Response to Michael M.J. Fischer's "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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I am very indebted to Dr. Fischer for his careful reading of, and thoughtful response to my article. I am pleased that I was able to bring this material to the attention of an anthropological audience, though in responding to Dr. Fischer, I must once again plead diffidence. I am not well versed in the complex methodologies and theories of contemporary cultural anthropology, and so it is quite likely that I will not be able to give the kind of full response to Dr. Fischer's commentary that it deserves.

I am prompted to begin by asking a question of my own (that anthropologists probably would find easy to answer). Fischer refers to "culturally validated excess, if indeed it be excess." My question is, what do we mean in this context by "culturally validated"? In my article, I posed the question of whether the Ptolemies were "successful" in their strategies, but I do not know whether this is the same thing as "culturally validated," and in any case, I do not believe I gave any very satisfactory answers. It is clear from the ancient sources which survive that Ptolemaic behaviour in general roused contempt in Greek and Roman observers alike. Yet at the same time, it must have been functional in some ways, else one can hardly see it persisting. Perhaps the incestuous marriages among commoners, attested at a later date in Egypt, are testimony to an acceptance and validation at a social level that fell beneath the radar of our sources (more on this below). My question here really has to do with cross-cultural comparison: are anthropologists aware of other societies which practised royal incest, or other forms of "excess" (accepting for the moment the proposition of a link between incest and excess), where there is such a dichotomous response to the royal behaviour: both abomination and adulation?

Fischer queries the link between sexually excessive behaviour on the one hand and luxurious display on the other: "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 that Fischer and I are in fact

in agreement on this point, at least with respect to the issue of moralizing judgments (although it is certainly true that I believe the Ptolemies to provide good evidence for a deliberate link between sexual excess and *tryphē* in other areas). His point about the Jains ("often personally quite puritan") is an interesting one, and calls to mind observations that have not infrequently been made about Ptolemaic queens in particular: that in the midst of a dynasty that was often condemned for its moral behaviour, not one Ptolemaic queen was ever suspected of having an illicit sexual liaison. The sole exception is Kleopatra VII, and her unique relationships with Caesar and Antony. Whether these liaisons were "illicit" or not is a matter of debate; but they certainly were not furtive.

My point, however, is that the moralizing in this case was applied not only by what we might call "outside observers" (e.g., Victorian-era classicists), but also by the Ptolemies' Greek and Roman contemporaries, or at least by many of them. Thus, the "trope" under discussion is one the Ptolemies themselves would have been confronted with in their own time and place, not one imposed on them by a completely alien society. Still, perhaps one thing that may have deserved more attention in my paper (even if only in the area of speculation) is the potential disjunction between the "Westernized" Greco-Roman attitude, coloured by philosophical traditions and enshrined in literature produced among the intelligentsia, and the eastern traditions of the native people and commoners whom the Ptolemies and other Hellenistic monarchs ruled. If the Ptolemaic practices were validated anywhere, it would have been among the latter group. The former—the educated elite of Greece and Rome—looked at the Ptolemies and saw what they expected to see: absolute rulers, conforming to all the expectations of a tyrant, and therefore corrupt, luxurious, decadent, weak and hubristic (on the connections between tyranny, luxury, incest, and hubris, see Passerini 1934; Fisher 1992:337; Holt 1998; Gambato 2000; Thompson 2000; Vernant 2000).

I am grateful to Fischer for his comments clarifying the "frequently muddled differences between the Iranian and Egyptian cases." He notes quite rightly that I made next to no reference to the Persian tradition, and his own well-researched insights on these matters are most welcome, particularly his clarification of the role of "Spendarmat" (my reference to this was drawn from Herrenschmidt 1994:120-124). My own knowledge in this area remains admittedly quite limited, and is drawn largely from the discussions in Lee 1988, Herrenschmidt 1994, Mitterauer 1994, and Scheidel 2002. I myself am not convinced by all of Scheidel's arguments, either in the area of the problematic Iranian evidence, or in the somewhat more clear-cut area of the evidence from Roman Egypt. I do share Fischer's lack of conviction about royal next-of-kin marriages (whether Iranian or Egyptian) necessarily being connected with purity as such. But it does seem feasible that an act of supreme meritoriousness or holiness—and difficulty—could be both inconceivable to the run of common folk and at the same time a sign of special people or gods—which is exactly what taboo is.

