
The Power of Excess: Royal Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty

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Abstract: The Greco-Macedonian dynasty of the Ptolemies, which ruled Egypt from 322 until 30 BCE, established early on a practice of incestuous marriage in the royal house. This custom, which may have had a number of pragmatic functional purposes, was on a more profound level symbolic of royal power. But royal incest, as practised by the Ptolemies, was only one of a larger set of behaviours, all of which were symbolic of power, and all of which were characterized by lavishness, immoderation, excess and the breaching of limits in general.

Keywords: incest, marriage, Ptolemy, Cleopatra, power, excess

Résumé : Les Ptolémées, dynastie gréco-macédonienne qui régna sur l'Égypte de l'an 322 à l'an 30 av. J.-C., avaient très tôt établi la pratique du mariage incestueux dans la maison royale. Si cette pratique résultait probablement de plusieurs objectifs pragmatiques et fonctionnels, elle symbolisait surtout, à un niveau plus profond, l'étendue du pouvoir royal. L'inceste royal, telle que la pratiquaient les Ptolémées, ne représentait cependant qu'un comportement parmi tant d'autres qui symbolisaient collectivement leur pouvoir et se caractérisaient par le luxe, l'immodération, l'excès et la violation des règles de façon générale.

Mots-clés : inceste, mariage, Ptolémée, Cléopâtre, pouvoir, excès

The subject of incest continues to spark much discussion in the scholarly literature. The foci for such discussion are multifaceted: the genetic consequences of inbreeding, the problem of sexual abuse within the family, the psychological factors promoting (or suppressing) incestuous behaviours, the complexity of symbolism underlying the concept of incest itself. The breadth of this topic, and the many angles from which it may be addressed, particularly invite a multidisciplinary approach. The intent of this paper is to offer a different perspective on the subject of symbolic incest, a perspective which draws on the study of a culture not generally represented in the anthropological literature. The author, as a classicist, feels some diffidence at making this offering to an audience of anthropologists; nevertheless, it is to be hoped that this window on a classical culture may help in some small way to inform the ongoing and vibrant debate on this topic.

In the Hellenistic Age, conventionally defined as the era of ancient Greek history following the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE), the kingdom of Egypt was ruled by a Greco-Macedonian dynasty descended from Alexander's general Ptolemy. The Ptolemaic kingdom, which came to an end with the suicide of Kleopatra VII in 30 BCE, was the most enduring of the Hellenistic monarchies, those realms established in the wake of Alexander's death in the territories conquered by the hyperkinetic Macedonian. Alexander's "empire" was an ephemeral one, fragmenting upon his death into several polities ruled by *arriviste* monarchs whose sole claim to legitimacy was their role as companions and followers of Alexander. Thus, one characteristic shared by each of the Hellenistic kingdoms was the ethnic divide between ruler and ruled: the indigenous inhabitants of Asia Minor, the Middle East, and Egypt now looked to ruling houses of Greco-Macedonian descent. In some of the kingdoms there was occasionally a mingling of royal blood with that of the natives of the region, but ethnic exclusivity was the general rule,

at least in Ptolemaic Egypt: Kleopatra VII, the last reigning monarch of the Ptolemaic dynasty, was also said to have been the first member of her house even to learn to speak the Egyptian language.

The Ptolemies practised another kind of exclusivity as well. Not only did they refrain from intermarriage with the native Egyptians; as time went on, the dynasty increasingly eschewed exogamous marriage altogether, at least for the reigning couple. Brother-sister marriage became the preferred model, though the family also presents examples of cousin and of uncle-niece marriage. Incest is therefore a striking feature of the Ptolemaic monarchy, a practice singular enough to draw comment from virtually all scholars who have written on the subject of Ptolemaic Egypt—yet so enigmatic a practice that a satisfactory explanation of it has still remained elusive.¹ It is the purpose of this article to suggest at least a partial explanation of this Ptolemaic custom by examining its symbolic meaning, and in so doing to provide further support for certain anthropological theories about the symbolic meaning of incest in general and royal incest in particular.

The connections between incest and power have been persuasively drawn by William Arens (1986), among others.² An examination of the incestuous marital strategy pursued by the dynasty of the Ptolemies supports the view that royal incest is symbolic of power. The Ptolemies should therefore be considered alongside other cultures which have adopted such practices when the question of royal incest and its links to power is debated. But the record of the Ptolemaic house also provides an opportunity for a more nuanced insight into the relationship between incest and power. The history of the dynasty demonstrates that incest was just one of a complex set of royal behaviours that were all representative of the extreme power of the family, and that all had the same thing in common: excess, prodigality, and “cultural flamboyance” (Gates 2005:153). Restraint and moderation were not characteristic of the members of this family; rather, the Ptolemies preferred to display their might through actions that could better be described as “over the top.” The Ptolemies crossed numerous boundaries of cultural and moral norms. Thus, incest takes its place as only one component in an integrated set of liminal behaviours symbolizing power and grounded in a philosophy of excess.

Before tackling the main point of this paper, groundwork needs to be laid in two areas. First, we need to establish Greek conceptions of and attitudes towards incest, since the Ptolemies, as a Greco-Macedonian dynasty, drew primarily on a Hellenic heritage (the Egyptian element in their self-conception will be discussed below). Such an

examination will in turn help to highlight how incest may be linked to the notion of excess in general. Secondly, a brief historical survey of the development of the practice of incest in the Ptolemaic house seems necessary. It is not fair to assume that an anthropological audience is intimately acquainted with the details of Ptolemaic history, and furthermore it is important to track some of the other dynastic behaviours which would not be at all apparent from a simple (or even complex) genealogical chart.

The ancient Greeks had no single word translatable as “incest.” The modern Greek word, *haimomixia*, “mingling of blood,” does not appear before the 9th century AD (see Rudhardt 1982:731-732). Nevertheless, the periphrases used by the ancient Greeks are as heavily value-laden as the Latin term *incestum* (“impurity, unchastity, defilement, pollution”). In particular, Greek expressions referring to incestuous behaviour make it clear that the Greeks saw the act as hateful to the gods.³ But the Greeks also found incest abhorrent because it implied a lack of restraint, a loss of self-control. One of the cardinal Greek virtues was the ethic of *sōphrosynē*, a term which embraces meanings of discretion, self-control, temperance and moderation. Incest is just one of the behaviours which breaches *sōphrosynē*:

Some of the unnecessary pleasures and desires are immoral, [says Plato],...[the] sort that emerge in our dreams, when the reasonable and humane part of us is asleep and its control relaxed, and our bestial nature, full of food and drink, wakes and has its fling and tries to secure its own kind of satisfaction...there's nothing too bad for it and it's completely lost to all sense and shame. It doesn't shrink at the thought of intercourse with a mother or anyone else, man, beast or god, or from murder or sacrilege. There is, in fact, no folly or shamelessness it will not commit. [Plato *Republic*, Lee translation 1955:571]

The 2nd century CE Greek writer Plutarch, echoing Plato's judgement, further specifies that the intemperance resulting from the loss of *sōphrosynē* leads one to indulge in forbidden foods as well as forbidden sex (Plutarch *Moralia*, Babbitt translation 1927:101a). Though Plutarch does not specifically state that such “unlawful meats” might represent repasts of a cannibalistic nature, it is certainly the case that much ethnographic literature, ancient as well as modern, links incest with cannibalism.⁴ Incest and cannibalism each symbolize the ultimate transgression of limits, the most dreadful offence against kindred flesh. Eating one's own kind is gastronomic incest, and it is noteworthy that mythic acts of cannibalism often involve dining on one's relatives. Thyestes, one of the great

criminals of Greek myth, eats his own sons and rapes his own daughter. Restraint and moderation, the observation of boundaries, of limits—in a word, *sōphrosynē* before this ultimate self-indulgence.

The Greeks clearly believed that incest was repugnant not only to the gods, but to all right-thinking human beings. Such distaste for and/or disapproval of incestuous mating is something that the Greeks share with virtually every other known culture.⁵ It need hardly be stated, however, that precise *definitions* of the approved degree of kinship for marriage and/or sexual relations can vary greatly from one culture to the next. The ancient Greeks were certainly repelled by the notion of parent-child or full sibling incest—there is plenty of evidence for such attitudes—but in general they were considerably more endogamous in their practices than is modern Western society. First cousin-marriage was fully acceptable and very common; and in the city-state of Athens, at least, it was permissible for an uncle to marry his niece, and even for a half-brother to marry a half-sister, provided that they were children of the same father, not the same mother.

The Ptolemies ruled Egypt for a span of nearly three centuries; the individual members constituting this house over that period were very numerous indeed, and their inter-relationships became increasingly convoluted. A simple glance at the genealogical chart (see Figure 1, next page) might prove confusing rather than illuminating. It is moreover unlikely to provide a sense of the historical context within which the custom of incestuous Ptolemaic marriages began, or the circumstances under which the practice continued and intensified. The next few paragraphs will therefore endeavour to provide a (brief) survey of the incestuous patterns pursued by the Ptolemaic dynasty, as well as examples of some of the more extreme intra-dynastic behaviours.⁶

The first sibling marriage in the family was that between Arsinoë II, daughter of Ptolemy I, and her paternal half-brother Ptolemy Keraunos. It was an inauspicious start to the custom, given that Keraunos celebrated the wedding by murdering his half-sister's two sons by her previous husband. As this marriage started off rather on the wrong foot, it was considerate of Keraunos to get himself killed in battle not long after. By that time, Arsinoë may already have fled to Egypt, where she then took part in the first full-sibling marriage of the dynasty by marrying her younger brother Ptolemy II, a marriage that ultimately gave them both the epithet *Philadelphos*, "Sibling-lover." This marriage was far more significant than the earlier one to Keraunos. Not only was Ptolemy II the ruler of Egypt, while Keraunos was merely a

volatile adventurer, but the full-sibling marriage was a much greater departure from tradition than the half-sibling one.⁷

That the Greco-Macedonian subjects of the Ptolemies were, to say the least, troubled by this first full brother-sister marriage is suggested by the appallingly sycophantic poem commissioned from the Alexandrian court poet Theokritos. In his *Idyll* 17, Theokritos likens the marriage of Ptolemy and Arsinoë to that of the Greek deities Zeus and Hera, brother and sister, king and queen of the gods, above and beyond reproach:

From Zeus let us begin, and with Zeus in our poems,
Muses, let us make end, for of immortals he is best; but
of men let Ptolemy be named, first, last, and in the
midst, for of men he is most excellent...he and his noble
wife, than whom none better clasps in her arms a husband
in his halls, loving with all her heart her brother
and her spouse. After this fashion was accomplished
the sacred bridal also of the immortals whom Queen
Rhea bore to rule Olympus; and single is the couch that
Iris, virgin still, her hands made pure with perfumes,
strews for the sleep of Zeus and Hera. [Theokritos
Idylls, Gow translation 1952:17.1-4, 128-134]

Such an official court posture suggests the need to quell a shocked response among a population who would find much to gossip about in such a marriage—or perhaps, not so much to quell (as we shall see below) as to direct. Undirected, the popular response was liable to result in such crude remarks as that of another of the contemporary poets, one Sotades, who quipped: "You're shoving your prick into an unholy hole" (Athenaios 1951:621a; author's translation). That Ptolemy and Arsinoë took their public image quite seriously is pretty clear from the sequel to this ill-advised jest: Sotades was hunted down by one of Ptolemy's officers, sealed into a lead jar, and dropped into the sea to suffocate or drown, whichever came first.

