

FAMILIARITY BREEDS: INCEST AND THE PTOLEMAIC DYNASTY*

Abstract: This paper examines the problem of Ptolemaic incest from a variety of cross-disciplinary perspectives. Specifically, it seeks to establish the following: that there is little in the ancient record to support the common claim that the Ptolemies suffered extensively from the deleterious genetic effects of inbreeding; that the various theories so far put forward as explanations for Ptolemaic incest offer at best only a partial rationale for this dynastic practice; that the most compelling rationale for Ptolemaic incest is to be found in complex, and perhaps unconscious, symbolic motivations analogous to those observed by anthropologists in other cultures; and finally, that, for the Ptolemies, incest was, like the *truphê* for which they were so notorious, a dynastic signature which highlighted their singularity and above all, their power.

Do you alone hang back, when all others hasten to the bed of the princess? The wicked sister is marrying her brother – the Roman general she has married already; hastening from one husband to another, she possesses Egypt and is playing the harlot for Rome. She was able to conquer Caesar's heart by drugs; if you put your trust in the boy, I pity you. If a single night brings them together, if her brother once submits to her embraces with incestuous heart and drinks in unlawful passion on pretence of natural affection, then he will grant her your head and mine, each perhaps in return for a kiss.¹

THUS the Egyptian eunuch Pothinus to his fellow schemer Achilles in Lucan's epic poem on the Roman civil war. The Roman poet offers a highly colourful version of the story of Caesar and Kleopatra, and dwells lovingly on the depraved sexuality of the latter, a sexuality fraught with danger for her enemies at the Alexandrian court. It is not very likely that Lucan's words represent anything like historical truth, but they do offer an apt introduction to the issue of the marital conventions of the Ptolemaic family. The question of incest in the Ptolemaic dynasty – its purpose, its meaning, and all its ramifications – is a broad one. Most scholarly works on Ptolemaic Egypt touch on the matter at least briefly, pausing to speculate on the reasons for this peculiar royal habit. Nevertheless, relatively few works have tackled the question in depth.² This article seeks both to enlarge on previous studies by addressing the rationale and the mechanisms of the Ptolemaic practice, and to enhance our understanding of it by examining it through an interdisciplinary lens: one that incorporates anthropological, scientific and historiographic viewpoints.

THE QUESTION OF 'INCEST'

The English word 'incest' comes from the Latin *incestum*, with its connotations of 'impurity, unchastity, defilement, pollution'. It is therefore a highly value-laden word in the original Latin.³ Terms for incest in other cultures also tend to have a valuative moral quality, but the values expressed can be very different, a fact which warns us against assuming that the precise perceptions of incest are universal. The Chinese term *luan lun*, for example, unites words meaning

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¹ Lucan 10.356-65 (Duff translation 1962, slightly modified).

² Among the more recent publications, see Carney (1987); Bennett (1997); Ogden (1999) 67-116; Hazzard (2000) 85-93. Hopkins (1980, 1994), Shaw (1992), and Scheidel's several publications on incest in Graeco-Roman Egypt do not deal primarily with royal incest.

³ Moreau (2002) 18-19.

'disorder' and 'social relationship', while the word employed by the African Tswana, *bothodi*, means 'something ominous, predicting evil'.⁴ The Indonesian *sumbang* ('improper', 'repugnant', 'disharmonious') is used to qualify many things and concepts other than incest.⁵ The non-Romance languages of Europe tend to focus on 'concepts of blood, contamination, or shame'⁶ – an example is the German *Blutschande*.

The ancient Greeks had no single word to describe the act of marriage or intercourse with too-close kin. The modern Greek word, *haimomixia*, is unattested before the ninth century AD.⁷ With its straightforward etymology ('mingling of blood'), this term may in fact be one of the less value-laden words for incest. On the other hand, the ancient periphrases used (in the absence of a single term) are very heavily value-laden, and imply that the Greeks saw the act as one that was defiling, and loathsome to the gods: *anosios* or *anagnos sunousia*, for example, 'unholy, impure intercourse', or *gamos asebês*, 'impious marriage'. While it is not clear that ancient Greek belief saw the commission of incest as inevitably resulting in a state of formal pollution, *miasma*, it is certainly the case that incest sullied those who committed it and made them abhorrent to the gods.⁸

