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THE ROLE OF QUINTUS DELLIUS IN THE MEETING OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA AT TARSUS

TREVOR FEAR

THE MEETING OF MARK ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA at Tarsus in 41 B.C.E. is one of the fabled events of ancient history. Whether the rendezvous between Egypt's queen and Rome's triumvir is encountered in the dramatic narrative of Plutarch, the poetry of Shakespeare, or the epic 1963 Mankiewicz movie, this iconic moment leaves a lasting impact. Given the larger than life personalities of the main protagonists involved, the theatrics and exuberance of the meeting at Tarsus may well seem entirely expected. However, there remains the possibility that there was a third significant contributor to the dynamics of this event: a man, whose role was behind the scenes, but who nevertheless helped to orchestrate this celebrated occasion. This man was Quintus Dellius.

Quintus Dellius was a colourful character who is best known from the verbal tag that was attached to him by Seneca the Elder in his *Suasoriae* (Sen. *Suas.* 1.7), where Messala Corvinus describes him as the *desultor bellorum civilium* ("the horse vaulter of the civil wars").¹ This description of Dellius was due to the number of times that he switched sides during the course of these conflicts: he changed allegiance from Dolabella to Cassius, and then from Cassius to Antony, and finally from Antony to Octavian (Sen. *Suas.* 1.7; Vell. Pat. 2.84).² The term was not, of course, intended as a compliment, but rather as a wry observation on Dellius' capacity for self-preservation. *Desultor* or "leaper" was a term applied particularly to a type of horse rider in the circus who jumped from horse to horse.³ This mutability on Dellius' part was also remarked upon by the younger Seneca (Sen. *Clem.* 1.10.1), who includes Dellius in a list of notable members of the Augustan inner circle who were recruited from the enemy camp. We can gather from these references that Dellius was a survivor, an astute and timely

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¹On Dellius more generally, see Wissowa 1901; Smith 2013: 424–425.

²On the occasion of Dellius' final switch from Antony to Octavian, Velleius (2.84), notes sardonically that at this point he, *exempli sui tenax*, was merely sticking to his habitual mutability.

³Perhaps the best-known use of this unusual word in a literary context appears in Ovid's *Amores* at 1.13.15, *non mihi mille placent, non sum desultor amoris* ("A thousand different girls don't please me, I'm not a switch-rider of love"). The evident irony of this phrase in the mouth of the Ovidian narrator demonstrates how this Latin word functions as a powerful metaphor for fickleness. See further Barnsby (1975: 44–45), who discusses the relationship between Ovid's use of the term in *Amores* 1.3 and Messalla's description of Quintus Dellius in Seneca the Elder.

reader of the rapid tides of change in troubled times, if perhaps not someone you could count on to be at your side in a moment of crisis.

Dellius was the person that Antony chose to send to Cleopatra in Alexandria in early 41 B.C.E. to summon her to a meeting in Tarsus (App. *B Civ.* 5.8; Cass. Dio 48.24; Plut. *Ant.* 25.1). At this point Dellius cannot have been a member of Antony's entourage for long. Before this he had been attached to Cassius, who committed suicide at the battle of Philippi in October 42 B.C.E. Presumably Dellius, with his penchant for timely switches to the winning side, had abandoned Cassius by then, though it may well have been not long before. It might seem a little odd then that Antony chose Dellius so soon for this important mission. There was, however, some prior history between Dellius and Antony: although we know little of Dellius' movements and attachments prior to his appearance in the east in the company of Dolabella, we are nevertheless informed by a passing reference to later events in Dio (Cass. Dio 49.39.2) that he believed Dellius was once a παιδικά ("boyfriend") of Antony's.⁴ Elsewhere, Dellius is described simply as Antony's "friend" (φίλος, Strabo 11.523; Joseph. *AJ* 15.29). From this we may surmise that whatever the earlier relationship between Dellius and Antony may have been, by the time of his involvement in the Tarsus affair, Dellius was no longer Antony's παιδικά but still his "friend."⁵ So in choosing Dellius, Antony elected to send to Cleopatra a man who had a long and intimate knowledge of him.