Arsinoë and Ptolemy Philadelphos had no children by each other; the ruler's heir came from his previous marriage, and did not follow the marital example set by his father. The sibling marriage was no doubt still in the category of a singularity, rather than an established dynastic custom. It suited the political plans of Ptolemy II that the younger generation's marriages be exogamous rather than endogamous: his son Ptolemy III was married to a princess (a half-cousin) who brought Cyrene back into the Egyptian fold, while he was able to employ his daughter Berenike as a useful tool in his struggle with the Seleukids of Asia by marrying her to Antiochos II.⁸ It is therefore not until the next generation that we find another Ptolemaic precedent: the marriage of the full brother and sis-

Ptolemaic Genealogy (conventional)
(not all members of the family are included here)

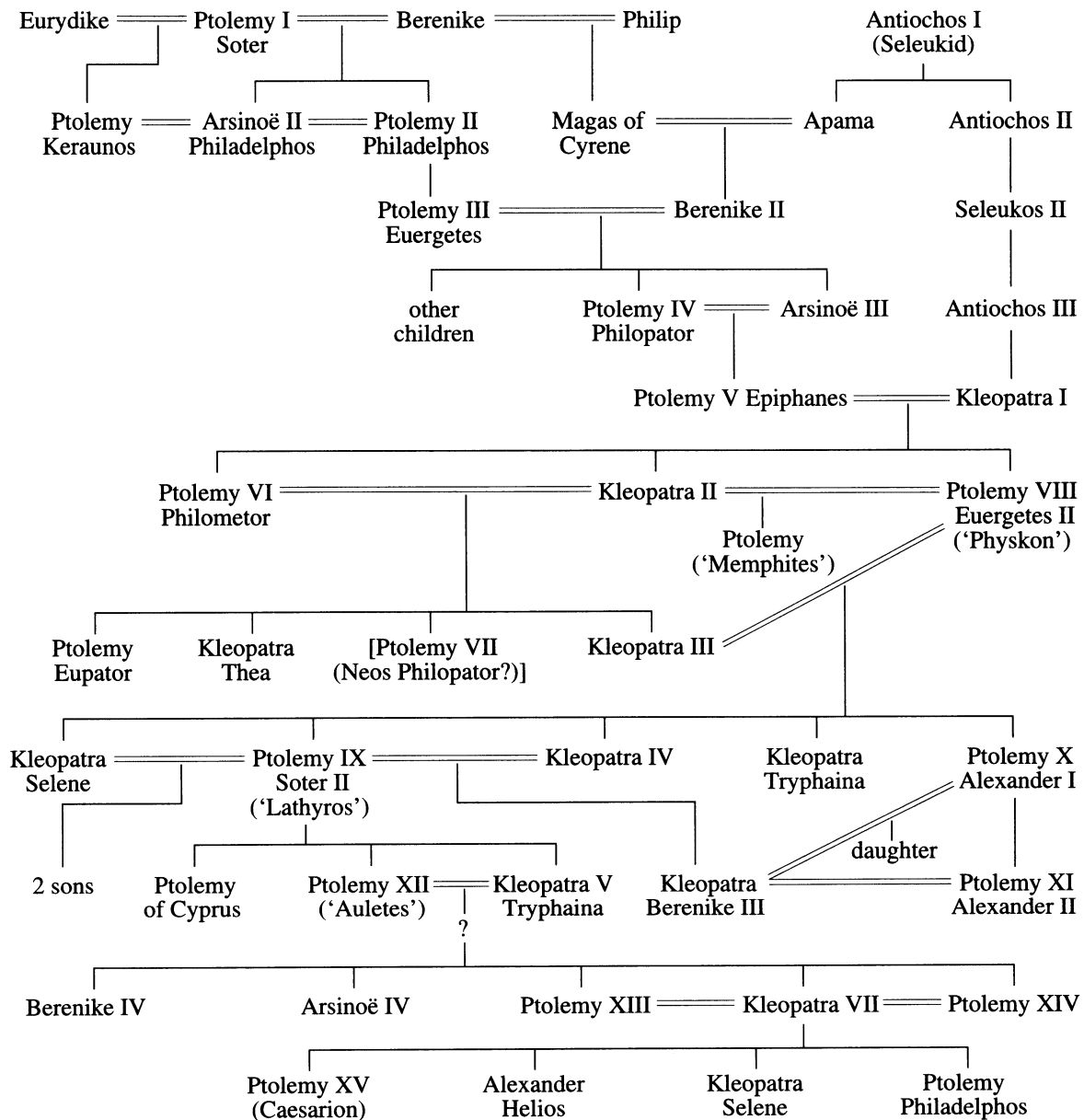


Figure 1: Ptolemaic Genealogy

ter, Ptolemy IV and Arsinoë III, and their production of a son. Ptolemy V, then, is the first product of a Ptolemaic sibling marriage.

Ptolemy V, who was orphaned at an early age, was an only child, perhaps because his father Ptolemy IV was reportedly far more interested in his lavishly inebriate

lifestyle and his various mistresses than he was in his sister-wife. Ptolemy V therefore had no opportunity to engage in the burgeoning dynastic custom of sibling marriage. Fortunately for his marital prospects, however, his Seleukid kinsman Antiochos III declared war on him. After permanently removing Syria from the Ptolemaic

kingdom, Antiochos sealed a peace treaty with the junior Ptolemy by marrying him to his daughter Kleopatra, the first of her name to enter the Ptolemaic house. Since Ptolemy and Kleopatra were third cousins, this marriage barely causes the needle on the incest-meter to quiver. Nevertheless, the offspring of this marriage more than made up for this failing, and the marital entanglements of Ptolemy VI, Kleopatra II, and Ptolemy VIII—and *their* children—in the end took Ptolemaic incest to new heights.

After the early death of Ptolemy V and, subsequently, Kleopatra I, the elder of the two boys, Ptolemy VI, was married to his sister. But Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II, while their own relationship was to all appearances amicable enough, suffered a perpetual affliction in the person of their younger brother. This is not the place to examine all the vicissitudes of the struggle between the siblings; suffice it to say that the Ptolemy who eventually became Ptolemy VIII spent a considerable amount of time and energy throughout his brother's lifetime in trying to oust that brother from the throne. Ptolemy VI, however, had the reputation of being a good and kindly ruler, and was not himself overly fratricidal. Ptolemy VIII therefore was able to spend many formative years as governor in Cyrene, where he waited, as Peter Green says, like some "vast, malevolent spider," to seize his chance (Green 1990:537). That chance came when Ptolemy VI died prematurely in 145 BCE. The elder son of Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II, Ptolemy Eupator, had already predeceased his father, and the younger son may have been too young to consider as his father's heir. The Alexandrians therefore brought Ptolemy VIII back from Cyrene and married him to his sister. What happened next is luridly described by Justin, the 3rd century CE Roman writer and great lover of grim sensationalism:

In Egypt, King Ptolemy [VI] had died, and an embassy was sent to the Ptolemy [VIII] who was king of Cyrene to offer him the throne, along with the hand of Queen Kleopatra, his own sister....As for [Ptolemy VII, the son of Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra], on the day of the wedding at which the king was taking his mother in marriage, Ptolemy [VIII] killed him in his mother's arms amidst the arrangements for the banquet and the rites of the marriage, and entered his sister's bed still dripping with the gore of her son. [Justin, Yardley translation 1994:38:8.1 and 8.4]

Justin's melodrama rouses some suspicions, given that he had already employed the motif of the child slain in his mother's arms on the day of her wedding to the murderer in his tale of an earlier Ptolemaic sibling marriage (that of Arsinoë II and Ptolemy Keraunos). Still, a

son of Ptolemy VI would always be a danger to Ptolemy VIII while he lived, and while he might not have been quite so irretrievably villainous about the whole thing as Justin reports, it is not hard to believe that Ptolemy VIII would have done away with the boy at the first opportunity. Kleopatra II's own subsequent history shows her to have been a woman of considerable ambition and not at all averse to marital and dynastic warfare. Ptolemy VIII would not have felt he could trust her, and the simple fact of the marriage would have made little difference to the degree of his trust. As long as his sister had a living son, she had the potential to rid herself of her brother, and choose a filial co-ruler instead, as did Kleopatra VII many generations later.

The next move in the dynastic game could not have done much to improve the trust and affection between Kleopatra II and Ptolemy VIII. Not long after Kleopatra bore their first child (Ptolemy "Memphites"), her brother either raped or seduced her daughter (his own niece on both sides), impregnated her, and subsequently married her.⁹ The marriage to Kleopatra III might have been Ptolemy VIII's political ambition all along, but in 145 Kleopatra II was no doubt still too powerful for him to bypass or displace her in favour of her daughter. In any case, the marriage to Kleopatra III represents a clear and unprecedented departure from the monogamous pattern of Ptolemaic sibling marriage (Whitehorne 1994:110; Ogden 1999:143). From this point on, the protocols refer to King Ptolemy, Queen Kleopatra "the sister," and Queen Kleopatra "the wife": what John Whitehorne has labelled a "ghastly *ménage à trois*" (Whitehorne 1994:123).