The offence offered to the gods by human acts of incest was not the only source of condemnation of the act. It was also repugnant because it was representative of a lack of restraint, of a loss of the virtue of *sôphrosunê*. Plato talks about this loss of self-control, for which incest is only one of a number of indicators:

Some of the unnecessary pleasures and desires are immoral ... [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.⁹

The intemperance implicit in this behaviour leads to overindulgence in *all* things, including things forbidden, whether they be food or sex. Plutarch echoes Plato's views in one of his own essays on virtue: when the shackles of conventional social conduct are removed, desires may awaken not only for Oedipal intercourse, but also for 'unlawful meats' (*brôseis athesmous*).¹⁰

While Plutarch does not specify the nature of these forbidden foods, it is significant that much ethnographic literature, ancient and modern, links incest with cannibalism.¹¹ The Yapese people explicitly likened incest to a 'voracious ... sexual cannibalism', while the Tahitian word for incest, *amu toto*, literally means 'eating blood'.¹² Far-away peoples (the farther the better) are commonly suspected of indulging in both incest and cannibalism, as Strabo accused the Irish (4.5.4). Obviously, people who are at the limits of the known world can easily pass beyond those limits, morally as well as geographically. The link between cannibalism and incest is thus not merely a matter of anthropologically observed (or imagined) customs among marginal cultures; there is also a clear symbolic connection. These two acts represent the ultimate breach of limits, the ultimate violation of kindred flesh: dining on one's own kind is a sort of gastronomic incest,

⁴ Seligman (1950) 309; Needham (1974) 63-4; Arens (1986) 5-6.

⁵ Needham (1974) 63-4.

⁶ Shepher (1983) 27; see also Needham (1974) 63-4.

⁷ Rudhardt (1982) 731-2.

⁸ On the question of incest and *miasma*, see Parker (1983) 97-100.

⁹ Pl. *Rep.* 571 (Lee translation 1955).

¹⁰ Plut. *Mor.* 101a.

¹¹ For connections between incest, cannibalism (especially cannibalism of kin) and familial murder in general, see (*inter alia*) Strabo 4.5.4; Isoc. *Panath.* 121-2; Sext. *Emp. Pyr.* 3.245-8; Schneider (1976) 162; Moreau (1979); Arens (1979) 14, 27-8, 146 and (1986) vii-ix; Parker (1983) 98, 360, 364; Durham (1991) 291; Arfouilloux (1993); Nagy (1999/2000) and Archibald (2001) 20-1 for beliefs about the early Christians.

¹² Labby (1976) 171; Hooper (1976) 227.

and it is no coincidence that acts of cannibalism in myth are often directed against kindred. Once Thyestes has eaten his sons, there is nothing to prevent him from raping his daughter.

Thus, in spite of their lack of an actual word for 'incest', and in spite of the fact that Plato implies that whatever laws there were restricting it were unwritten,¹³ the Greeks clearly had a notion that it was abhorrent to the gods. The aversion to incest is something that the Greeks share with virtually every other known culture.¹⁴ What is *not* universal, however, is the notion of where to draw the line. One culture's definition of the approved degrees of kinship within which it is permitted to marry and/or have sexual relations will not necessarily hold true for another culture. Not only is it the case that different cultures vary as to who falls within the prohibited degrees of kinship, it is also true that different cultures respond differently to breaches of the incest rules: some are more horrified by parent-child incest, others by brother-sister incest.¹⁵ The ancient Code of Hammurabi prescribes exile for a father who committed incest with his daughter, burning alive for a mother and son who indulged in the same behaviour, and fails to mention sibling incest at all.¹⁶

Western culture has seen the incest prohibition both expand and contract over time. Elizabeth Archibald points out that in the mediaeval period in Europe, the prohibited degrees of kinship were vast, banning 'sexual intercourse between all relatives connected by consanguinity or affinity to the seventh degree'.¹⁷ Modern Western society has relaxed these mediaeval prohibitions drastically; in the contemporary Western world, the (fluctuating) boundary appears to lie along the line of first-cousin marriage.¹⁸ As for ancient Greece, on the other hand, prohibitions were even less restrictive: it is common to point to the Classical Athenian law permitting half-brother and half-sister to marry (provided they were offspring of the same father rather than the same mother).¹⁹ It should thus be clear that, while the power of Sophokles' *Oedipus Rex* offers resounding testimony to the horror the Greeks felt at the notion of committing incest, Greek ideas about just exactly what constituted incest are not necessarily precisely consonant either with our own or with those of other ancient cultures.

