind of texts, providing very few biographical evidence. In consequence, the methodology I use in this study is based on indirect strategies, basically consisting in analyzing parts of Ptolemy's works which may show the author's concern for self-presentation and for the external projection of his work.

The first chapters deal with the works which are considered to be earlier in Ptolemy's production, the *Canobic Inscription*, *Harmonics*, and *On the Criterion and the Ruling Principle*. In these three works a scientific investigation (on astronomy, harmonics, and knowledge theory) is followed by a non-argumentative section linking the main topic with Platonic traditions attested in earlier writers, mainly Middle Platonic developments inspired in the *Timaeus*. The Pythagorizing Platonist Eudorus of Alexandria could have been an important source for Ptolemy in this aspect, since there are many parallels between material drawn from his work by Plutarch and some passages in the last parts of Ptolemy's inscription and the *Harmonics*. As regards the text on knowledge theory, it is interesting that, although concomitant with the topic of mathematics, and overlapping with the epistemology developed in the *Harmonics* (of Stoic, Aristotelian, and Platonic tradition, in the line of Antiochus of Ascalon), mathematics is not even alluded to in there. In the same manner as in the preface of the *Almagest*, where mathematics appears only very late in the text, Ptolemy seems to present himself mainly as a philosopher: this may be put in relation with Galen's self-presentation, as well as with the public persona

cultivated by other influential intellectuals of Ptolemy's time who were not primarily philosophers. Another telling feature of the text on the criterion is its style: it is neither didactic nor 'seriously' philosophical. The text does not present the clarity of a manual kind of work, but neither the deep engagement with philosophical issues of a genuine philosophical text: Ptolemy does not cite authors or works, and he does not develop long arguments. At the same time, the text presents throughout many verbal echoes of the *Timaeus*. Imitation of the *Timaeus* could be related to rhetorical practice, which Ptolemy probably received to some degree as every educated citizen in the empire.

I also analyze an external feature of some of Ptolemy's works, especially prominent in the three earlier ones: in these treatises the text appears divided in nearly equally long portions, perhaps related to harmonic intervals. Comparing with rhetors, this could be akin to the attention paid to the voice and the gesture, the external qualities which should reflect a harmony suitable to the contents of the discourse.

It seems that Ptolemy gradually frees himself from such formal concerns in later works, perhaps because he had acquired by then a more stable position: already in the *Almagest* the impersonation of a Pythagorean and Platonic philosopher appears only as an introduction restricted to the preface and an epigram that precedes the work, rather than as a development of the main scientific part.

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