This *ménage* does not appear to have been a particularly happy one, in spite of, or more probably because of, the close family ties. Kleopatra II had plenty of reason to loathe her brother-spouse even before his return to Alexandria, given his repeated efforts to oust her first husband, Ptolemy VI, from the throne. The murder of her young son would certainly have crystallized her hatred for her surviving brother. As for Kleopatra III, she seems to have transferred whatever loyalty she might once have had to her mother wholly to her uncle; the intrusion of Ptolemy VIII into the Alexandrian court therefore also brought about (or exacerbated?) an alienation between mother and daughter. The familial tensions were inevitably mirrored by political rivalries, and in the late 130s, Kleopatra II temporarily gained the upper hand and forced her brother and her daughter out of Alexandria. She may have hoped to place her 12-year-old son, Ptolemy Memphites, on the throne at her side, but she was cruelly forestalled in this by her brother: Ptolemy VIII murdered the boy (his own son), had the body dis-

membered, and sent it to his sister as a birthday present.¹⁰ As in 145, Ptolemy dealt with the threat of a potential rival through the simple expedient of murdering the youth. Dynastically speaking, it made no difference to him that Memphites was his own son, since he already had two other sons by Kleopatra III. This action, which robbed Kleopatra II of her last male progeny, ensured that she would ultimately have to turn back to Ptolemy VIII himself for a familial co-ruler. Thus, more remarkable than Ptolemy's savagery—for which all the ancient sources revile him—is the fact that subsequently we find him back in Alexandria again, ruling at the side of his sister and his wife. Kleopatra II, who had her brother to thank for the murder of two sons, not to mention the alienation and rivalry with her own daughter, was evidently willing, for the sake of her own power, to put up with him until he died.¹¹

Familial affection is not more outstandingly characteristic of the later generations of the Ptolemaic family. Ptolemy VIII died in June of 116, Kleopatra II a few months later, perhaps helped along the way by her loving daughter (Otto and Bengtson 1938:136, 144; see also Huß 2001:630-631). Upon his death, Ptolemy left the throne to his niece-wife Kleopatra III and "whichever of their sons she should prefer."¹² Whatever its motivation, this particular act may be ascribed to Ptolemy VIII's "evil genius" for creating strife.¹³ Under the circumstances, both sons of course considered that they had a legitimate claim; the volatile situation was exacerbated by the fact that Kleopatra III is said not only to have favoured the younger, Ptolemy X Alexander, but to have harboured a positive hatred for the elder, Ptolemy IX "Lathyros," or "Chickpea" (Pausanias 1979:1.9.1). This hatred found expression in the seemingly arbitrary and high-handed demand that Ptolemy IX divorce his sister-wife Kleopatra IV—one of the rare Ptolemaic sibling marriages which is specifically attested to have been a love-match—and marry another sister, Kleopatra Selene (who may have been more sympathetic with her mother?).

The affection, or at least the favour by default, which Kleopatra III lavished on Ptolemy X was probably disproportionate, when we consider that he ultimately murdered her.¹⁴ After ridding himself of his domineering mother, Ptolemy X married his niece, Kleopatra Berenike III, the daughter of his brother Ptolemy IX and (probably) their sister Kleopatra IV. As was the case with her great-grandmother, Kleopatra II, dynastic continuity upon the death of the king was subsequently provided by the female consort: when Kleopatra Berenike's uncle-husband Ptolemy X died, his brother Ptolemy IX returned to Alexandria and reigned there in association

with his popular daughter, the widow of the deceased ruler. Although some have argued that Lathyros actually married his daughter, this seems most unlikely: the evidence for it is very shaky, and marriage in the direct line of descent would have been completely without precedent among the Ptolemies.¹⁵

In 80 BCE, when Ptolemy IX died, dynastic continuity once again pivoted around Kleopatra Berenike. For a short time she ruled alone, but sole female rule was clearly an abnormality, too unnatural to be tolerated for long. Accordingly, a candidate for co-ruler was found: her cousin and stepson, Ptolemy X's son, Ptolemy XI, was brought to Alexandria and married to her. The marriage of Kleopatra Berenike and Ptolemy XI, according to the conventional reconstruction of Ptolemaic genealogy, was less incestuous than many Ptolemaic unions. Bennett (1997), however, suggests a closer relationship for the pair, making them half-siblings in addition to being cousins. Nevertheless, in certain respects the degree of incest in this union has little significance, at least in terms of any genetic impact it might have had on potential offspring: Ptolemy XI, in a fit of inexplicable imbecility, murdered his bride less than three weeks into the honeymoon. The Alexandrians, who had far more reason to be loyal to the long-familiar and well-loved Kleopatra Berenike, and who moreover were accustomed to being kingmakers and kingbreakers, set upon their new and fatuous king and tore him to pieces.

Upon the death of Ptolemy XI, the throne went to a son of Ptolemy IX, Ptolemy XII "Auletes," the "Flute-player." Rumours of Auletes' illegitimacy mean that we cannot establish who his mother was with any certainty, though Bennett does argue that he was the child of a full-sibling marriage, the love-match between Ptolemy IX and Kleopatra IV (Bennett 1997:46-52).¹⁶ Auletes also married a sibling, one Kleopatra V Tryphaina, thought to be a daughter of Ptolemy IX; as is the case with a number of members of the family, while paternity may be fairly certain, "maternity" is not, and since we do not know who either Auletes' or Kleopatra Tryphaina's mother(s) were, we do not know whether theirs was a full- or a half-sibling marriage.

The last member of the Ptolemaic line to rule Egypt was, of course, Kleopatra VII, who also poses a problem in terms of her maternity. She was the daughter of Auletes, but whether she was also the daughter of Kleopatra V Tryphaina, or the daughter of another unknown wife of Auletes, or the bastard daughter of one of his concubines is unknown, though the balance of probability may tip in favour of her being the daughter of Tryphaina, and hence the child of a sibling union.¹⁷ Kleopatra VII herself

may (or may not) have married each of her younger brothers, Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV, in succession. The first died during the civil war he fought against her and Julius Caesar in 48-7 BCE; the second she is said to have poisoned in 44 BCE on her return to Egypt in the wake of Caesar's assassination, in order to make room for her son by the Roman. If the sibling marriages did occur, it is highly unlikely that either of them was ever consummated (Dio Cassius 1955-61:42.35; 42.44).¹⁸ Certainly Kleopatra's children did not come from the incestuous dynastic marriages: her eldest child, Ptolemy XV "Caesarion," was fathered by Julius Caesar, while her three younger children were the offspring of her liaison with Marc Antony.

Ptolemaic Incest: A Viable Dynastic Strategy?

An anthropology audience has no need of a general discussion of the problems posed by incest as a dynastic practice. A great deal of the literature on the topic has been devoted to the potential consequences of inbreeding, as well as to the barriers presented by cultural incest "taboos" (whatever their origins or functionality) and by apparently naturally-occurring inhibitions against incest (the Westermarck effect). It is not the intention of this paper to engage in definitive discussion of any of these issues; this section will, however, touch on them briefly as they affect our view of how the Ptolemies managed to pursue, more or less successfully, a strategy of dynastic incest and inbreeding for a span of roughly two centuries. Should the family not simply have imploded in a welter of birth defects, mental deficiency and cultural-emotional malaise and wretchedness?

The "barrier" presented by the cultural taboo may perhaps be most easily dismissed. It was pointed out earlier that the ancient Greeks and Macedonians shared the well-nigh universal aversion to incest, though in general their cultures were accepting of unions close enough to cause unease to the modern Western mind. Yet the whole point behind the concept of "taboo" is that it represents something consecrated to special individuals, while barred to society in general.¹⁹ Royalty are obvious candidates for those "special" people who are allowed to engage in behaviours not open to the common run. The Ptolemies, therefore, like other royal families which have practised incest, did not "break" a taboo by engaging in sibling marriage—rather, they fulfilled the taboo and gave it meaning, demonstrating their own extraordinariness by breaching a limit constraining the actions of ordinary people.²⁰ Taboo is a thing "set apart." By their incestuous actions, the Ptolemies became "taboo" (see Bischof 1972:28), set apart and untouchable by ordinary standards of human behaviour.

If the existence of a cultural taboo presents no real barrier against *royal* incest, indeed provides a positive incentive for it, what of the natural obstacle created by the Westermarck effect? If Ptolemaic siblings were subject to the same processes which seem to affect most humans—that children raised in close proximity to one another from an early age tend to eschew one another as sexual partners in later life—how could the monarchy have been successful not only in carrying out the formal rituals of endogamous marriage generation after generation, but also in having those marriages entail sufficient sexual activity to result in royal offspring? The conviction that the Westermarck effect should have been so efficacious in inhibiting the sexuality of royal sibling-pairs as to effectively render such marriages infertile prompted Ray Bixler to produce an article debunking the amount of incest that actually occurred in the royal families of Ptolemaic Egypt, Inca Peru and old Hawai'i (Bixler 1982a; also 1982b).

Bixler is right in criticizing the naive and generalizing statements made by some earlier writers on the subject of Ptolemaic incest (notably Ruffer 1921), though his own arguments are seriously flawed.²¹ In any case, his energies seem misplaced, at least insofar as he is concerned to defend the viability of the Westermarck hypothesis. He argues forcefully that the Ptolemaic marriages involved little or no sexual attraction: few would be inclined to disagree with him on this point, but that is not the same as stating that these marriages involved no sexual activity. The whole issue of the Westermarck effect is really largely beside the point when it comes to the question of royal incest. For one thing, infants in a large royal household may well be brought up in circumstances which do not feature the kind of proximity and intimacy which is thought to foster the Westermarck inhibition (Arens 1986:109; Bixler 1982a:267; Fox 1980:48; Mitterauer 1994:246; Shepherd 1983:61, 131; Wolf 1993:160-161). For another—and far more importantly—royal marriage is not, and never has been, inspired primarily by sexual attraction. Royal spouses who lack sexual feelings for one another, whether or not they happen to be related to one another, have still managed to produce heirs. One could hardly imagine Kleopatra II and Ptolemy VIII harbouring warm feelings of any sort for each other, whether sexual, fraternal, or even just barely civil in nature. Yet the exigencies of dynastic necessity led to the conception and birth of Ptolemy Memphites, evidently in the immediate wake of the murder of Kleopatra's son at her brother's hands.²²

Neither cultural prohibition nor natural inhibition would seem, then, to have presented a barrier to the suc-

cess of the incestuous strategy of the Ptolemaic dynasty (or any royals, for that matter). More problematic is the matter of inbreeding, the genetic consequences of incest. One classicist has summed up the popular view succinctly, if not perhaps very scientifically:

If the word "degeneration" has any meaning at all, then the later...Ptolemies were degenerate: selfish, greedy, murderous, weak, stupid, vicious, sensual, vengeful, and...suffering from the effects of prolonged and repeated inbreeding. [Green 1990:554]

It seems that incest and inbreeding are the markers of a much more generalized dynastic corruption, a corruption that culminates in the character deficiencies of the most infamous member of the line, Kleopatra VII:

Certain elements in her character may have been due to this persistent inbreeding—notably her total absence of moral sense, and a tendency to murder her brothers and sisters which may have been partly an inherited family habit. [Grant 1972:27]

It is probably fairly safe to dismiss this vision of a Kleopatra genetically driven to familial murder, presumably as a result of the concentrated build-up of morally (rather than mortally) lethal recessive alleles in her system. Nevertheless, a few words should be addressed to the matter of the genuine physical consequences inbreeding might have had for the Ptolemies. Daniel Ogden has indicted the Ptolemaic practice of incest, and consequent inbreeding, as the cause of various problems suffered by the dynasty (Ogden 1999:67-116).²³ The offspring of incestuous Ptolemaic marriages, he argues, were regularly "genetically compromised," and the Ptolemies as a result suffered from depressed fertility, enhanced mortality, and a number of genetic disorders.