INCESTUOUS PTOLEMIES: SOME GENEALOGICAL QUESTIONS

Without delving too deeply into the reconstruction controversies of the Ptolemaic family tree, it seems best to begin with a brief survey of the history of the practice in this house. The genealogical chart (FIG. 1) gives some idea of the pattern pursued over the generations, though there are some gaps and uncertainties in our knowledge. There are times when we cannot determine

¹³ Pl. *Laws* 838-9 (cf. *Xen. Mem.* 4.4.19-23).

¹⁴ The only apparent cases of non-royal culturally approved full sibling incest are from the Roman period in Egypt (Bell (1949); Hombert and Préaux (1949); Modrezejewski (1964); Hopkins (1980, 1994); Boureau (1992); Shaw (1992); Bagnall and Frier (1994) 127-34; Scheidel (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2002, 2005); Parker (1996); Hendrix and Schneider (1999); Gonis (2000) (the only known case of incestuous marriage between twins) and Zoroastrian Persia, which may also have influenced its immediate neighbours (Lee (1988); Herrenschildt (1994); Mitterauer (1994); Scheidel (2002)). The Persian example is often ignored in favour of the better publicized example of Roman Egypt. See Storrie (2003) for a discussion of sibling marriages among some Hoti groups in Venezuelan Guiana.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Goody (1956); Fox (1962); Durham (1991) 294-5; Reynolds and Tanner (1995) 170.

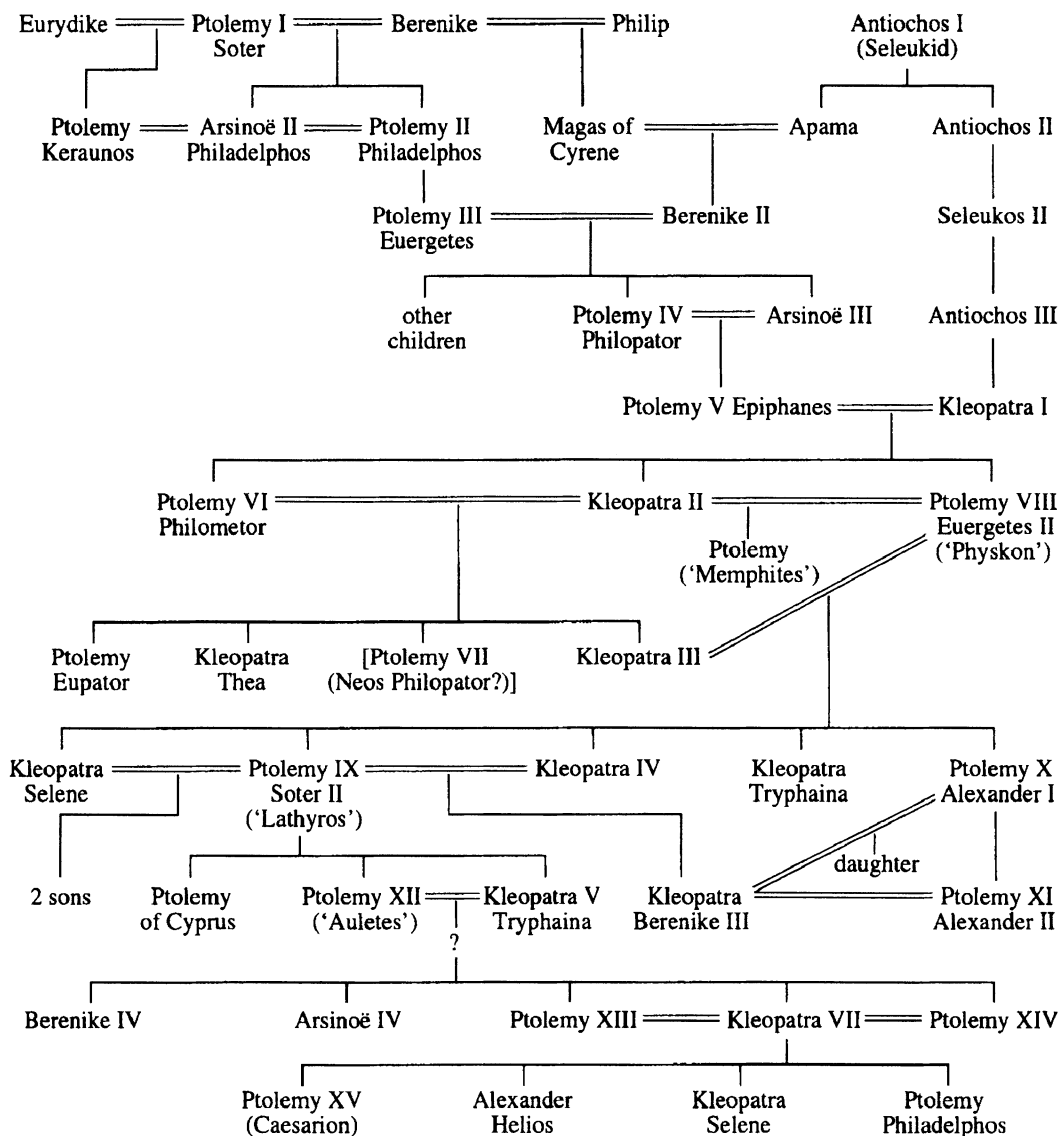
¹⁶ Mitterauer (1994); Ziskind (1988).

