

Ptolemaic Jouissance and the Anthropology of Kinship: A Commentary on Ager “The Power of Excess: Royal Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty”

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Sheila L. Ager’s article, “The Power of Excess: Royal Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty” (*Anthropologica* 48(2006):165-186) provides a lovely opportunity for anthropologists and classicists to puzzle out together some of the old chestnuts of kinship theory and ancient civilizations. These occur along the way of her quite right skepticism about reductionist sociobiological efforts to defend the incest taboo by looking for evidence of disease and infertility, and if not that then a hypothesized instinctive or phrenomal distaste for sex with those with whom one has been raised. There’s nothing wrong with looking into biological pedigrees or family trees (we do it all the time for genetic disease linkage studies), but the stripping of context and meaning is unnecessary and probably self-defeating. The parallax between biology/sexuality and passion/symbolism/power/fantasy is what that enigmatically wonderful Lacanian French word *jouissance* is all about. It is like the game of closing one eye, then the other, and trying to catch the shifts in what you see, and also like the sexual bliss of two bodies in rhythm but not fully merged or synchronized. In what follows, I wish to reflect upon the ways in which Ager’s observations on the Ptolemies evoke the pleasures, excesses and addictive repetitions of this *jouissance*.

Correlations and Explanations.

Like Clifford Geertz’s (1967) “Deep Play,” or Marcel Mauss’s (1925) account of Northwest Coast potlatches, the final two and a half page “Philosophy of Excess” section of Ager’s article, reinforces the anthropological insistence that one must consider the symbolic, or meaning-making, dimensions of culturally validated excess, if indeed it be excess. In this case, the putative excess is royal incest in Egypt and, for possible comparative perspectives, wherever else such a pattern might occur. The portrait of the Ptolemies and their use of luxurious display, and their “theatre state” imitation of gods (in which Kleopatra and Anthony emulate Isis and Dionysius) is

vibrant and compelling. The marriage arrangements are dramatically told, as rich as the tales of Caligula that Robert Graves and Derek Jacobi embellished. It is of course, however, not necessary for display and luxury to go with indolence and sexual excess which is a moralizing trope or narrative, one of several possible elective affinities. I think of India and the elaborate ritual displays of wealth and power of the Jains in public processions through the streets and of the celebrity diamond merchant weddings, as demonstrating the power and correctness of their faith which they even talk about in martial *varna* (caste), but “nonviolent,” terms as being *kshatria* in origin. Jains, however, are often personally quite puritan and spartan as part of this same ideology, partaking of a calculative mercantile this-worldly asceticism and other-worldly merit making. Hence, as Ager says, the importance of meaning-making, and symbolism, to the actors.

Next-of-Kin Marriages and the Logics of Royal versus Commoner Marriages

On this issue, first, I would like to clarify the frequently muddled differences between the Iranian and Egyptian cases. Second, I would like to have more clarity on the cultural differences (or not) between Egyptian royal and commoner marriage rules or patterns. Third, I would like to have more clearly delineated the relationship between Greek and Egyptian conceptual categories.

In Ager’s article, I miss a discussion of the Persian Empire’s *khodvedatha* (or *xwetodas*, in Ager’s transliteration), which is only mentioned in passing in footnote 42. This is still a much disputed term, although many philologists-Orientalists think it does mean next-of-kin marriages. They tend to justify it on the purity logic that insofar as the king carries the divine light (*farr*, *farovahar*), the royal line perhaps should be maintained as purely as possible with no outside mixture. I am not quite so convinced. Kings can lose the *farr*, one of the topics of the *Shahnameh* epic. Moreover the textual passages praising *khodvedatha* as one of the highest forms of holiness do not seem to be limited to royals. And so we look to other cases, of which the Egyptian is the most often cited along with the royal Hawaiian and Inca ones.