The "evidence" for such genetic compromise, however, springs from a priori reasoning. Inbreeding is now known to enhance the potential for genetic problems: therefore, the Ptolemies *must have* experienced these problems, to a greater or lesser degree. But the negative genetic consequences of inbreeding are "probabilistic, not deterministic" (Durham 1991:301). They do not inevitably appear in all offspring of incest. Furthermore, the assessment of biological or demographic "evidence" from antiquity is a notoriously tricky undertaking. As far as the Ptolemies are concerned, all we have is the literary evidence, supplemented by some artefactual evidence in the form of sculpture and coin portraits; and such evidence as we have cannot be taken to provide proof of Ogden's thesis.

Indeed, the inbreeding Ptolemies were no less fertile—productive of viable offspring—than any of the

neighbouring non-incestuous dynasties, and often considerably more fertile. There are numerous examples one could point to; an outstanding one would be the inbred Kleopatra III, who bore five apparently healthy children in quick succession to her uncle Ptolemy VIII, all five of whom went on to breed children of their own (some of them with each other).²⁴ Almost all the incestuous Ptolemaic marriages resulted in offspring, and the only ones which seem to have been unproductive of children had ample reasons other than impeded fertility. Arsinoë II was probably already about 40 when she married Ptolemy II, and both brother and sister already had heirs (though Arsinoë admittedly had lost two of hers at the hands of her half-brother). As the first fully incestuous marriage in the dynasty it is likely that its purpose was chiefly symbolic and political, and not meant for the production of heirs.²⁵ Like the last incestuous marriages in this house (the putative marriages of Kleopatra VII to her brothers), this first incestuous marriage may well have entailed no sexual activity at all. The only other childless Ptolemaic marriage was that of Ptolemy XI and Kleopatra Berenike, and since the groom murdered the bride before the honeymoon was out, the infertility of this marriage can scarcely be taken as evidence of genetic compromise.

If incestuous Ptolemaic marriages produced just as many (and frequently more) children as the dynastic marriages of their Hellenistic contemporaries, what can be said of survival rates? Did Ptolemaic offspring suffer from an enhanced mortality rate, one greater than that of the local commoners or the neighbouring royalty? Again, not so far as the available evidence shows. Naturally, some Ptolemaic children died young: a lengthy inscription offers touching testimony to the sudden death of a young Ptolemaic princess, Berenike, the daughter of Ptolemy III and Berenike II (Bagnall and Derow 2004:no. 164), while Ogden (1999:86) makes much of the untimely death of Ptolemy Eupator, heir of Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II.²⁶ But legitimate heirs (sometimes, unfortunately, more than one) survived to occupy the throne in almost every case of succession, and even the rare exceptions—where allegedly illegitimate (non-inbred?) heirs succeeded—are wrapped in sufficient genealogical controversy to allow scholars to argue that these alleged bastards were indeed after all the legitimate offspring of incestuous dynastic unions.²⁷

In arguing that the Ptolemies did indeed sustain genetic damage through their habit of inbreeding, Ogden attaches great significance to the monstrous obesity of both Ptolemy VIII (known as "Physkon," "Pot-belly"), and his son, Ptolemy X (Ogden 1999:97-98):²⁸

To the Romans...[Ptolemy VIII] was as ludicrous a figure as he was a cruel one to his fellow-citizens. He had an ugly face, and was short in stature; and he had a distended belly more like an animal's than a man's. The repulsiveness of his appearance was heightened by his dress, which was exceedingly fine-spun to the point of transparency, just as if he had some motive for putting on display what a decent man should have made every effort to conceal. [Justin, Yardley translation 1994:38.8.8-9]

Through indulgence in luxury [Ptolemy VIII's] body had become utterly corrupted with fat and with a belly of such size that it would have been hard to measure it with one's arms; to cover it he wore a tunic which reached to his feet and which had sleeves reaching to his wrists; but he never went abroad on foot except on Scipio's account....Ptolemy's son [Ptolemy X] Alexander also grew fatter and fatter....The master of Egypt, a man who was hated by the masses, though flattered by his courtiers, lived in great luxury; but he could not even go out to urinate unless he had two men to lean upon as he walked. And yet when it came to the rounds of dancing at a drinking-party he would jump from a high couch barefoot as he was, and perform the figures in a livelier fashion than those who had practised them. [Athenaios, Gulick translation 1955:549e; 550a-b]

Ogden argues that Ptolemy VIII's fat issues, as well as his evident lack of stature, point to unusual genetic problems attendant on inbreeding. And yet Ptolemy VIII, the "grossest" of all the Ptolemies, in behaviour as well as appearance, was not himself the product of excessive inbreeding.²⁹ Furthermore, the second passage just cited provides ample evidence for the real reason behind the corpulence of both father and son: theirs was a lifestyle disease. Excessive nurture, in the form of gluttonous living, rather than nature in the form of a putative concentration of damaging recessive genes, is surely the answer.

The matter of the excessively luxurious lifestyle of the Ptolemies will be addressed further below; it is in fact central to the point of this paper.³⁰ For the moment let it simply be said that, while it cannot be denied that the Ptolemies *may have* at times suffered from the potentially adverse effects of inbreeding, the available evidence does not demonstrate clearly that at any given point they actually were so affected. Although Walter Scheidel's intensive demographic study of inbreeding in Roman-era Egypt does not touch on the Ptolemies, his conclusions could easily apply to the Ptolemaic evidence as well:

All in all, the available evidence from Roman Egypt cannot be taken to refute the model of increasing inbreeding depression and its potentially disastrous conse-

quences for the offspring of brother-sister matings. *At the same time, neither the census returns nor any other sources I am aware of offer any indications of unusually elevated levels of infant mortality and severe physical or mental handicaps among the inbreeding families of Roman Egypt.* [Scheidel 1996a:28]³¹

Royal Incest: Consciously or Unconsciously Determined?

The previous section argued that the Ptolemies found incest on the whole to be a viable royal strategy: that they were able to propagate their dynasty through a more or less regular series of closely incestuous marriages, and that whatever genetic damage they *may* have sustained over time is invisible in the record (and would probably never have been apparent to the Ptolemies themselves as something resulting from their mating practices). But the mere viability of the custom of royal incest does not in itself account for its desirability. The simple fact that incestuous behaviour for the Ptolemies was not ruled out by culture or nature, and that they were apparently reasonably lucky on the inbreeding front, does not explain why they should have adopted the practice in the first place, or clung to it so tenaciously. This question, though it may have taken a long time to reach, is the main point of this paper.

Classical scholars who have studied the Ptolemaic dynasty have made various conjectures as to the possible reasons for Ptolemaic incest. Most of the rationales suggested have been of a more or less pragmatic nature, or at least have been grounded in the notion of a conscious decision deliberately taken by the Ptolemaic rulers. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that there still exists a sense of scholarly dissatisfaction, a conviction that the real reason for Ptolemaic incest still eludes analysis. While several of the proposals are likely to have some merit in that these consciously pragmatic rationales may well have contributed to the functionality of Ptolemaic incest, it is my belief that the picture is incomplete without consideration of the symbolic (and arguably at times unconscious) underpinnings of the practice.

Among the more pragmatic reasons suggested for the institution of incest among the Ptolemies is the notion that these Greco-Macedonian newcomers to Egypt sought acceptance from the Egyptian population by adopting a native practice (Burstein 1982; Hombert and Préaux 1949; Macurdy 1932:118; Ogden 1999:77-78; Turner 1984:137-138). Although this view has been criticized on the grounds that the Egyptian Pharaohs did not engage in sibling marriage to the extent that modern popular belief would have

it (Bonhême and Forgeau 1988:319; Černý 1954; Middleton 1962; Robins 1993:26-27), it is clear that the ancient Greeks (and others) held the firm belief that Egyptian brothers and sisters, royal or common, were prone to marrying each other. "The Egyptians also made a law, they say, contrary to the general custom of mankind, permitting men to marry their sisters, this being due to the success attained by Isis in this respect" (Diodoros, Oldfather translation 1933:1.27). "Ptolemy [II] was in love with his sister Arsinoë, and married her, flat contrary to the traditions of Macedonia, but agreeably to those of his Egyptian subjects" (Pausanias 1979:1.7.1). Whether or not this view was true to the Egyptian reality is therefore not relevant; what matters is what the Greeks believed about the Egyptians. It cannot be mere coincidence that this foreign dynasty adopted a practice that was widely held to be one of the most striking of the local customs. Yet this cannot be the only answer. Royal sibling marriage also took place in the neighbouring Seleukid kingdom (far more rarely, it is true), and may even have been instituted there before the Ptolemies began to practise it (Ogden 1999:125-126).³² And in any case, asserting that the Ptolemies copied the Pharaohs only begs the question, why would the *Pharaohs* have engaged in it?