Dellius' role as the emissary of Antony to Cleopatra is typically not remarked upon in recent historical accounts, or at most receives only a passing mention.⁶ This is curious given that our central (and indeed, the only detailed) narrative source for the meeting at Tarsus, Plutarch, specifically names Dellius as Antony's messenger, and also attributes to him a leading role in both persuading Cleopatra to go to Tarsus and suggesting the manner in which she should go (Plut. *Ant.*

⁴The implication in Dio is that as an adolescent or as a young man, Dellius had been a sexual partner of Antony's. Williams (1999: 76) notes that "*pedicare* is said to be derived from the Greek παιδικά." See also Adams 1982: 123–125.

⁵The Greek term, φίλος, is presumably used as the equivalent for the Latin term *amicus*. The word, like the English "friend," allows for a wide semantic range. *Amici* were the advisers of a Roman governor in the provinces in the republican period, and later the *amici principis* formed the inner circle of influential advisers around the emperor. The term could also signify a patron or a client, or more loosely refer to an ally, a friend, or, in a more intimate physical connection between two people, a lover. Thus, although the term has more potential shades of meaning than παιδικά, it does not entirely remove the aura of intimacy between the two men. It does, however, suggest that this intimacy had evolved in its nature over time.

⁶For example, Hölbl (2001: 240–241) and Ashton (2008: 147–148) make no mention of Dellius at all; Tyllesley (2008: 149) mentions only that Dellius was Antony's emissary but offers no evaluation of his role; Roller (2010: 76–77) provides a bit more detail, but stops short of a full analysis of Dellius' role and the extent to which he may have been in a position to inform Cleopatra's planning for the meeting at Tarsus.

25).⁷ In Plutarch's account, when Dellius arrives and meets Cleopatra for the first time, he is immediately struck by what he perceives her potential impact on Antony might be (Plut. *Ant.* 25.3):

ὡς εἶδε τὴν ὄψιν καὶ κατέμαθε τὴν ἐν τοῖς λόγοις δεινότητα καὶ πανουργίαν, εὐθὺς αἰσθόμενος ὅτι κακὸν μὲν οὐδὲ μελλήσει τι ποιεῖν γυναῖκα τοιαύτην Ἀντώνιος, ἔσται δὲ μεγίστη παρ' αὐτῷ, τρέπεται πρὸς τὸ θεραπεύειν καὶ προτρέπεσθαι τὴν Αἰγυπτίαν, τοῦτο δὴ τὸ Ὀμηρικόν, ἐλθεῖν εἰς Κιλικίαν εὐ ἐντύνασαν ἔ αὐτήν.

But when he saw her appearance and perceived the cleverness and cunning in her discourse, he immediately understood that Antony would not do such a woman any harm but that she would rather have the greatest influence over him, so he turned to flatter and persuade the Egyptian to go to Cilicia having turned herself out in all her finery, as Homer put it.

Dellius' opinion is based both on Cleopatra's physical appearance and on his assessment of her verbal capabilities and talent for manipulative verbal artistry. The words δεινότης and πανουργία suggest cleverness but also, particularly πανουργία, a certain unscrupulous ingenuity.⁸ In this way, Dellius senses in Cleopatra precisely the kind of person who could hold sway over a man like Antony whose central characteristic Plutarch has just described as ἀπλότης ("simplicity," Plut. *Ant.* 24.9).⁹ This inclines Dellius to immediately dismiss any notion that Antony would visit any retribution on Cleopatra; she will more likely lead him than be led by him.

This is in keeping with the general sentiment of Plutarch's narrative on Antony and Cleopatra, where Cleopatra is presented as Antony's τελευταῖον κακὸν ("final evil," Plut. *Ant.* 25.1). For Plutarch, the point at which the love of Cleopatra enters Antony's life is the moment that his true downfall commences, and the beginning of his end will come with the meeting at Tarsus. We must remember, however, that Plutarch is casting his overall narrative in the light of hindsight and his own moralistic judgment of Antony's character.