Here is where the help of a classicist is needed both to unravel the puzzles of jural and terminological kinship systems of Greek and Egyptian provenance, and to evaluate the statistical data that Keith Hopkins (1980) adduces in favour of more widespread than royals practice of brother-sister marriages in Roman Egypt. Ager’s article cites Hopkins in the bibliography, but does not discuss his data on brother-sister marriages in Egypt, saying that

they refer to a later Roman era phenomenon. Hopkins notes that we have (a few) royal examples going back to the 11th Dynasty in 2000 B.C. But is his data not credible or does it need to be contextualized, and if so, does that contextualization perhaps provide some more clues to, or constraints on, hypotheses about meaning? Might the later patterns be an imitation of a royal pattern? Scheidel (e.g., 1996a, 2005), whom Ager quotes, partly because he is a defender of sociobiological approaches, makes claims about Zoroastrian *khodvedatha*. First, Scheidel makes a claim to the effect that there is copious evidence for actual next-of-kin marriages in Iran. In fact there are only a few textual uses of the term *khodvedatha*, and no genealogies, nor census material. Second, he hypothesizes that the holiness of *khodvedatha* is so difficult, so repugnant even to Zoroaster, that only the most devoted insiders would undertake it. Third he repeatedly insists that this Zoroastrian pattern might provide comparative perspectives on the Egyptian one. One need not argue that *khodvedatha* does not mean next-of-kin marriage, as the Zoroastrian priest, Darab Dastur Peshotan Sanjana, did in 1888 in an exhaustive survey of the texts. One could simply raise the question of whether it is a metaphor, particularly since so much of the Zoroastrian *Gathas* themselves are often composed of enigmatic, puzzling and challenging poetic metaphors and *mathras* (Vedic *mantras*). As the texts upon which the later texts are putative commentaries, recollections and expansions, the *Gathas* are transcripts, as it were, of competitive (challenge-response) poetry contests (*sadhamada*, symposia) that aim to put their adepts into an inspirational state. Later illuminationist philosophy, *irfan* or sufism call this inspirational state a spritual *hal*). Indeed such contents are metaphorized, as in Greek, as winged chariot races: viz. Plato’s winged charioteer with a team of two horses, one clean-limbed needing no whip, the other crooked, lumbering, “stiff-necked,” and deaf to boot! In any case, if *khodvedatha* is the holiest of actions then how can it be incest (it is of course incest by our categories); or maybe, then we can say that incest is sacred, tabooed for ordinary folk but sacred for the gods and for those who pattern themselves after the gods. But then are we within the logic of myth that can interfere with and disrupt daily logic (as Sahlins [1981] argued in the case of Captain Cook)?

Ager might be quite correct to sharply separate royal from commoner marriage patterns, and earlier from later periods (though the end of the Ptolemies is only a century before the census data for the commoners). But one does wish for a bit of diachronic tracking of historical traces, legacies, or breaks and paradigm shifts, or just contextualization of the two data sets (Ptolemaic, Roman).

Hopkins says 63% of the 270 surviving household census returns are from the Arsinoe nom (today called the Fayum Oasis), and Scheidel says there are no brother-sister marriages recorded before 103 C.E. or after 187. Is there a coincidence or something more to the fact that the Arsinoe nom was named after Queen Arsinoe, the wife in the first Ptolemy brother-sister marriage? Hopkins notes that at this marriage one rhapsode likened the couple's embraces to those of Zeus and Hera, (a brother-sister marriage among the gods) but that another rhapsode rather obscenely disparaged the marriage, which was a second marriage when Arsinoe was almost 40, and Ptolemy already had children by a first wife. Hopkins provides arguments for taking the surviving census forms as representative of Egypt at large, but Scheidel notes that most (and a higher ratio of) marriages of this sort are from the main town of Arsinoe nom, rather than the villages. This makes one wonder again if we are dealing with a relative isolate (Fayum only) and/or an urban status-seeking, royal-imitating pattern? In any case, my question here is: do these parameters tell us anything? Scheidel looks for inbreeding diseases and infertility rates so that he can argue for a deep biological structural feedback and thus the irrelevance of semantic or cultural categories, but his data is inconclusive.