Fischer seeks further clarity on the "cultural differences (or not) between Egyptian royal and commoner marriage rules or patterns." My article was in no way intended to dismiss the phenomenon of sibling-marriage among commoners in Roman Egypt as insignificant, or as unrelated to the phenomenon of royal sibling-marriage. Among classicists, however, the works of Hopkins (1980 and 1994) in particular, as well as Scheidel (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2002, 2005), are so frequently cited, even in (brief) discussions of Ptolemaic marriage, as to obscure the fact that neither Hopkins nor Scheidel really incorporate the Ptolemaic evidence at all. My own unwillingness (if it was that) to engage with the question of sibling-marriage in the population at large was merely the inverse of Hopkins' and Scheidel's approach, and perhaps over-corrected in the other direction.

Fischer seeks a better understanding of the value of the data used by Hopkins and Scheidel. The data—chiefly papyri recording census returns—are indeed reliable, and are given their place in a larger context in Bagnall and Frier's study (1994) of the surviving documents that allow us to make (at least conjectural) conclusions about the demography of Roman Egypt. Bagnall and Frier point out that the papyri indicate that "the practice was obviously common" (1994:129) by the beginning of the second century C.E., and that both Greeks and Egyptians pursued it (but the latter is not so easy a point to determine as it may seem, given that Egyptians often adopted Greek names). Scheidel's work on marriage among commoners, based on these data, focusses largely on questions of biological viability and the place of the Westermarck effect in cases of sibling-marriage in ancient Egypt. Hopkins speculates more broadly, and brings into play literary evidence as well as the papyri. Yet his conclusion—that "Egyptian brothers and sisters married each other because they themselves wanted to" (1980:353)—is still wanting, and to be fair to Hopkins, he himself admits this (he characterizes his conclusion as "tentative").

Two questions relevant to Ptolemaic royal sibling-marriage arise from contemplation of the documentary evidence for such marriages among non-royals. One is a question of time (when did such marriages become acceptable or common among the people?). The other is one of

space (was there a concentration of such marriages in a particular area, i.e., the Arsinoite nome, and if so, what does this mean?). The issue of timing has relevance to the Ptolemaic phenomenon if only because there appears at first glance to be a temporal disconnection between the practice of royal sibling-marriage in Egypt (the last examples being Kleopatra VII's probable marriages to her brothers in the 40s B.C.E.), and the evidence for such marriages in the population (the vast bulk of the documentary evidence stems from the second century C.E., over a hundred years later). But it so happens that any documents of this type—census returns—are rare from the earlier period (Bell 1949:91; Hombert and Préaux 1949:138). Therefore, the fact that we have next to no evidence for sibling-marriage among commoners from the Ptolemaic period itself may simply be an accident of recording practices or documentary survival.

To draw the conclusion, simply because of the time-lag in the evidence, that there is no connection between the highly-advertised custom of sibling-marriage among the Ptolemies, the rulers of Egypt, and the singular practice of sibling-marriage among commoners in that same land, seems to me to place a staggering weight on the notion of "coincidence." It is my view that the non-royal incestuous marriages were in all probability inspired by and sanctioned by the royal ones, and that they had probably begun already in the Ptolemaic period (see Bell 1949:91; Turner 1984:138). The commoner marriages may in their turn have validated the royal practice. (When the Roman emperor Claudius had the law changed in order that he could marry his own niece Agrippina, his example in what had heretofore been designated as an incestuous marriage was followed by a single Roman knight, who allegedly was motivated by the desire to win Agrippina's favour.)