Dellius, however, remains a diplomatic participant in this drama rather than an omniscient narrator. Although he is cast in the role of facilitating Antony's ultimate demise, that was not, presumably, his intention at the time. Dellius' mission was ostensibly to secure Cleopatra's cooperation in going to Tarsus to meet Antony in order to answer charges of aiding and abetting his enemies, and so it was surely in Dellius' best interests to present a case to Cleopatra that

⁷While both App. *BC* 5.8 and Cass. Dio 48.24 reference the meeting at Tarsus, neither mentions Dellius in this context.

⁸On πανουργία, Pelling (1988: 185) comments that the term "is often used of ingenious speakers who will 'do anything': it suggests both the 'resourcefulness' of their style and their 'lack of principle' in applying their skills." He suggests that translating it as "cunning" has "the right undertone of unease."

⁹Pelling 1988: 182–183.

minimised the risks involved in such an enterprise.¹⁰ When he met Cleopatra he had the chance to assess personally her character, appearance, and capabilities. He was then able to draw on his knowledge of Antony to decide on the best way to proceed: to present the meeting as a golden opportunity rather than as an overdue reckoning. He may also have kept an eye on what was best for himself. After all, if Dellius served Antony, but he thought Antony in turn would end up serving Cleopatra, then he would have needed to find a solution that advanced Cleopatra's interests too. So, ideally, as a political opportunist and survivor, he needed to produce a carefully triangulated outcome of mutual benefit.

How this meeting between Antony and Cleopatra was to be achieved, and the manner in which it was to be conducted, is made clear enough in Plutarch's narrative and through his choice of literary allusion. The original passage of Homer (*Hom. Il.* 14.159–362.) that Plutarch quotes refers to Hera and her scheme to seduce Zeus and to lull him into a post-coital sleep, thus allowing Poseidon to assist the Greeks against the Trojans. The plan is conceived as a seduction expressly designed to deceive Zeus and to further Hera's own interests.¹¹ Plutarch's implication must be that the trip to Tarsus was to include a similar role for Cleopatra.

It was Dellius, according to Plutarch, who was the instigator of this plan. To not only satisfy Antony, but to potentially gain influence with Cleopatra as well, Dellius would need to suggest a means by which she could see the meeting at Tarsus not as simple compliance with the directive of a Roman magistrate, but as an opportunity to build an influential new relationship with Rome. If Plutarch's account is accurate, then Cleopatra's arrival in Tarsus, and the manner in which she arrived, would appear to be a triumph of Dellius' diplomacy.

However, as noted above, despite the centrality of Dellius in this account, there seems to be a general reluctance in the secondary sources to acknowledge the extent of his involvement. Chauveau (2002: 41), for instance, remarks that Plutarch exaggerates the importance of Dellius' scheming, and argues instead for the primacy of Cleopatra's own agency. This seems to have become a general orthodoxy; Hölbl (2001: 240–241), for example, remarks, "Her intention was to conquer the Roman general by a display of Ptolemaic *tryphē* and through her feminine charms," and Tyldesley (2008: 149), "Her personal knowledge of Antony the man allowed Cleopatra to settle on a tactic that would give her genius for showmanship full rein."¹²

¹⁰It is debatable how far Cleopatra had actually helped Cassius, and also whether Antony really believed that she had. The accusation was the ostensible reason for the meeting as presented in our sources (*Plut. Ant.* 25.1; *App. BC* 5.8), but Hölbl (2001: 240), for instance, sees support for the war that was being prepared against Parthia as the real purpose of Antony's summons, and Cleopatra's alleged support of Cassius as an "official pretext for her visit."

¹¹This phrase is a very slight adaptation of *Il.* 14.162: ἐλθεῖν εἰς Ἴδην εὖ ἐντύνασαν ἔαυτήν ("to go to Ida having turned herself out in all her finery").

¹²See for example Hölbl 2001: 240–241; Burstein 2004: 23; Tyldesley 2008: 149.

While we should be wary of seemingly taking agency away from Cleopatra and handing it to a Roman male, there are a couple of issues here that should be borne in mind. First, we ought to recall that Plutarch is far from averse to presenting Cleopatra in a negative way. What motivation would he then have in attributing the initial plan for the nature of the Tarsus encounter to Dellius rather than to Cleopatra herself? Second, there is a tendency, as demonstrated by Tyldesley above, to attribute the character of the meeting at Tarsus to Cleopatra's knowledge of the character of Antony.