So, while there may be no connection between the Ptolemaic royal and Roman commoner patterns, might there be a common symbolic structure or background cultural sensibility, or would the Egyptians of the Ptolemaic period have viewed the inhabitants of the main town of Arsinoe as depraved, or their practices incomprehensible?

Mythic Logic versus Kinship Logic¹

I am puzzled by the claim that "the Zoroastrian god Ohrmazd engages in incestuous sex with his daughter Spendarmat" (p. 176). *Spendarmat* (*spenta armaiti*) is one of the *amshaspands* composing the godhead, not a daughter, except perhaps in some Victorian transmutation. Mary Boyce (e.g. 1970, 1975a, 1975b, 1979), for instance, has the irritating habit of turning rich metaphorical structures into hypostasized gods and given this, I find Stanley Insler (1975) a better guide to the decipherment of the Gathic texts (see also Windfuhr 1976). It is true that *spenta armaiti* is one of the three *amshaspands* that are feminine in gender, and three are neuter (or masculine if you want to make it a sexual pairing). All six *amshaspands* go into the composition of the godhead, Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd). In the high liturgy rituals, Ahura Mazda sits in the seat of the *zot* (officiant) with Soroush as his assistant (*raspi*), and the six *amshaspands*

as elements of creation. In the ancient ritual there are eight priests who represent all these positions around the ritual implements, fire and *barsom*.

In any case, Ager is quite right that mythic and ritual logic often operates through splitting into siblings and remerging through marriage. In the Avesta there is a repeated meiosis of this sort beginning with Gaiumart. I have sketched this out in a diagram in *Mute Dreams* (Fischer 2004:78), contrasting it with the way it is transformed in the logic of the epic, in the *Shahnameh*. That the early Ptolemies should have used a mythic parallel of Hera and Zeus, and the later ones Isis and Dionysus is not surprising, but it is not clear that the logics are played out any further than simple analogies.