Another reason for thinking that sibling-marriages in the population at large took place already within the Ptolemaic period is that it is hard to see what particular incentives for such a peculiar practice could have been provided by the Roman conquest of Egypt. Augustus, whose victory it was, took care to dissociate himself from the Ptolemies and all they stood for. While Kleopatra VII still lived, he vilified her. After her death, in secure possession of Alexandria, he took in the local tourist sights and went to see the embalmed body of Alexander the Great, but scorned to view those of the earlier Ptolemies, declaring that he had come to see a king, not a row of corpses. (His reverence for Alexander's remains was perhaps a little too enthusiastic: he is said to have accidentally broken off part of Alexander's nose.)

Augustus' hostility to Kleopatra was of course prompted by her relationship with his rival Marc Antony. Later Roman emperors, however—notably Caligula and Claudius—were direct descendants of Marc Antony, and it is perhaps no coincidence that both of them may have attempted to evoke Ptolemaic behaviour. Claudius married his own niece, even though, as noted above, this had hitherto been regarded as an incestuous relationship by the Romans; as for Caligula, any reader of Robert Graves knows that he was widely held to have engaged in incest with his sisters, particularly Drusilla, whom he venerated. Wood (1995) argues against the assertions made by the scandal-mongers of antiquity, but what she has to say about the propaganda Caligula deliberately promulgated about his siblings resonates well with the notion that, at least in the eastern Mediterranean, he may have been trying to emulate Ptolemaic images (see also Green 1998:784; Moreau 2002:93-96). Caligula, like Ptolemy XII, bore the epithet *Neos Dionysos*, the "New Dionysos" (Athenaios 148d, Gulick translation 1955: vol. II:177). Speculation about Claudius and Caligula aside, however, the Romans in general never rivalled the Ptolemies in this type of propaganda, and their behaviour is not very likely to have influenced the common people of Egypt into instigating a custom of sibling-marriage. If anything, the inverse is likely to have been the case: Roman emperors such as these two may have been interested in mollifying at least some of the peoples in the Empire, and may have been influenced in their self-presentation by Egyptian (or more generally eastern) customs, rather than the other way around.

Bagnall and Frier, among others, make the point that "brother-sister marriages are heavily concentrated in the Arsinoite nome"; Scheidel remarks that, at 37% of known unions in the Arsinoite nome, the number of sibling-marriages "approaches the feasible maximum" (Bagnall and Frier 1994:129; Scheidel 2005:93). It is hard not to be struck by the fact that the bulk of our evidence for incestuous unions among the common people comes from a place named for Arsinoë II Philadelphos, the famous sister-wife of Ptolemy II, and tempting to think that there was some special cultural practice connected with this place. But it is all too easy to be caught up in what is here probably (if not certainly) no more than a coincidence. The "Arsinoite nome" was only one of roughly 40 nomes, or administrative districts, into which the land of Egypt was divided under Ptolemaic rule. It was a large and fertile district (today known as the Fayoum), reclaimed from Lake Moeris by Ptolemy I and his son Ptolemy II; it was the latter who was responsible for giving it the designation of his sister's name, and for assigning to her the revenues from the fishing in what remained of Lake Moeris (Pomeroy 1984:14, 152-153). But there is no reason to posit

a particularly strong relationship between the inhabitants of this nome and Arsinoë herself. When Ptolemy II issued orders that a percentage of the revenues from vineyards and orchards be dedicated to the cult of Arsinoë, these orders applied to all of Egypt, not merely the Arsinoite nome (Bagnall and Derow 2004 no. 114). The Fayoum simply happens to have been a large and well-populated region, in which a great number of papyri and other antiquities (such as the famous mummy portraits) were fortunately preserved. It seems most likely, therefore, that if the "disconnection" between royal sibling-marriage in the Ptolemaic period and commoner sibling-marriage in the Roman period is simply an accident of documentary survival, then so too is the putative "connection" between those sibling-marriages and the "Arsinoite" nome (see Scheidel 1995:154).