The latter issue is relatively straightforward to address. The degree to which Antony and Cleopatra were already acquainted before their meeting at Tarsus is debatable. The evidence for any direct contact between them before this point is extremely limited. Appian's assertion (App. *BC* 5.8) that Antony conceived a passion for Cleopatra in 55 B.C.E. when he helped restore her father, Ptolemy XII, to the throne is surely questionable.¹³ It is possible that Cleopatra came into contact with Antony during the time that she spent in Rome, continually or intermittently, between 46 and 44 B.C.E.¹⁴ However, the extent and nature of any contact between them during this period must remain a matter of speculation. Nonetheless it is clear that, as he entered Alexandria in 41 B.C.E., Dellius knew a great deal more about Antony the man than Cleopatra did. This certainly seems to be the implication of Plutarch's narrative.¹⁵ If Cleopatra's detailed knowledge of Antony and his character prior to Tarsus came from anywhere, it must have been from Dellius. To convey such knowledge and to allow it to inform the nature of his meeting with Cleopatra may well have been the reason that Antony chose Dellius for this mission in the first place.

It, therefore, seems not unreasonable to assume that the suggestion for Cleopatra to go to Tarsus in Homeric style, εὖ ἐντύνασαν, did indeed come from Dellius. The proposition was based on his knowledge of Antony, but also on the capabilities that he saw in Cleopatra to influence Antony and establish a future relationship with him. Cleopatra would certainly have known her Homer well enough to understand the implication of the adapted quote. In this way, Dellius may well have sown the seed of the plan, and then encouraged Cleopatra to nurture its growth into the scenario that eventually played out at Tarsus. The Ptolemies were, of course, masters of ostentatious regal display; putting on a grand entrance for Antony's benefit at Tarsus was but a continuation of this family tradition.¹⁶ Cleopatra would surely not have needed any

¹³ Chauveau (2002: 41) remarks that Appian's narrative "seems to be nothing more than a fiction invented after the fact." Bursstein (2004: 23) refers to this account as a "Roman legend" and considers it "unlikely."

¹⁴ On the question of how much time Cleopatra spent in Rome during this period, and how often she visited, see Gruen 2011 and Peek 2000: 134–136.

¹⁵ Chauveau 2002: 41.

¹⁶ The Grand Procession of Ptolemy II in the late third century is probably the most high-profile example of such Ptolemaic display; see Hazzard 2000: 59–80; Rice 1983. The notion of royal display

advice from Dellius on how to go about constructing a dazzling incarnation of herself. However, there is one central aspect of her self-presentation where we might again suspect that Dellius did make a contribution.

Cleopatra's entry into Tarsus (Plut. *Ant.* 26.2) involved many striking visual elements, but at its heart was a tableau centred on Cleopatra herself, reclining under a gold decorated canopy and adorned so that she resembled the goddess Aphrodite in a famous painting. There might appear to be nothing particularly unusual in Cleopatra taking this form, there having been, after all, a long tradition of Ptolemaic royal women identifying with Aphrodite and her Egyptian equivalent Isis.¹⁷ However, there must have been an added significance in Cleopatra taking this particular form for her meeting with Antony, because of the latter's own developing divine affiliations at this time. It seems clear that during the thirties B.C.E., Antony increasingly associated himself with the god Dionysus.¹⁸ However, there is also evidence that this identification started somewhat earlier with Antony's entry into Ephesus in early 41 B.C.E. In Plutarch's account of this event (Plut. *Ant.* 24.4) Antony, preceded by a procession of women dressed as bacchanals and men and boys dressed as satyrs and Pans, entered a city full of ivy, thyrsus wands, harps, pipes, and flutes, and was hailed as Dionysus χαριδότην καὶ μειλίχιον' ("The Giver of Joy and The Beneficent"). As there are evident parallels between Antony's entry into Ephesus and Cleopatra's arrival into Tarsus in terms of the scale of pageantry and the theatrics involved,¹⁹ there can be little doubt that Plutarch wants readers to see the resemblances between these two events. This symmetry then leads with a certain inevitability in Plutarch's narrative to the meeting between Cleopatra and Antony at Tarsus, where Cleopatra's appearance as Aphrodite culminated, he says, in the pervasive rumour (Plut. *Ant.* 26.5) that "Aphrodite had come to revel with Dionysus for the good of Asia" (ὥς ἡ Ἀφροδίτη κομμάζοι παρὰ τὸν Διόνυσον ἐπ' ἀγαθῶ τῆς Ἀσίας).