¹⁷ Archibald (2001) 11.

¹⁸ In 1984, Bratt found 30 American states with sanctions (in eight states, criminal sanctions) against the marriage of first cousins and 20 states with no sanctions against such a union: Bratt (1984).

¹⁹ Philo, *De spec. leg.* 3.4.22. According to Philo, the Spartan situation was precisely the reverse – children of the same mother (not the same father) could marry one another – but it is tempting to see this claim as the sort of typical 'inversion' the popular imagination gave to Spartan society (Vérilhac and Vial (1998) 94). It is not certain that Athenian half-siblings took advantage of the law and regularly married each other; we actually know of very few such marriages (Hopkins (1980); Vérilhac and Vial (1998) 94).

FIG. 1. Ptolemaic genealogy (conventional)
(not all members of the family are included here)



beyond doubt just how inbred a particular Ptolemy, Arsinoë, or Kleopatra might be, since we do not know for certain what his or her parentage is. Alternative genealogical reconstructions will be noted, but this is not the place for an intensive examination of these arguments (the chart adheres to the conventional genealogical reconstruction of the dynasty); what is sought here is a sense of the overall pattern.²⁰

The first sibling-marriage in the family was that of Arsinoë II to her paternal half-brother Ptolemy Keraunos, but this union was swiftly eclipsed by the far more significant marriage which took place a few years later. The first full-sibling marriage of the dynasty ultimately gave both Arsinoë II and her younger brother Ptolemy II the epithet 'Philadelphos'.²¹ The full-sibling

²⁰ See Ogden (1999) 73-116 for a fuller discussion of the detailed evidence for the individual marriages.

²¹ Paus. 1.7.1 and 3; Plut. *Mor.* 736e-f. On the epithet, see Criscuolo (1990, 1994).

marriage was a much greater departure from tradition than the half-sibling one. We have no real way of knowing what the Egyptians thought of it, but we do have some neatly juxtaposed comments from the Greek side. Theokritos' *Idyll* 17, an unabashedly sycophantic poem that likens the marriage of Ptolemy and Arsinoë to that of Zeus and Hera, represents the official response:

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.²²

Perhaps Theokritos' emphasis on the chastity of the virgin Iris and the purity of the hands with which she arranges the bridal couch was an effort to cleanse an image that was bound to stick in the throats of a Greek audience. Probably more reflective of the unofficial popular view was Sotades' sardonic one-liner: 'you're shoving your prick into an unholy hole'.²³ Unfortunately for Sotades, this was not a very profitable view to hold: Ptolemy's admiral Patroklos sealed the poet into a lead jar and dropped him into the sea.²⁴

The marriage of Arsinoë and Ptolemy Philadelphos had no issue.²⁵ Ptolemy II's heir, and his other children, were from his previous marriage, although Ptolemy did take care to adopt these children to his sister. Ptolemy III did not follow his father's example in marrying a sister, though he did marry a half-cousin, Berenike II, daughter of Magas of Cyrene. It is therefore not until the next generation that we find another 'first': the marriage of the full brother and sister, Ptolemy IV and Arsinoë III, and their production of a son. Ptolemy V, then, is the first product of a Ptolemaic sibling-marriage.

As an only child who was orphaned young, Ptolemy V had no opportunity to emulate the example set by his parents. Since he and his Seleukid bride Kleopatra I were third cousins, the marriage can scarcely be described as incestuous. Nevertheless, it is significant in other ways. For one thing, the marriage brought the dynastic name 'Kleopatra' into the Ptolemaic house for the first time. Far more important, however, was the issue of this marriage. The two sons and the single daughter of Ptolemy V and Kleopatra I were to dominate affairs through most of the second century BC, and their marital entanglements ultimately went far beyond anything as simple as mere sibling-marriage.

These three were also orphaned young. The elder of the two boys, Ptolemy VI, was subsequently married to his sister, Kleopatra II, who bore him at least three, and probably four children. Ptolemy VI died prematurely in 145. His elder son, Ptolemy Eupator, had already died several years earlier, and the younger son was perhaps too young to consider as his father's heir.²⁶ The widow's other brother, Ptolemy VIII, was accordingly brought back from Cyrene and married to his sister.²⁷ Justin claims that Ptolemy crowned his nuptials by slaughtering his

²² *Idyll* 17.1-4, 128-34 (Gow translation 1952); cf. Kallimachos, *SH* 254.

²³ Athen. 621a.

²⁴ Athen. 621a; cf. Plut. *Mor.* 11a. See Fraser 1 (1972) 117-18; Carney (1987) 428-9; Weber (1998/9).

²⁵ Paus. 1.7.3; schol. Theoc. *Id.* 17.128.

²⁶ Eupator, who was born in the mid-160s, was named co-regent with his father in 152, but died in that same year; Ogden (1999) 86 suggests that 'genetic compromise' carried him off, though it is hard to believe that he would have been designated as heir and co-regent by

his father if he had suffered from any obvious or crippling physical/mental defect (cf. the speculations of Chauveau (1990) 166; and Whitehorne (1994) 149).

²⁷ This paper adheres to the conventional numbering of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which designates the two sons of Ptolemy V as Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII, and which had allowed for a brief reign of a son of Ptolemy VI as Ptolemy VII in 145 before his murder by Ptolemy VIII. Recent discussions have called into question the existence of such a son, but the most recent evidence seems to suggest that while he might not ever have sat on the

surviving nephew, and ‘entered his sister’s bed still dripping with the gore of her son’.²⁸ While the melodrama might be a trifle suspect, if on no other grounds than that Justin had already employed it in his account of the marriage of Arsinoë II and Ptolemy Keraunos, it is quite credible that Ptolemy VIII would have seen fit to remove his brother’s son and his own potential rival. So long as Kleopatra II had a living son who was not a child of Ptolemy VIII, she might be able to anticipate the example of Kleopatra VII, and choose to divest herself of an unwanted brother-husband in favour of a filial co-ruler.