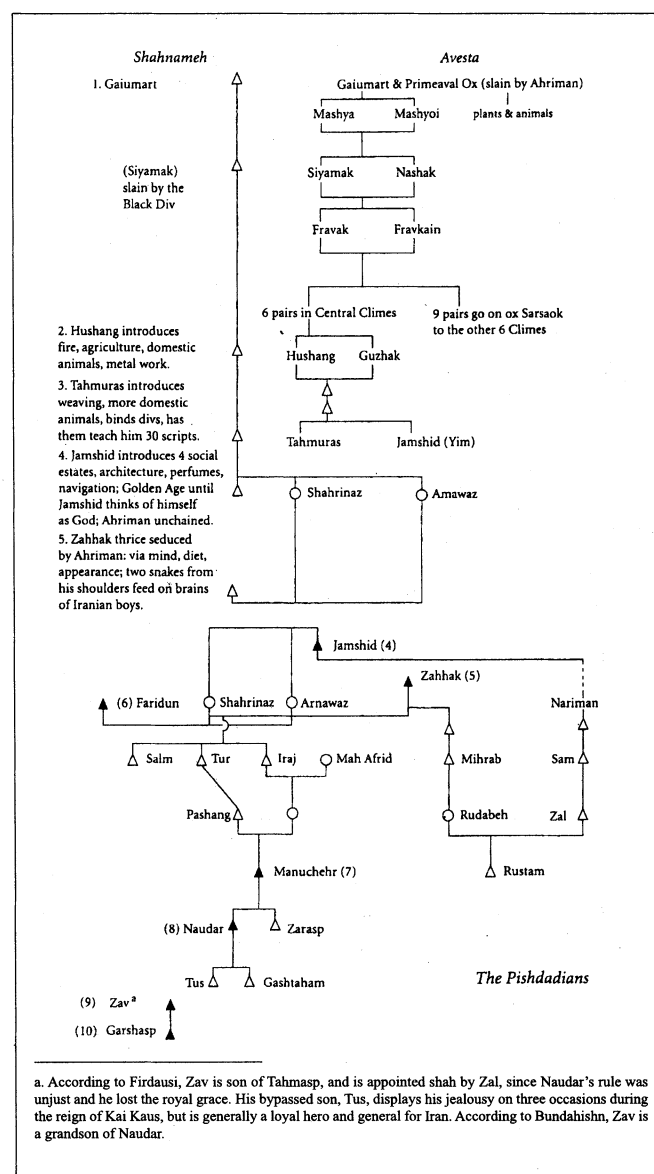


Figure 1: Pishdadian Dynasty: Avesta versus Shahnameh

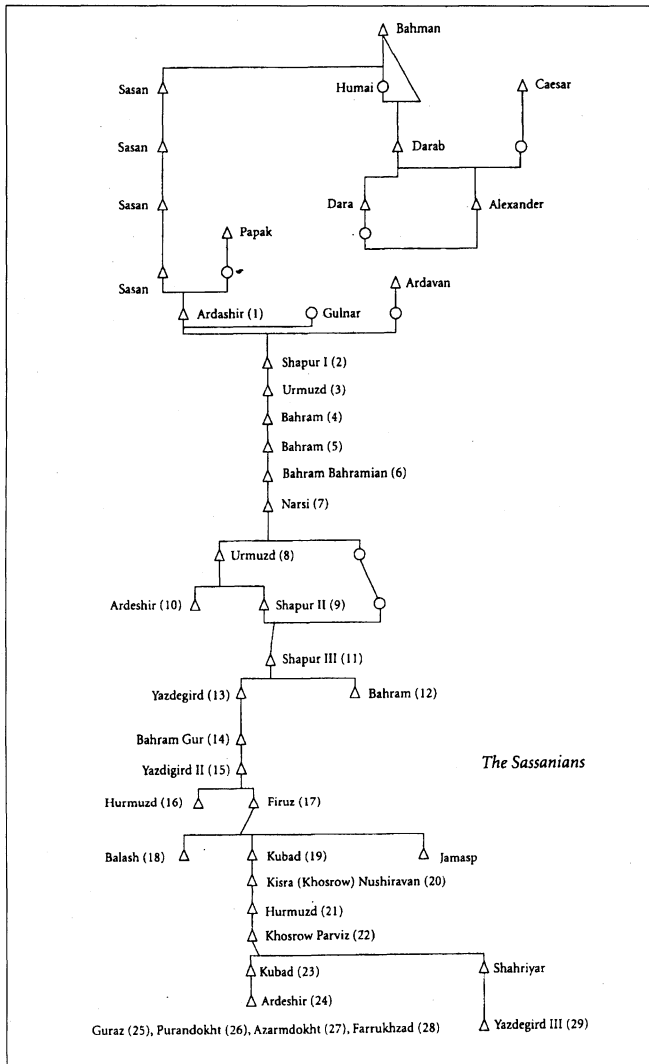


Figure 2: Kayanian Dynasty

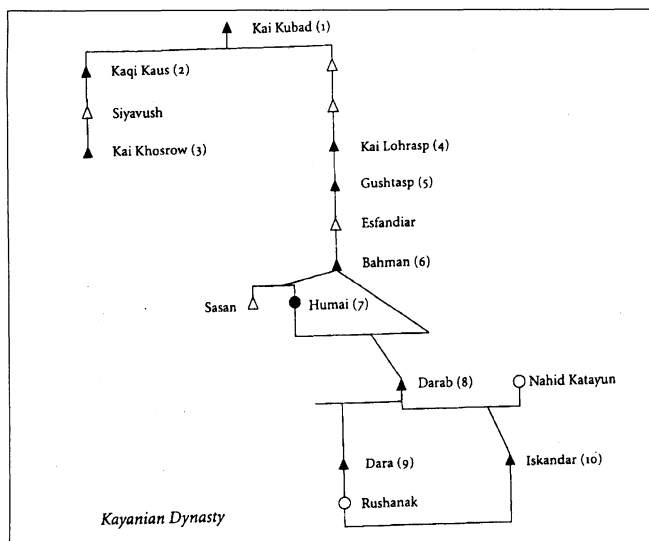


Figure 3: Sassanian Dynasty

Semantic Space and Comparison

If sociobiology and the work of Scheidel, as Ager says, will not get us very far, more to the point is the semantic space that different cultures divide up differently in their kinship terms and marriage rules. Here the fact that Greek did not have a term for incest might be worth exploring a bit more. Cousin marriages and uncle-niece marriages are common in the Mediterranean and Middle East and are not the same as direct sibling marriages. The case of half-sibling marriages with same father but different mother is worth further exploration. On this, Hopkins points out that the Athenians allowed marriage between half siblings from the same father but different mother, while the Spartans allowed marriage between half siblings from the same mother but different father. In much of the Middle East anyone imbibing milk from the same woman is forbidden as a marriage partner. This would be considered incest. They are milk kin, Persian *hamshir*, same milk, whether full siblings or merely wet nursed together. So it is not surprising that in the Arsinoe records we only find the half-sibling marriages of the same father but different mother. Ager cites David Schneider (1968, 1976) who not only argued that kinship ideologies go along with characteristic metaphors.² But he also argued that incest was a slippery notion to impose on Polynesia, where the kinship terminology, adoption practices, and other rules, and hence the notion of kinship, are quite different. Ager acknowledges this in passing by admitting that incest might only be approximately universal. But it would be interesting to sketch out how the terms in ancient Greece actually worked semantically and jurally to divide conceptual, legal, (and therefore also reproductive, and biological) space or frames of reference.