Diodoros connects the putative Egyptian custom of brother-sister marriage to the Egyptian reverence for the goddess Isis. Isis was one of the great goddesses of Mediterranean antiquity, a culture-hero, civilizer, and founder, along with her brother-husband Osiris (Diodoros, Oldfather translation 1933:1.13-22). Isis and Osiris were said to have loved each other so deeply that they made love while they were still both in the womb (Plutarch *Moralia* 1927:356a). When Osiris was killed and his body dismembered and scattered throughout Egypt by his brother Set, the grieving Isis wandered up and down the length of the Nile collecting her dead brother's remains. From his partially revived corpse she succeeded in conceiving Horus, the divine infant who would grow up to take vengeance on Set and restore order to the world (Diodoros, Oldfather translation 1933:1.21; Plutarch *Moralia* 1927:357f-358b). The divine trio of Isis, Osiris, and Horus had weighty political significance as well. The living Pharaoh was assimilated to Horus, while the one immediately deceased was identified with Osiris, ruler of the dead; the new Pharaoh's task, like Horus, was always to re-establish cosmic order, order which had been thrown into disarray and confusion by the death of his predecessor. As for Isis, whose name refers to the royal throne, she was literally the seat of political power.

Isis and Osiris therefore represented civilization and order over chaos and disorder; furthermore, they were

emblematic of a marital love that was also a sibling love. In this they had counterparts in other cultures, including the Greeks themselves. The ruling deities of ancient Greece—Zeus and his consort Hera—were also full brother and sister. It was only incest among humans that was loathsome to the Greek gods, who had every right to engage in the practice themselves. For royalty to follow suit was of course to suggest that incestuous royals were more than human, that they were raised to the plane of divinity. Theokritos' poem in praise of Ptolemy II (cited above) specifically makes the connection between the marriage of Ptolemy and Arsinoë and that of Zeus and Hera. This was propaganda for Greek consumption, as it was Ptolemy's Greek subjects who were more likely to shudder at the marriage. For the native Egyptians, the marriage's analogy with Isis and Osiris would have been far more meaningful. It is significant that throughout the centuries the Ptolemaic dynasty strove to evoke these deities in numerous ways besides sibling marriage. Ptolemaic queens were repeatedly assimilated to or identified with Isis; Arsinoë II, the first participant in a sibling marriage, is a particularly good example.³³ One wonders whether Ptolemy VIII, who is said to have shipped the dismembered remains of her murdered son to his sister Kleopatra II during the civil war between the siblings, was mocking and challenging her claim to any association with Isis, the goddess whose greatest feat had been the restoration of her murdered and dismembered spouse.

Perhaps connected to the political-religious ideology of assimilating the royal dynasty to the gods is the argument that incest prevents the royal blood from being tainted by mingling with that of lesser beings (mere mortals and commoners). Several scholars have found a solution to the enigma of Ptolemaic incest in this conscious notion that endogamy promotes purity (Chamoux 2003:223; Grant 1972:26; Heinen 1978; Mitterauer 1994; Whitehorne 1994:91), but this does not seem to be a compelling solution, at least not by itself. Royalty, even god-like royalty, can always marry other royalty (though this could bring its own set of problems, as we shall see). The Hellenistic dynasties regularly married into each other, and the Ptolemies participated in this too: over the years numerous Ptolemaic princesses married Seleukid men (though it was rare indeed for a Ptolemaic ruler to take a non-Ptolemaic bride).

Putative ancient notions of the special qualities of royal, perhaps even divine, blood, find some resonance with the views of sociobiologists, who maintain that "royal incest is best explained in terms of the general sociobiological paradigm of inclusive fitness" (Van den Berghe and Mesher 1980:300). The concentration of genetic mate-

rial after generations of incestuous marriage practices would eventually result in a scenario where the king would be close to “cloning” himself. As someone who is very far from being a specialist in this field, I do not believe I can comment on the lively debate surrounding sociobiological theories of incest, or sociobiology in general.³⁴ I would simply state that it seems difficult to see how any of the sociobiological notions about dynasties seeking *genetic* fitness and survival could ever have been consciously determined, as they surely must have been if this motivation is to make any sense.

Sociobiologists have also seen royal incest as “the ultimate logical outcome of hypergyny,” the female marital strategy of “marrying up” (Van den Berghe and Mesher 1980:303). This brings up the question of the role of Ptolemaic females in all these dynastic chess moves. Did the Arsinoës and Kleopatras deliberately seek marriages with their brothers because otherwise they had “almost no way to go but down” (Van den Berghe 1983:100; see also Arens 1986:110; Herrenschildt 1994; Shepherd 1983:130)? The answer seems to be, “probably not.” Strong-willed many of the Ptolemaic women certainly were, but theirs were not the marital choices driving this dynasty. Arsinoë II could never have persuaded Ptolemy II to marry her unless the marriage suited and benefited him (Burstein 1982; Carney 1987; Hazzard 2000:81-100),³⁵ while one can scarcely imagine Kleopatra II marrying Ptolemy VIII if she had not been compelled to (at least, so long as she wished to retain her own position). Furthermore, it is questionable whether marriage to neighbouring royalty, such as the marriage of Ptolemy II’s daughter Berenike to the Seleukid king Antiochos II in the mid-third century, really represents a step “down.” Several Ptolemaic princesses married neither down nor up, but “sideways” (chiefly to Seleukids).³⁶

Lateral marriages to Seleukids do highlight some more pragmatic reasons why the Ptolemies might have found endogamy more functional than exogamy. Marriage to foreign royalty always gave an excuse and a lever for interference from a rival monarch, as the Ptolemies knew only too well from their own behaviour. The third century marriage of Berenike to Antiochos was in fact an aggressive Ptolemaic move, a marriage settlement forced on the Seleukid ruler in the wake of a (poorly-documented) war that evidently went better for the Ptolemies than for the Seleukids. It was clearly Ptolemy II’s intention that his daughter’s child should inherit the Seleukid throne (Antiochos had been forced to agree to set aside his previous wife Laodike and her two sons). The Ptolemaic plan backfired when Antiochos died unexpectedly, and Berenike and her infant were murdered, allegedly at the behest of

Laodike. Yet this situation ultimately offered Berenike’s brother, Ptolemy III, a lever for interference: he invaded the Seleukid kingdom and made enormous inroads into it, claiming legitimacy for his actions through his kinship with the murdered queen and her child, the legitimate heir. In the next century, the Seleukids paid back Ptolemaic aggression with interest, again by means of an exogamous marriage. Antiochos III imposed his daughter Kleopatra on young Ptolemy V in the wake of a war won by the Seleukid, and he is said to have done so as part of a deliberate effort to subvert the Ptolemaic kingdom (Jerome *Commentary on Daniel* 1958:11.17). This marriage connection subsequently enabled Antiochos III’s son, Antiochos IV, to do what Ptolemy III had done 75 years before: invade the neighbouring kingdom, this time Egypt, ostensibly on behalf of a threatened and still minor legitimate heir. Thus, although the Ptolemies were always willing to marry off excess females to Seleukids, they strove wherever possible to reserve a Ptolemaic bride for the royal heir. Such an extremely endogamous union brought with it no set of aggressively ill-mannered in-laws.

A number of pragmatic rationales, as suggested by various scholars, have been gathered here: pure political expediency in some cases, a consciously devised platform of religious propaganda in others. But I have been maintaining throughout that the picture is incomplete without looking at the symbolic content of royal incest, and symbolic motivations may or may not have been conscious ones: “the participants [are not] necessarily aware of this cultural intent or message” (Arens 1986:148). It is in a symbolic context that the link between incest and power stands out so clearly.

Notions of chaos and disorder characterize incest. The Chinese and Indonesian terms for it evoke concepts of disorder and disharmony (Arens 1986:5-6; Needham 1974:63-4), while the later Greek compound *haimomixia* implies an undifferentiated mixing and mingling. The mythic adversary of Oedipus—the Sphinx—manifests this chaotic disorder in her scrambled genetic makeup, embodying woman, lion and bird.³⁷ Malinowski’s famous statement on the taboo also associates incest with disorder; according to him, human society avoids incest simply because otherwise there would be “complete social chaos...the upsetting of age distinctions, the mixing up of generations, the disorganization of sentiments, and a violent exchange of roles” (Malinowski 1927:251).³⁸ Oedipus’ bitter cry of spiritual agony captures vividly that sense of inappropriate roles and affect: “born from those who should not have borne me, living with those I should not have lived with, killing those I should not have killed!”³⁹

And yet the breaking of barriers, the flouting of civilized structures, the invitation to open a door into the world of chaos, may be beneficial, provided that it is done by the right individual: the extraordinary one, the divine one, the magical one, the royal one. Oedipus is the incarnation of all the “grisly horror” that humans have ever associated with incest, a horror compounded by the dreadful chain of fate or coincidence that ensnares this morally innocent victim. But Sophocles’ great tragedy, in which Oedipus discovers his true identity and thus the terrible reality of his existence and his actions, is not entitled *Oedipus the Incestuous* or *Oedipus the Parricide* or even just plain *Oedipus*: it is called *Oedipus the King*.⁴⁰ The point is that Oedipus is not just any ordinary mortal. He is a king, and if he has committed incest, that incest was central to his ascent to the throne. *Oedipus the King* focusses chiefly on the horror of Oedipus’ self-discovery and the agony of its aftermath. But a later play of Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, suggests that, even blind and in exile, convicted of parricide and incest, Oedipus is still extraordinary, and has the power to bestow blessings on others.⁴¹

Incest appears to unlock power, particularly creative power. Numerous creation myths emphasize the power of incestuous sexuality to bring order and structure out of chaos. In Greek myth the structuring of the world is carried out through the mating of Gaia (Earth) with her son Ouranos (Heaven); the Zoroastrian god Ohrmazd engages in incestuous sex with his daughter Spendarmat (Earth) in order to advance creation;⁴² Lot’s daughters seduce their father in order to give birth to a new race in the wake of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah;⁴³ and “the representation of brother and sister as a symbolically parental couple in descent ideology” forms part of the creation mythology of a number of cultures (Moore 1964:1309).⁴⁴

It is those with extraordinary stature—gods, first humans, royalty—who engage in this powerfully creative incest, who can breach the boundaries between civilization (which they themselves participate in creating and securing) and the chaotic forces of disorder. Royalty in particular is a liminal state, at the outer (upper) boundaries of society, and in many cases at the borders between human and divine. By stepping beyond those bounds, through the commission of incest, royalty elicits that creative power. Mary Douglas argues that individuals undergoing a rite of passage, or otherwise in a transformative state, return from those borderline, chaotic places beyond the community to which they have gone with the power to recreate order (Douglas 1966:94-104; see also Turner 1967). Thus royalty, through participation in an act evocative of chaos and disorder, may deliberately summon forth calamity, only to overcome it and restore the order nec-

essary for the community to continue. In effect, royal incest fights fire with fire, or rather, chaos with chaos.