There are other aspects of the practice of sibling-marriage among commoners in Egypt which remain baffling, and which suggest a connection to the royal practice, yet without offering a clear notion of what that connection actually is. For instance, scholars often seek to find the motivation for sibling-marriage in inheritance issues (a sibling-marriage keeps wealth within the family). But such a motivation would not have been particularly suited to the Ptolemies themselves, who were not notably frugal, and who indeed made much of their beneficence. Furthermore, the very common custom of first cousin marriage already functioned well enough along these lines: without outraging a taboo, it still did not disperse family wealth too far afield. On its own, therefore, this is not a sufficient explanation of why some of the siblings of Roman and (arguably) Hellenistic Egypt married one another. Whatever their reasons, however, there is no indication that the inhabitants of the Arsinoite nome (or any married siblings elsewhere) were seen as depraved, although this is admittedly an *argumentum e silentio*. There certainly was no shyness about declaring the status of these marriages in public documents.

Fischer comments on the notable lack of a single ancient Greek word for incest. But is the absence of a specific term to be equated with the absence of a concept—even a clearly defined concept? The ancient Greeks made little use of specific terms meaning "husband" and "wife" (using instead the generic terms "man" and "woman"); that does not mean that they had no notion of legitimate marriage. And even in spite of their very clear notions on legitimate marriage, the language they employed is frequently confusing to us, since they typically used the term "live with" to denote both legal marriage and what we might refer to as a "common law" arrangement with a concubine (the Egyptians also employed similarly broad terminology). Ancient Greek was in many ways a simpler language than English (though equally difficult to learn), with a much smaller and much less technical vocabulary. It often employed periphrases; yet these periphrases do not appear to have sprung from a reticence in dealing with distasteful topics, a reticence that might have been based in shock or shame. Drama—central to the communal life of Classical Athens—regularly depicted horrifying subject material (including incest), while contemporary artwork (vase paintings) displays a staggering variety of explicit sexual acts (not all of which would have had a name). I do not know, therefore, that I would attach too much meaning to the lack of a specific term for "incest" as such. My limited understanding of the various terms for "incest" across cultures is that they are very often terms which may have a much broader (and often non-sexual) meaning than the English term "incest," or they may have a much narrower meaning, or there may exist a number of terms within the same culture for various acts or relationships which an English speaker might define as "incest" (Needham 1974:61-68). In any case, I suspect that what this all means in anthropological terms is much better tackled by anthropologists specializing in the area than by a classicist who dipped into it rather selfishly to explore a particular problem of interest.

Fischer's comments and queries about marriage and kinship rules raise another point of discussion. As he states, "first cousin marriages and uncle-niece marriages are common in the Mediterranean and Middle East," but while the former is true of the ancient Mediterranean cultures, the latter is less so. It has already been pointed out that for the Romans at least uncle-niece marriage was considered incestuous until Claudius had the law changed (and even then it does not appear to have become a popular marriage choice). Among the Greeks, first cousin marriages were perfectly acceptable and very common, but while uncle-niece marriages were legally allowed (and even mandated in certain inheritance situations), some of our evidence suggests that such marriages might be rather frowned upon socially. Less so because of what we might designate as the incest of such a situation (the Greeks would not have), and more because of the generational disproportion and the potentially unworthy motives of the uncle (marrying his niece for the sake of her inheritance, and legally even having the right to separate her from her husband—if she had one—in order to claim her for himself).

There is of course in all societies at times a disjunction between what is legally allowed and what is socially acceptable.[1] Laws often deal with limits (i.e., extremes), while social pressures may favour a middle ground. More-

over, laws do not always take account of every possible scenario, if only because they can fail to forecast that an individual will take it into his or her head to do a particular thing. So does the fact that the Code of Hammurabi has nothing to say about brother-sister incest, while proscribing other forms of nuclear family incest (Mitterauer 1994:238; Pritchard 1958:155), mean that sibling incest was perfectly legal and acceptable (unlikely)? Or does it mean that it was so appalling that people could not conceive of it happening? The latter choice too may seem unlikely, although it is perhaps reflected in certain Polynesian societies for whom sibling incest was the most horrifying form (see Goody 1956:292-294; Fox 1962; Labby 1976; Fischer et al. 1976; Arens 1986:142; Reynolds and Tanner 1995:170).