was so ingrained that it affected even the nomenclature of the Ptolemies with the adoption of the epithet of "Tryphon" ("the displayer of magnificence"). As Hölbl (2001: 92) remarks, this epithet "promulgated the notion of *tryphé*, splendour and magnificence, as the ideal image of the wealth and good fortune produced by Ptolemaic rule." The wealth and resources of the later Ptolemies may not have matched those of their early ancestors, but the symbolic importance of wealth was not lost on them.

¹⁷ Ashton 2003: 126–146; 2008: 138–142; Goudchoux 2001: 134, 137, 139; Hazzard 2000: 152–153; Higgs 2001: 111, 202; Whitehorne 1994: 97, 129, 136, 146, 148. The sources are collected at Fraser 1972: 1.197, 238–240.

¹⁸ For this association, see Goudchaux 2001: 137, 139; Hölbl 2001: 243–245; 291–299; Mac Góráin 2012–13: 200–202; Pelling 1988: 179–180, 189, 241, 265, 303–304; Weber 2002: 338–340; Zanker 1988: 57–58. For the principal primary sources, see Fraser 1972: 1.205 and 2.348–349. Among them are Cass. Dio 48.39.2; Sen. *Suas.* 1.6; App. *BC* 5.76; Vell. Pat. 2.82.4; Plut. *Ant.* 60.3–5, 75.4–6; *BMC, RomRep.* 2.502–503.

¹⁹ Pelling 1988: 179.

Clearly, in Plutarch's account, the meeting at Tarsus was a carefully orchestrated event where Cleopatra played Aphrodite precisely to complement Antony's Dionysus.²⁰ The genius of Cleopatra's appearance as Aphrodite at Tarsus was that it built on this incipient moment to construct the basis of a future complementary relationship between herself and Antony in terms that were suitably grandiose and flattering towards Antony, but also maintained her own regal divinity and status. The way in which their relationship could be mapped onto, and further developed by, the Aphrodite/Isis and Dionysus/Osiris dyad into the 30s B.C.E. could be taken as an ample demonstration of the success of this initial move. So this manoeuvre by Cleopatra turned out to be an astute tactical move, and the success of its implementation must have been due to Cleopatra herself.²¹ However, we might also consider the basis upon which this strategy rested and what information would have induced Cleopatra to pursue it. If the decision to go to Tarsus as Aphrodite was indeed based on the knowledge of Antony's entry to Ephesus as Dionysus, then where did Cleopatra's information about this event come from?

Although Alexandria was a busy port and news travelled even in the ancient world, the most detailed source of information available to Cleopatra about these events would have been Dellius. As a member of Antony's entourage, at least at the point that he was dispatched to Cleopatra, he was probably also with Antony during the procession into Ephesus. Dellius would then have been ideally placed to report on Antony's entry to the city. Again, we might then suspect that Dellius, through his account of events of Ephesus, had at least some formative influence on the decisions that Cleopatra subsequently made with respect to the choreography of her arrival at Tarsus.²²

²⁰ Some historians have doubted that Antony's self-identification with Dionysus began as early as 41 B.C.E.: see, for example, Michel 1967: 126–129; Pelling 1988: 179. However, it seems possible that it was precisely then that Antony made his first steps in this direction, perhaps orchestrated by the Ephesians rather than himself.

²¹ This is certainly the image of the event that is typically narrated in modern historical accounts, where Cleopatra's bold move is inevitably highlighted. For example, Burstein (2004: 23) comments that "she boldly assumed the role of the Egyptian royal goddess Isis in the guise of the Greek goddess Aphrodite coming to visit her husband Osiris in his manifestation as Dionysos"; Tyldesley (2008: 149), "If Antony was Dionysos, she would greet him as Isis, consort of Dionysos-Osiris."