Royal incest thus “draws attention to actors engaged in cultural performance rather than reproductive strategy” (Arens 1986:122). Arens argues that royal incest is in fact primarily a symbol of power, rather than a means to attain pure blood heirs.⁴⁵ “The theme of incest plays a major part in the deification procedure [of the king of the African Shilluk], for it reflects the ability of the would-be king to violate a basic rule and survive the encounter with a symbolic act of potency and creation” (Arens 1986:123).⁴⁶ The power elicited by royal incest is not simply a personal power, the exercise of which would indeed be tyranny: it must be a power wielded on behalf of society. “The king and society are one, while his vitality and goodwill are essential to Shilluk continuity. With him, there is order, and without him, chaos” (Arens 1986:129).

The Egyptian context of the Ptolemaic dynasty would have brought them up against the vital cosmic role of the Egyptian Pharaoh, a responsibility the Ptolemies would also have borne. Pharaoh defends not only his people and his nation, but even the very fabric of the world, subduing cosmic chaos and re-establishing cosmic order after the death of the previous Pharaoh. As Horus, he avenges the death (and disordering through dismemberment) of his father Osiris at the hands of Set (Bonhême and Forgeau 1988:63-70; Koenen 1983, 1993). The creation and ordering of the world is threatened by the death of every Pharaoh; every new Pharaoh must restore that order and that creation, responsible as he is for Maät, for cosmic order and justice (see Bonhême and Forgeau 1988:110-120, 132; Heinen 1978; Koenen 1983, 1993; Quaegebeur 1978:246; Winter 1978). It would be difficult of course to argue that royal incest was inevitably demanded by a cosmic role of the defender of order against chaos, either for the Pharaohs or for the Ptolemies. After all, these cosmic roles were originally defined for the native Egyptian Pharaohs, and while they did pursue incestuous marriages, they were not particularly rigorous about it (certainly not as rigorous as the Ptolemies). Yet it is certain that royal incest’s symbolic creative potency could only enhance the ruler’s ability to re-enact the cosmic drama of the gods.

Thus, stepping beyond boundaries, as exemplified in acts of incest, may be emblematic of creativity and power. But the sexual barriers mandated by society were not the only limits breached by the Ptolemies. Their dynastic behaviour in general was evocative of excess and intemperance in all directions. Their marriage practices would therefore seem to have been only one piece of a larger puzzle.

The Philosophy of Excess

As we saw earlier, the Greeks condemned incest not only on the grounds that the gods found it hateful. They also saw it as representative of completely immoderate self-indulgence, of a total loss of all restraint. Such self-indulgence might take many forms, unrestrained indulgence in sex and food being two of the most obvious breaches of moderation and self-restraint. The Ptolemaic record offers one glaring nexus of excess in every facet of life: Ptolemy VIII. Grotesquely obese gourmand, vile husband to his sister, (allegedly) rapist of his niece, murderer of children (including his own), Ptolemy VIII epitomized all that was contrary to the notion of *sōphrosynē*. He was, in short, “a monster steeped in murder and incest,” at least to one Victorian classicist (Mahaffy 1895:377).⁴⁷ The clear decadence of these over-indulgent Ptolemies has been read as a sign of political decay ever since antiquity. The Greek historian Polybios, writing in the second century BCE, blamed the beginnings of the decline of the Ptolemaic empire on Ptolemy IV, who neglected affairs of state and indulged himself instead in “shameless amours and senseless and constant drunkenness” (Polybios, Paton translation 1922:5.34, 10).⁴⁸ In more recent years, as evidence for the negative genetic consequences of inbreeding has mounted, it is the procreative aspect of Ptolemaic marriage practices that has been indicted for their perceived political degeneration (Green 1990; Ogden 1999): a putative scientific basis for a 2000-year-old prejudiced perception.

Were the Ptolemies really nothing more than a pack of self-indulgent, gluttonous, sexually voracious sots, with no policy beyond the gratification of every whim, the more extreme the better? Surely not. A more careful examination of Ptolemaic royal ideology reveals that their philosophy of excess was grounded in a carefully mapped out strategy of propaganda and self-presentation. In 1948, J. Tondriau published an article in which he argued that the Ptolemaic royal philosophy deliberately rejected the traditional virtue of *sōphrosynē*, and extolled instead *sōphrosynē*'s opposite: *tryphē* (Tondriau 1948c; see also Heinen 1983). The Greek word *tryphē* is most often translated as “luxury,” and carries with it also a sense of delicacy, or softness, of wanton behaviour, and in general a lack of stern self-control. As a concept, it may seem to be rather odious, and so it certainly was interpreted by many of the Greek and Roman philosophers and writers who exalted the notion of moderation and the mastery of the self.

Nevertheless, as with incest itself, there could be a positive side to a propaganda that emphasized luxury and ostentatious display. Certainly the incredible wealth of

the Ptolemies could scarcely have been imagined had they restricted themselves to public habits of *sōphrosynē*, and wealth of course (for a ruling dynasty) implies both power and benefaction (what the Greeks called *euergetism*). The literary record has left us with several descriptions of dazzling public displays of wealth and luxury put on by the Ptolemies, displays of staggering proportions. Such spectacles were clearly intended to impress subject, friend, and potential enemy alike with Ptolemaic power: the power to do good to those deserving of their friendship from their inexhaustible store of wealth, and the power to purchase the military might necessary to do harm to those undeserving of that friendship.

The most famous of these exhibitions to a modern reader is probably the arrival of Kleopatra VII at Tarsos in 41 BCE. Summoned to meet Marc Antony, she decided to get the upper hand from the start by staging a classic display of Ptolemaic wealth, and in so doing, upstaging Antony:

She sailed up the river Cydnus on a golden-prowed barge, with sails of purple outspread and rowers pulling on silver oars to the sound of a reed-pipe blended with wind-pipes and lyres. She herself reclined beneath a gold-embroidered canopy, adorned like a painting of Aphrodite, flanked by slave-boys, each made to resemble Eros, who cooled her with their fans. Likewise her most beautiful female slaves, dressed as Nereids and Graces, were stationed at the rudders and the ropes. The wonderful smell of numerous burning spices filled the banks of the river. Some people formed an escort for her on either side all the way from the river, while others came down from the city to see the spectacle. The crowd filling the city square trickled away, until at last Antony himself was left alone, seated on a dais. [Plutarch *Life of Antony*, Waterfield translation 1999:26]⁴⁹

This passage from Plutarch, made so famous by Shakespeare's adaptation of it, captures not only the unbelievable wealth underlying Ptolemaic *tryphē*, but also its sensual quality, and the delicacy, softness, and perceived effeminacy associated with this type of luxury. Ptolemy VIII and his famously transparent garments mentioned earlier, “a sort of see-through nightdress” (Whitehorne 1994:107), would not have been out of place on Kleopatra's barge, though perhaps his allegedly repellent personal appearance might have struck a sour note. Yet even the prodigious obesity of Ptolemy VIII finds its own place in a dynastic philosophy which emphasized wealth, luxury, excess and plenty.⁵⁰ In fact, the surviving official portraits of Ptolemy VIII and his son, the equally famously fat Ptolemy X, highlight rather than downplay their corpulence.

The luxury and magnificence of *tryphē*, as remarked above, emphasized the dynasty's *euergetism*, its ability and willingness to bestow beneficence. *Tryphē* is also an emblem of power, and not simply because of the obvious equation between power and wealth. *Tryphē*—excessive luxury, immoderate display, wanton self-indulgence—implies a lack of control. Lack of self-control, of course, is one manifestation of *tryphē*, and those critical of the Ptolemies, like Polybios, or the arrogant Roman legates who visited Ptolemy VIII and sneered down their virtuous Roman noses at the poor fat king as he tried to keep up with them while they marched about Alexandria, would have argued that the Ptolemies simply were not masters of themselves.⁵¹ But if they were not masters of themselves, their lack of restraint in all things surely implied for all to see that neither was anyone else master of them. Excessive indulgence, particularly indulgence in things forbidden, underscores the absolute omnipotence of royalty. There is no superior power capable of coercion, and not even the gods would intervene to check Ptolemaic behaviour.

Ptolemaic incest should therefore be considered in the context of the Ptolemaic philosophy of excess in general, a connection which has not hitherto been drawn. Ptolemaic freedom to indulge, and to do so ostentatiously and deliberately, is representative of power. Incest, as the most illicit of sexual acts, is almost demanded by a royal philosophy of power that recognizes no limits or restraints and that is prepared to overstep all boundaries. The peculiarly Ptolemaic dedication to *tryphē* may indeed be why this dynasty was more determinedly incestuous than the native Pharaohs had been. The Ptolemies may first have adopted sibling marriage because of the reports about native Egyptian behaviour; but it would have resonated so well with the rest of their philosophy that it inevitably became central to it. Ptolemy II was the first to engage in full-sibling marriage, as he was also the first on record to present the kind of stupefying public displays of wealth that subsequently became associated with the Ptolemaic dynasty generally.⁵² As for Ptolemy VIII, we may speculate that the exceedingly hyperbolic (even for his family) behaviour that he exhibited in all dimensions may be linked to the fact that he had spent so many years of his life in rather uncertain circumstances. After decades of semi-exile in Cyrene, at odds with the rulers in Alexandria, he would have been concerned to establish his power and authority by any and all means, pragmatic and symbolic, once he finally ascended the throne.