As Ager notes there is no word for incest in ancient or classical Greek. My question is what does this mean? How then does one talk about the rules of marriage, its taboos, and violations? Do we have a sense of a mapping of different systems of marriage rules in the Greek world, as Hopkins' comment begins to suggest we do? And what are the Egyptian semantics (and marriage rules) that the Greek official language might have been in subtle competition with for governance of actual marriage patterns. Scheidel mentions classificatory kinship systems in passing, but since he is a genetic fundamentalist, he gives them little credence as effective operators. A good anthropological account cannot get away with that. The problem resembles the conundrum of race: many physicians and biologists claim not to believe in racial categories as biologically meaningful, but our epidemiological statistics are still coded in those terms, and social patterns of race

classification do impose effects. So too with our modern bio-ideological insistence on the category of incest?

Fortunately or unfortunately we need to keep all these logics and factors in analytic play: such is the *jouissance* (delight, excess, intensity, parallax demands) of anthropological engagements. Ager's Ptolemaic *jouissance*, and any further clarifications, are welcome additions to the discussion.

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Notes

- 1 I include the genealogical charts of the transformations of the Avestan mythic logic into the Shahnameh's epic logic (the Pishdadians), along with those of the Kayanians, and the Sassanians. For expansion on this and on the *yasna* high liturgy ritual with the roles of the *zot-raspi* and *amshaspands*, see Fischer 2004; there is some discussion of the state of the argument in the 1970s over *khedvedatha* in Fischer 1973).
- 2 Schneider (1968, 1976) argued that patrilineal ideologies go with the metaphors of seed and vessel, furrow or field, devaluing the egg in relation to the sperm to use contemporary terms transposed from biology. In contemporary Greece, Paxson (2006) points out, women's blood shed and flesh torn during childbirth is discursively positioned as a "sacrifice" tying them materially to the child beyond genetic contribution (which is often less important in an age of sperm and ova donation) and in return for which the child is obligated for life (both aspects of the pun intended).

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*See p. 306 for references cited in the original article.