It is true indeed that Athenian half-siblings could legally marry, provided they were the offspring of different mothers. But it does not seem to have happened very often, and full-sibling sexual attachments certainly were seen as morally wrong, even if we do not have a clear idea of what the laws were restraining them (the fact that the law explicitly allowed half-sibling marriages suggests that at the same time it did *not* allow full-sibling ones). Suspicions of sexual activity with a sibling could be used to rouse social condemnation, as was the case with the Athenian politician Kimon, accused of having engaged in sexual relations with his sister Elpinike.

As for the Spartans, we do have an ancient source that declares that at Sparta it was just the opposite: half-siblings could marry, but only if they were the offspring of different *fathers*. But while it is quite true that the Spartans frequently had a different take from other Greeks on matters of kinship, marriage, and inheritance, it seems very likely that in this instance, the report on half-sibling marriage simply reflects the typical assumptions made by outsiders about the contrary Spartans ("the Spartans always have to be different from the rest of us"; see Vérilhac and Vial 1998:94). In any case, whatever differences we find in Spartan custom should not lead us to assume widely divergent customs or assumptions about kinship and marriage in the Greek world. Athenian customs are probably more reflective of the majority of Greek societies.

Fischer has brought up the point of "milk kin," and on this, it is interesting to note Scheidel's arguments (2005:101-105) about cross-fostering. In the context of his discussion of the possible impact of the Westermarck effect among the sibling couples of ancient Egypt, Scheidel puts forward the possibility that siblings might have been fed by unrelated wet-nurses, and consequently became "sensitized to an MHC (major histocompatibility complex) type other than their own [which] thereby reduced their inhibitions against sexual relations with their own kin at mature ages." Scheidel bases this proposition on arguments previously made by Gates in connection with the *sim-pua* children of Taiwan, to the effect that unrelated children might smell alike because they had been nursed by the same woman; but while Gates' argument might account for the fact that the unrelated Taiwanese couples eschewed each other as adults, it is not quite so clear to me why nursing at the breasts of different and unrelated women would destroy or compromise the existing MHC type of *related* children. (Perhaps someone more versed in this area than I am could speak to this question.)

The question of Egyptian semantics and marriage rules, which might have provided another model, one that had its own set of influences on the customs which developed in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, is valid, but I think far too large for the scope of this rather rambling response. Much of the work on ancient Egyptian marriage is based on trying to come to grips with the Egyptian semantics: see Pestman 1961, Watterson 1991, Robins 1993 and El-Mosallamy 1997. At times, it seems that the Egyptian categorizations are even vaguer than the Greek (thus there is difficulty in determining the word for "wife," and much potential for confusion with other female relations; Robins 1993:60-62). Of course, the most famous example of blurry categories and semantic confusion lies in the use of the terms "brother" and "sister" as designators of erotic or conjugal relations (El-Mosallamy 1997: 262). One thing the Egyptian evidence does show, however, is that notwithstanding the fact that Egyptians were widely believed by their contemporaries to engage in brother-sister marriage, and that the Egyptians themselves probably were initially more accepting of the Ptolemaic custom than were the Greeks, it does seem that we should not over-estimate Egyptian complacency in the face of sibling sexuality. El-Mosallamy reports an objection lodged by an Egyptian father troubled by the intimacy between his two children: "Does the law allow marriage between brother and sister?" (El-Mosallamy 1997:262).

Dr. Fischer raises many excellent questions in his commentary, and has certainly fleshed out a number of areas left blank in my own treatment of this vast and fascinating topic. I am well aware that I really have provided few answers, and have chosen instead to pose questions of my own. I would welcome most warmly the response of others who have more expertise in these areas than do I.

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Note

1 The "prohibited degrees" laid down in the Canadian Marriage (Prohibited Degrees) Act of 1990 do not include marriage with aunts or uncles, or first cousins—but it is difficult to imagine that a marriage between uncle and niece in modern Canada would not meet with considerable social opprobrium in many circles. Interestingly, the prohibited degrees *do* include adoptive (i.e., non-blood) relatives.

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