²² Jeanmaire (1924) proposed that Cleopatra herself shaped Antony's association with Dionysus and orchestrated the manner of his entry into Ephesus. Pelling (1988: 180) notes the parallels between the Dionysiac elements of Antony's entry into Ephesus and those at the grand procession of Ptolemy II. This might appear to lend some credence to Ptolemaic influence in the proceedings. One does have to wonder, however, to what extent Cleopatra would have been in a position at this point to influence Antony to express his aspirations to divinity in a particular manner, or to orchestrate a Bacchic event in a city on the other side of the eastern Mediterranean. It is possible that aspirations to a quasi-divine style of Hellenistic kingship were already starting to take shape in Antony's mind. Plutarch makes it clear that at this time Antony was surrounded by flattery he found difficult to resist (Plut. *Ant.* 24.10–12). Dellius may have been one of those flattering

In Plutarch's account, then, the initiative for the staging of the Tarsus meeting came from Dellius and responsibility for its execution lay with Cleopatra.²³ Whose diplomatic triumph does Tarsus represent? Ultimately, the answer to this question is that perhaps Tarsus in the end served the purposes of all the main protagonists involved. Dellius' role was to effect Cleopatra's voyage to Tarsus to meet with Antony. To do this he needed to persuade Cleopatra that the summons by Antony posed no real threat to her and that she had the necessary tools to turn the occasion to her advantage. From Antony's perspective, Cleopatra came to Tarsus in response to his summons, the brilliance of her incarnation as Isis serving to bolster his own emerging ambitions as a Dionysus, and he could now engage her in the matter of his upcoming Parthian campaign. From Cleopatra's point of view, she had effectively managed a potentially difficult situation. The threat of retribution from Antony had dissipated, a way ahead for future cooperation and alliance had been created, and a powerful set of symbols for such a relationship had been established. This must be counted a significant diplomatic success, and it may well have formed the basis for Antony's continued use of Dellius on high profile diplomatic missions in subsequent years, even if none of Dellius' later achievements was so impressive or high-profile.²⁴

There is no doubt that the meeting at Tarsus paved the way for an association between Antony and Cleopatra that proved successful in the years that followed, allowing her to ally herself again to a powerful representative of Rome, and further expand the bounds of the Ptolemaic empire. In the end, the alliance proved to be a failure and its ultimate lack of success, accompanied by Antony's demise, allowed it to be transmuted into a cautionary tale in our Roman sources. Dellius, of course, by this point, *semper mutabile* and served by his acute political

voices, encouraging an ambition in Antony to divine assimilation. Whether an active participant or an observer, Dellius would then have been in a position to share this insight with Cleopatra and strategize about how to use it in planning her meeting with Antony.

²³It is perhaps notable that it is only in Plutarch that there is any detail of both Antony's entry into Ephesus and Cleopatra's into Tarsus. Both of these events find little narrative space elsewhere in our existing sources. On Ephesus, Appian (*BC* 5.4) remarks that when Antony entered the city he offered a splendid sacrifice to the city's goddess and pardoned nearly everyone who had fled to the temple as suppliants. With regard to the entry to Tarsus, Appian (*BC* 5.8) simply says that Cleopatra came to meet Antony in Cilicia and Cassius Dio (48.24.2) only mentions the after-effects of the meeting in Tarsus. The similarities in the accounts of these two occasions in Plutarch could suggest that he was drawing on a common source for both, possibly Dellius' own narrative of these events; see Pelling 1988: 28; Roller 2010: 78; Smith 2013: 425. If such were the case, Dellius would not only have been a participant in these events, but also an influential raconteur of them.

²⁴Dellius was involved in the restoration of Herod in Judaea (Joseph. *AJ* 14.25); the events concerning the appointment of Aristobulus to the office of High Priest in Jerusalem (Joseph. *AJ* 15.24–29), and the negotiations with Artaxes, the king of Armenia, prior to Antony's expedition there (Cass. Dio 49.39.2–3).

survival instincts, had moved on: changing horses in midstream was, after all, his speciality.

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