If Kleopatra II did not already hate her younger brother, the murder of her young son would surely have provoked such a sentiment. She cannot have been much more endeared to her new mate by his next actions. Shortly after Kleopatra bore her new brother-spouse their first child (Ptolemy ‘Memphites’), Ptolemy VIII either raped or seduced his bride’s daughter (his own niece, twice over), and fathered a son on her. In a major departure from Ptolemaic monogamous tradition, he subsequently married her, a marriage that might have been his plan all along.²⁹ Kleopatra II still continues to be accorded the title of queen and to be named with her brother in all the protocols; the difference is that her daughter Kleopatra III has now joined her. Ptolemy VIII, ‘Queen Kleopatra, the sister’, and ‘Queen Kleopatra, the wife’ thereupon ruled together in what has been called ‘a ghastly *ménage à trois*’ until 116, when Ptolemy died.³⁰

This is not to say that they ruled together happily or that their reign was uninterrupted by political and familial turmoil. One incident alone is sufficient to indicate the nature of family life. In the late 130s, Kleopatra II succeeded in temporarily ousting her brother and her daughter from Alexandria, and reigned there alone for a time.³¹ On this occasion, Ptolemy VIII murdered Kleopatra’s last remaining son, the twelve-year-old Memphites, dismembered the body, put it in a box and despatched it to the boy’s mother as a birthday present.³² Diodoros remarks that he did so because it was the best way to punish and wound her for her hostility towards him, but the political and cold-bloodedly practical rationale for this act must have been Ptolemy’s fear that Kleopatra would take advantage of his absence to crown their son as her co-ruler. As he had done in 145, he removed this fear through the simple expedient of murdering his potential rival. The fact that Memphites was also his own child was immaterial; he had already two more sons from Kleopatra III, while Kleopatra II was now deprived of all her progeny.

After the triple reign of Kleopatra II, Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra III, the rest of the Ptolemies, and their marital antics, seem almost colourless in comparison. Ptolemy VIII died in June 116, Kleopatra II a few months later. By the terms of his will, Ptolemy left the throne to his niece-wife Kleopatra III and whichever of their sons she should prefer.³³ Naturally, both sons considered themselves legitimate candidates, and further spice was added to the mix by the fact that Kleopatra herself is said to have cherished a real hatred for her older son, Ptolemy IX

throne, and while he perhaps should not be identified with ‘Neos Philopator’, there nevertheless *was* a surviving son of Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II in 145. See van’t Dack (1983); Chauveau (1990, 1991, 2000); Huß (1994a, 2001, 2002); Heinen (1997).

²⁸ Justin 38.8.4 (Yardley translation 1994).

²⁹ Diod. 33.13; Livy, *Per.* 59; Justin 38.8; Val. Max. 9.1 (ext.) 5. The son of Kleopatra II and Ptolemy VIII was given the sobriquet Memphites because of his birth at Memphis, in 144/3 (Mooren (1988); Huß (2001) 604; Hölbl (2001) 195). The marriage to Kleopatra III seems to have taken place sometime between 8 May 141 and 14 January 140 (Huß (2001) 606; Hölbl (2001) 195, 217), but since Kleopatra gave birth to her uncle’s child (the future Ptolemy IX) in 142, it is clear that the relationship could not have postdated the birth of Memphites by any

considerable time. Whitehorne (1994) 110 thinks that marriage to the niece rather than the sister had always been Ptolemy VIII’s plan; in 145, however, Kleopatra II was no doubt too powerful and influential to allow him to bypass her. Mooren (1988) thinks that the birth of Ptolemy IX prompted Ptolemy VIII to marry the child’s mother. Although Ogden (1999) considers that the Hellenistic dynasties indulged in polygamy, he does acknowledge that Ptolemaic sibling-marriage was ‘usually associated with monogyny on the male side’ (143).

³⁰ Whitehorne (1994) 123.

³¹ On the period of sole rule and the civil war, see Huß (2001) 608-15; Hölbl (2001) 197-201.

³² Diod. 34/35.14; Livy, *Per.* 59; Justin 38.8; Val. Max. 9.2, (ext.) 5.

³³ Justin 39.3; *cf.* Paus. 1.9.1-2.