Tryphē and incest are also linked through the gods of the Ptolemies. Of all the Greek gods, the Ptolemies claimed to have a special relationship with Dionysos, and

repeatedly assimilated themselves to him (see Cerfaux and Tondriau 1957; Heinen 1978; Lunsingh Scheurleer 1978; Queyrel 1984, 1985; Sullivan 1990:230; Tondriau 1948a, 1950, 1952). A god of fertility and all the good things in life—particularly the vine and its products—Dionysos is representative of delivery from care and inhibition. His gift of wine induces and epitomizes the lack of restraint associated with *tryphē*, and may lead to acts of forbidden sexuality. Since at least the 5th century BCE, Greeks (and Egyptians) had accepted the equation of Dionysos with Osiris, to whom the rulers of Egypt also assimilated themselves (Diodoros 1.13; Herodotos 2.42; Plutarch *Moralia* 364e-365f.). Both are gods associated with incest, and both are gods of fertility and the life force, a power manifested in the myths of both of them, myths which feature death, dismemberment and rebirth.⁵³ Both Dionysos and Osiris are liminal gods, gods who pass beyond the borders of death into chaos, and who return, bringing power back with them.⁵⁴ Deities of both *tryphē* and incest are thus united in the unique Greco-Egyptian context of the Ptolemaic monarchy, and incest and *tryphē* are the mainstays of the Ptolemaic royal propaganda.

That it *was* propaganda, i.e., meant for public consumption, seems certain. Even if the Ptolemies themselves did not always consciously apprehend every nuance of their symbolic behaviour, it can hardly be credited that they would have engaged in this symbolism only behind closed doors, so to speak. Yet many classical scholars have professed themselves puzzled over some of the more overt behaviours which would have called attention to the incest, on the grounds that the dynasty should have preferred to sublimate or disguise it somehow. This is particularly a question that arises with the first marriage, that of Ptolemy and Arsinoë Philadelphos. One scholar, for example, thinks that the epithet “Sibling-lover” was chosen in order to “soften the incestuous nature of the relationship,” since it should emphasize the fraternal—rather than erotic—nature of Ptolemy and Arsinoë’s love for one another (Fraser 1972[1]:217).⁵⁵ Yet the choice of such a flagrantly “in your face” epithet surely deliberately accentuates the incest rather than deflecting attention away from it. Incest, like the Ptolemaic *tryphē* with which it was connected, would have lost all its symbolic value if it was not publicly celebrated.

Did this royal program of excess in all things work? It is difficult to judge this matter, given that we are forced to read Ptolemaic history through a screen of bigoted ancient authors who reviled the self-indulgent Ptolemies from their own upper-class standpoint of Greek *sōphrosynē* and Roman *simplicitas*. We also must contend with the historical reality that interposes between

us and the Ptolemies the centuries-long domination of the military might of Rome. Ptolemaic Egypt, under its last ruler Kleopatra VII, was the last of the great Hellenistic kingdoms to fall to Rome, and the writers of Augustan Rome echo the hysterical hatred that Kleopatra's Roman enemies whipped up against her and all things Ptolemaic. But from the point of view of the common people of ancient Egypt and the Hellenized East, a Ptolemaic ruler such as Kleopatra was a provider of bounty and the promise of better things to come, and not purely on material grounds. The symbolic aspect of Ptolemaic beneficence is well captured in Plutarch's account of Kleopatra and Antony's meeting at Tarsos: "the word went out to all that Aphrodite was making merry with Dionysos for the good of Asia" (Plutarch *Life of Antony* 1988:26; author's translation).

Although the ancient sources largely condemn Ptolemaic tryphē, they are in fact less prone to abominate or at least comment on Ptolemaic incest than writers of a more recent era. The 1st-century CE Jewish writer Josephus, who drew on the memoirs of Kleopatra's enemy, Herod the Great, to compose his history, and who consequently presents one of the most poisonous portraits of Kleopatra to survive, did not criticize Kleopatra for marrying her brothers, only for (allegedly) murdering them (Josephus *Against Apion* 1977:2.57-8; *Jewish Antiquities* 1998:15.89; *Jewish War* 1997:1.359-60). Polybios criticizes Ptolemy IV for the sordid extra-marital affairs which kept him out of his sister's bed, and even a 5th-century CE Christian writer can comment that Ptolemy VIII's great crime against his sister Kleopatra II was setting her aside in favour of her daughter, not marrying her in the first place (Orosius *Against the Pagans* 1964:5.10, 6; Polybios 1922:5.34, 10). It is noteworthy that no ancient author speaks ill of the full sibling marriage of Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II, perhaps because it was evidently an amicable and successful one. It is modern writers who tend to fixate on the incest specifically, blaming it (or rather, the consequent inbreeding) for the ostensible "degeneration" of the Ptolemaic dynasty and kingdom (a judgment which peculiarly, yet repeatedly, fails to take note of the fact that the Ptolemaic kingdom survived longer than any of its Hellenistic counterparts).

Peter Morriss has commented that modern Anglo-American society tends to be less tolerant of the blurring of boundaries (especially sexual boundaries) than many cultures which are perceived as less "advanced" (Morriss 1997:276-280). Although no one could designate the classical culture of the ancient Mediterranean as anything less than highly sophisticated, it is true that it was in general more tolerant of close-kin sexuality than subsequent

Western cultures have been.⁵⁶ The differing perspectives of ancient and modern commentators on the subject of Ptolemaic incest would seem to support Morriss' observation. Morriss further argues that contemporary Western culture tends to believe that its own prejudices and taboos are based on hygiene and science, rather than superstition. Recent scholarly arguments to the effect that Ptolemaic "degeneration" was the result of genetic, if not moral, decay again may say more about the perspective of the commentators than about the reality of the historical dynasty. In order to understand the enigma of Ptolemaic incest more fully (and perhaps we shall never understand it completely), it seems vital that we at least make the attempt to free ourselves from the age-old conviction that the Ptolemies were a degraded and corrupt race.

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Notes

- 1 Among the more recent publications dealing with Ptolemaic incest, see Carney 1987; Bennett 1997; Ogden 1999:67-116; Hazzard 2000:85-93. Hopkins 1980, 1994, Shaw 1992, Parker 1996, and Scheidel 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2002, 2005 focus on the phenomenon of incest among commoners in the Roman period in Egypt, not on the Hellenistic royal incest that preceded it.
- 2 See Ross and Rapp 1983 for comments on the social and political construct of sexuality in general.
- 3 *Anosios* or *anagnos sunousia* ("unholy, impure intercourse"); *gamos asebeēs*, "impious marriage."
- 4 See Strabo 1927:4.5, 4; Isocrates *Panathenaicus* 1928:121-122; Sextus Empiricus *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1996:3.245-248; Hooper 1976:227; Labby 1976:171; Schneider 1976:162; Arens 1979:14, 27-28, 146 and 1986:vii-ix; Parker 1983:98, 360, 364; Durham 1991:291; Arfouilloux 1993; Nagy 2000; Archibald 2001:20-21; Moreau 2002:30.
- 5 The only apparent cases of non-royal culturally-approved full sibling incest are the Roman period in Egypt: Hopkins 1980, 1994, Shaw 1992, Bagnall and Frier 1994:127-134,

- Scheidel 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2002, 2005, Parker 1996, Hendrix and Schneider 1999, Gonis 2000; and Zoroastrian Persia: Lee 1988, Herrenschmidt 1994, Mitterauer 1994, Scheidel 2002; see Storrie 2003 for sibling incest among the Hoti of Venezuelan Guiana. On cultures which have practiced *royal* incest, see Goggin and Sturtevant 1964:202-207.
- 6 There are unfortunately some gaps and uncertainties in our knowledge, and some points of dispute in the genealogical reconstructions. As the main point of this paper is the issue of the symbolic meaning of Ptolemaic incest, it is the overall pattern of marriage and mating within the family (rather than the finer points of specific detail) that is of interest.
 - 7 Athenian custom would not have balked at the paternal half-sibling marriage, though of course neither Arsinoë nor Ptolemy Keraunos was an Athenian.
 - 8 The Seleukids were the rival Hellenistic dynasty which laid claim to Syria and much of the Middle East.
 - 9 Diodoros 1933:33.13; Livy *Periocha* 1929:59; Justin 1994:38.8; Valerius Maximus 2000:9.1 (ext.) 5. The marriage to Kleopatra III took place between 8 May 141 and 14 January 140 (Huß 2001:606; Hölbl 2001:195, 217), but Kleopatra had already given birth to her uncle's child (the future Ptolemy IX) in 142.
 - 10 Diodoros 1933:34/35.14; Livy *Periocha* 1929:59; Justin 1994:38.8; Valerius Maximus 2000:9.2, (ext.) 5.
 - 11 The dating formulae of royal documents indicate that the trio was back together again in Alexandria as of 124.
 - 12 Justin 1994:39.3; cf. Pausanias 1979:1.9.1-2.
 - 13 The phrase is Grace Macurdy's (1932:152).
 - 14 Justin 1994:39.4; Pausanias 1979:1.9.2.
 - 15 For the assumption of a unique father-daughter marriage between Ptolemy IX and Kleopatra Berenike, see Fraser 1972 (1):124; Whitehorne 1994:175; Ogden 1999:95. Against the notion of such a marriage: Bevan 1968 [1927]:334; Bennett 1997; Chauveau 1998; Shipley 2000:212; Huß 2001:667-668; Hölbl 2001:212.
 - 16 Bennett is expanding on a suggestion of Mahaffy; against Bennett see Huß 2001:672-673. Sullivan 1990:88, 91 comments on the possibility that Auletes (and Kleopatra V Tryphaina) were the legitimate children of Ptolemy IX and Kleopatra Selene.
 - 17 Strabo asserts that only Auletes' eldest daughter, Berenike IV, was legitimate, but the possibility exists that he is confusing her with Kleopatra Berenike, declared by Pausanias to be the only legitimate child of Ptolemy IX (Strabo 1927:17.1.11; Pausanias 1979:1.9.3). The "argument from silence" may have some bearing on the question of Kleopatra VII's legitimacy: if she had been illegitimate, we would certainly expect her Roman enemies to have made political capital of it (as capital was made of Auletes' alleged bastardy), and there is no hint that they did so. Since Kleopatra VII was born in 69, and Kleopatra V Tryphaina is present in the record at that time as Auletes' wife, it seems very likely that she was Kleopatra VII's mother (Bennett 1997:60).
 - 18 Criscuolo 1989, 1994 doubts that Kleopatra was ever actually married to her brothers, arguing that the title *Philadelphos* was an emblem of familial solidarity rather than necessarily of a sibling marriage. See also Hölbl 2001:231, 237.
 - 19 *OED*²: "set apart for or consecrated to a special use or purpose; restricted to the use of a god, a king, priests, or chiefs, while forbidden to general use." See also Arens 1986:6-7.
 - 20 The symbolic significance of the royal "fulfillment" of taboo will be discussed further below.
 - 21 Bixler focusses only on sibling marriage. He ignores (for example) the high inbreeding co-efficient of an uncle and inbred niece pair such as Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra III (see further below); he fails to take note of the production of any children other than those who inherited the throne; and he traces the rulers only through the male line, ignoring the existence of such dynamic and vigorous female co-rulers as Kleopatra III, Kleopatra Berenike, Berenike IV and Kleopatra VII, all of whom were daughters of sibling incest.
 - 22 Although the question of the Westermarck effect is largely irrelevant in the context of royal incest, it is interesting to note Roscoe's arguments about amity and aggression, positing an actual link between incestuous sexuality and familial aggression of the sort so observable in the Ptolemaic dynasty. Roscoe 1994 shows that the Westermarck inhibition is the result of familial amity and security, while incestuous sexual feelings tend to arise in family situations which feature strife, aggression, and conflict (see also Erickson 1989, 1993; Hardy 2001). The notorious lack of affect, and indeed the outright hostility of some of the Ptolemaic incestuous pairs (such as Ptolemy IV and Arsinoë III, or, outstandingly, Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra II), could serve to illustrate Roscoe's point. Roscoe also draws a connection to the widespread cultural-mythic links between cannibalism (particularly of kin) and incest.
 - 23 Scheidel's expansive study (1996a) deals with the genetic question in great detail, but focuses on Roman-era marriages among commoners in Egypt, rather than with the royal Ptolemaic dynasty.
 - 24 The inbreeding coefficient (F) of an uncle-niece pair if there is no family background of inbreeding is 0.125; Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra III, however, were related in multiple ways, and for them, F would have been 0.25, the same as for a parent-child or full-sibling pair (calculated using Wright's method of path coefficients; see Vogel and Motulsky 1997:551-552).
 - 25 Ptolemy took care to adopt his children to his sister, so that she became their putative mother in any case. There was little need to complicate matters by producing half-siblings via the new marriage, a situation which might only have led to "amphimetric strife" in the next generation (Ogden 1999).
 - 26 Eupator was probably 12 or 13 when he died; since his father had recently named him as co-regent, it seems unlikely that he was suffering from any obvious physical or mental defect.
 - 27 Controversy arises when the sources are silent as to the identity of the mother of some of the royal offspring (for example, Ptolemy XI), or state outright that so-and-so was illegitimate, as in the case of Ptolemy XII, who was (not-so-affectionately) dubbed "Nothos" ("Bastard") by the Alexandrian populace. But we saw above that it is at least possible to argue that even Ptolemy XII was the offspring of a full-sibling union (whether it was one to be considered "legitimate" or not might be another matter).
 - 28 Cf. Grant 1972:27. For official portraits (and discussion) of Ptolemy VIII, see Kyrieleis 1975:63-4, pl. 52-53; Smith