(‘Lathyros’).³⁴ Her autocratic attitude (which, to be fair, was not limited to her animus towards her eldest son) found expression in her insistence that Ptolemy IX divorce his beloved sister-wife, Kleopatra IV, and marry another sister, Kleopatra Selene. Kleopatra III’s preference for her younger boy, Ptolemy X Alexander, seems a trifle misplaced, given that he ultimately murdered her after putting up with her domineering behaviour for several years.³⁵ Ptolemy X then married his niece, Kleopatra Berenike III, the daughter of his brother Lathyros and (probably) their sister Kleopatra IV. When Ptolemy X died, the Alexandrians brought his brother Lathyros back, and he reigned in association with his popular daughter Kleopatra Berenike, his brother’s widow. Some have tried to argue that Lathyros actually married his daughter, but a marriage in the direct line of descent would have been completely without precedent among the Ptolemies, and there is no firm evidence for this marriage in any case.³⁶ When Lathyros died in 80 BC, Kleopatra Berenike briefly ruled alone, but sole female rule was too abnormal to be sustained for long, and Kleopatra’s cousin and stepson, Ptolemy XI, was brought in and married to her.

As incestuous marriages go, the degree of kinship involved in this one was fairly innocuous, provided we refrain from the wilder speculation that Kleopatra Berenike was actually Ptolemy XI’s mother, and not merely his stepmother.³⁷ The alternative genealogy offered by Bennett (see FIG. 2) suggests a closer relationship, making Kleopatra Berenike and Ptolemy XI half-siblings in addition to being cousins – not to mention the step-parent, step-child relationship.³⁸

Nevertheless, even if we accept this conjectural stemma, the incestuous character of this marriage has little significance, as it did not last long enough to have any dynastic impact. Ptolemy XI – who seems to have been singularly injudicious – murdered his new wife during the honeymoon. The Alexandrian populace, who adored Kleopatra Berenike, dragged their witless king off to the gymnasium and tore him into many small pieces.³⁹

The throne then passed to Ptolemy XII ‘Auletes’. Ptolemy XII was certainly the child of Ptolemy IX, but persistent rumours of his ‘illegitimacy’ mean that we cannot say certainly who Auletes’ mother was. Bennett argues that Auletes was after all the child of a full Ptolemaic brother-sister marriage, that between Ptolemy IX and his beloved Kleopatra IV, but such a reconstruction must remain in the field of conjecture.⁴⁰ Auletes himself married a certain Kleopatra V Tryphaina, also thought to be a daughter of Ptolemy IX, though whether she was Auletes’ half-sister or full sister cannot be determined.

³⁴ Paus. 1.9.1, who remarks that Ptolemy IX bore the official title ‘Philometor’ as a form of grim irony, ‘no king known to history having been so hated by his mother’. Mooren (1988) 443 suggests the antipathy felt by Kleopatra III to her elder son was the result of the psychological trauma experienced around his conception and birth (her unwed state at the time, possibly rape by her uncle, certainly alienation from her mother); still, Kleopatra III does not strike one as being very easily traumatized.

Cauville and Devauchelle (1984) 47-55 argue that there was no natural affection between Kleopatra III and Ptolemy IX for the reason that the latter’s mother was in fact Kleopatra II, not Kleopatra III (and that the Kleopatra who reigned alongside Ptolemy IX from 116 until his exile in 107 was the older queen). Against this suggestion, see Mooren (1988); Thompson (1989); and Ogden (1999) 111 n.126. All the literary sources assert that Ptolemy IX was the child of Kleopatra III.

³⁵ Justin 39.4; Paus. 1.9.2.

³⁶ For the assumption of a marriage between Ptolemy IX and his daughter Kleopatra Berenike, see Fraser 1 (1972) 124; Whitehorne (1994) 175; Ogden (1999) 95 (and n.152), who cites the demotic stele published in Mond and Myers (1934) 10-11, no. 11. The stele is full of scribal errors (see Mond and Myers 31) and cannot provide telling testimony in favour of such a marriage. Against the notion of a marriage between Kleopatra Berenike and her father: Bevan (1968 [1927]) 334; Bennett (1997); Chauveau (1998); Shipley (2000) 212; Huß (2001) 667-8; Hölbl (2001) 212.