- 1988:93-4, cat. 73, pl. 75.17; Ashton 2001:55; Walker and Higgs 2001:54-57, cat 21, 22; Stanwick 2002:cat 79-104.
- 29 His parents were only third cousins.
- 30 The prodigality and self-indulgence of the reigning Ptolemies can be traced back at least to Ptolemy II, who suffered greatly from gout, the classic disease of dissipated living (Tunny 2001).
- 31 My emphasis.
- 32 The Seleukids too may have looked to pre-existing examples such as the Zoroastrian dynasty of Achaemenid Persia, or even the Hekatomnid dynasty of Karia (Hornblower 1982:358-363).
- 33 She is the one Ptolemaic queen who offers the most extensive and varied associations with Isis until we come to Kleopatra VII, who employed the epithet *Nea Isis*, the "New Isis." On Ptolemaic queens' (especially Arsinoë II's) association with Isis (and Aphrodite, equated with Isis), see Tondra 1948b; Fraser 1972 1:197-198, 237-244; Dunand 1973:80-92; Thompson 1973:121; Quaegebeur 1978, 1988; van Nuffelen 1998-99; Ashton 2001.
- 34 For criticism of the sociobiological approach to royal incest, see Kitcher 1985, especially 275-279; against Kitcher, see Sesardic 1998 and Leavitt 1990; (against Leavitt, see Moore 1992).
- 35 The traditional view (now debunked) had held that the incestuous marriage (and Ptolemy's divorce of his first wife) was the result of the powerful Arsinoë manipulating her weak-willed younger brother (Huß 2001:309; Longega 1968:72-73; Macurdy 1932:118; Turner 1984:136; Walbank 1984:67).
- 36 Kleopatra Thea (daughter of Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II) married three different Seleukid rulers; Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra III's three daughters each married Seleukids (two of them only after they had taken a turn at marrying their brother Ptolemy IX). Berenike IV, daughter of Auletes, brought in co-regent husbands from outside; her two younger brothers (who ultimately may or may not have married their sister Kleopatra VII) were no doubt considered too young to be viable as co-regents. Kleopatra VII's relationships with leading Romans represent a unique circumstance.
- 37 See Twitchell 1987:44-51 for artistic images of the monstrous "sexual chaos" associated with incest.
- 38 Sociologists and clinicians also use the term "chaotic" to describe family circumstances which give rise to incestuous sexual abuse (Bourcet et al. 2000; Rudd and Herzberger 1999), as well as the emotional state of incestuous abuse victims (Brown 1993:32-33).
- 39 Sophocles *Oedipus the King* 1990:1184-1185; author's translation.
- 40 In fact, the Greek title of the play is *Oedipus Tyrannos*, which could of course be translated as *Oedipus the Tyrant*. Although the word *tyrannos* at an early stage of Greek history was a neutral one, there are sufficient references within the play's text to give rise to the view that Sophocles was deliberately presenting Oedipus as a somewhat ambiguous figure. On the whole, however, it seems evident that Sophocles intended Oedipus to be seen as a morally positive ruler. The play is better known by its non-tendentious Latin title *Oedipus Rex*.
- 41 In this play, the elderly Oedipus makes his way to the territory of Athens, where he prophesies to the Athenian king Theseus that his bones will sanctify and protect whatever land receives them; Theseus grants him sanctuary, and Oedipus finally disappears mysteriously in an earthquake, with the implication that the gods have called him home at last.
- 42 See Herrenschildt 1994, who connects Zoroastrian *xwêtdôdas* (incestuous marriage) with creation myth.
- 43 *Genesis* 19.30-38; see Arens 1986:120.
- 44 Rudhardt 1982:745-746, 762-763 emphasizes the transformative power of incest in Greek mythology, where many tales featuring incest result in a metamorphosis. Cf. the role of the male and female chiefs of the Ihanzu of Tanzania, whose symbolic incest plays a recreative role, and whose pairing echoes the pairing of male and female Ptolemaic rulers (Sanders 1998).
- 45 Arens' theory on incest and power is convincing, although his view that there is (almost) a complete disjunction between royal incest and royal reproduction is not applicable to the Ptolemies.
- 46 See also de Heusch 1958 on other African cultures; de Heusch argued in favour of royal incest in these cultures being the result of cultural diffusion from ancient Egypt.
- 47 It is perhaps no coincidence that the particularly excessive Ptolemy VIII was also unique in committing not only "ordinary" royal incest, but also what Françoise Héritier has defined as incest of the "second type," by marrying a mother and daughter and thereby creating an incestuous relationship between the two women as well (Héritier 1999). Héritier argues that this type of incest was capable of rousing extremes of horror, pointing out that in some societies it called for the most severe punishments (the Old Testament mandated burning alive for all three participants in such a relationship: *Leviticus* 18.17 and 20.14).
- 48 It is worth pointing out that Polybios is actually criticizing Ptolemy IV's non-incestuous affairs with mistresses; his incestuous marriage to his full sister Arsinoë III was considered legitimate.
- 49 Cf. Shakespeare *Antony and Cleopatra* 1990:2.2, 201-228, which is based very closely on the Plutarch passage. The majestic arrival of Kleopatra at Tarsos actually pales into insignificance when compared with the spectacular processional pageant put on by her ancestor Ptolemy II sometime in the 270s BCE (for which see Athenaios 1951:196a-203b).
- 50 The horn of plenty (cornucopia) was the symbol of Ptolemaic queens in coinage and sculpture (Heinen 1978; Thompson 1973).
- 51 For the Roman embassy to Alexandria, see Diodoros 1933:33.28b, 1-3; Plutarch *Moralia* 1927:200f-201a; Justin 1994:38.8; Athenaios 1951:549e. On Ptolemy VIII trying to make a *positive* display of *tryphe* to the Romans, see Heinen 1983.
- 52 Hill Gates (citing Clifford Geertz) refers to the "theater state' tactics" of certain polities: "flashy monumentalism, spectacular public ritual ... and the lavishly detailed apotheosis of rulers. This repertory of cultural flamboyance accords well with the shock value of royal incest" (2005:153). Gates refers in general to polities smaller and less developed than ancient Egypt (and indeed seems not to appreciate the distinction between Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt), but her point about rule by "cultural flamboyance" at a time

when the rulers have not fully consolidated their position may have some relevance to the early Ptolemaic dynasty under Ptolemy II.

- 53 In the Orphic tradition, Dionysos is the offspring of Zeus and Zeus' daughter Persephone; torn apart and devoured by the evil Titan gods, his heart was rescued by Zeus, who sewed it into his thigh, where Dionysos was regenerated and ultimately reborn.
- 54 See Rudhardt 1982; Persephone and Adonis (whose cult was particularly fostered by Arsinoë II) are also identified as liminal deities who are born of incest and who have special power over death. Reed (2000) notes the especially strong link the Ptolemies made between Adonis (previously unassociated with Egypt) and Osiris.
- 55 See also Pomeroy 1984:36, Hauben 1989, and Hazzard 2000:67 for other expressions of puzzlement or for interpretations of Ptolemaic behaviour based on the a priori assumption that Ptolemy would have wanted to downplay the incest.
- 56 The incest prohibition in Europe and North America has oscillated over time. In the medieval period, the prohibited degrees of kinship were vast: "At their most draconian, ... these prohibitions banned sexual intercourse between all relatives connected by consanguinity or affinity to the seventh degree, and between persons linked by compaternity (spiritual affinity) to the fourth degree" (Archibald 2001:11). In the modern Western world, the (fluctuating) boundary tends to lie along the line of first-cousin marriage (see Bratt 1984).

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