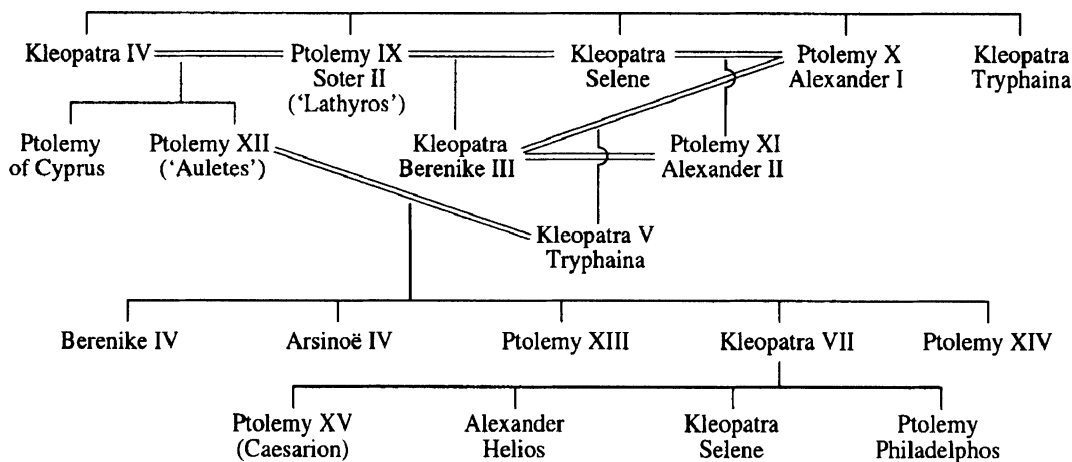
³⁷ Green (1990) 554; against this, see Bennett (1997) and Huß (2001) 653.

³⁸ See Bennett (1997) 53-4.

³⁹ Appian *BC* 1.102; Porphyry *FGrHist* 260 F2 (10-11); Cic. *Alex.* fr. 9-10. See Mittag (2003) 184-6.

⁴⁰ See Bennett (1997) 46-52; against Bennett, see Huß (2001) 672-3. Sullivan (1990) 88, 91 comments on the possibility that Auletes (and Kleopatra V Tryphaina) were the legitimate children of Ptolemy IX and Kleopatra Selene; also Siani-Davies (1997) 308-9.

FIG. 2. Later Ptolemaic genealogy



Finally, we come to Kleopatra VII, who also poses a problem in terms of her maternal lineage. She was certainly the daughter of Auletes, but the identity of her mother has long been the subject of debate: was she Kleopatra V Tryphaina, was she another (unattested) wife of Auletes, or was she one of his concubines? 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.⁴¹ The matter is complicated by the enigma of the disappearance of Kleopatra V Tryphaina from public life sometime late in 69 or early in 68, a riddle made more mysterious by her apparent reappearance at the side of her eldest daughter, Berenike IV, a decade later during Auletes' exile.⁴² Werner Huß has argued that Auletes' daughter Kleopatra was the child of a marriage to an Egyptian woman of the high-ranking priestly caste, but there is little evidence to support this argument, and in any case Kleopatra VII's birth-date (69) surely suggests that she was indeed the daughter of Tryphaina.⁴³

Kleopatra VII herself may or may not have married each of her brothers in succession. The first, Ptolemy XIII, died during the Alexandrian war, presumably before he could 'submit to her embraces with incestuous heart'. The second, Ptolemy XIV, was said to have been murdered by his sister, who wanted a path clear for her child by Caesar.⁴⁴ Certainly none of her children came from these marriages; if they did take place, it seems unlikely that either of them was actually consummated.⁴⁵

Over the course of the centuries, then, incest came to dominate the marriage patterns of the Ptolemaic house, and the offspring of the royal unions became increasingly inbred. Such a situation naturally leads us to ask: how could such a dynastic strategy ever have been a success?

⁴¹ Str. 17.1.11; Paus. 1.9.3. The *argumentum e silentio* 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.

⁴² This is not the place to discuss the mystery of Kleopatra V Tryphaina's disappearance and resuscitation, an intriguing topic, but one that requires a lengthy treatment and is not directly relevant to the subject of this paper. See Quaegebeur (1989); Sullivan (1990) 240-1; Bennett (1997); Hölbl (2001) 223, 227, 251-2; Huß (2001) 674-5, 679, 686.

⁴³ Against Huß (1990), see Chauveau (2002) 10; Bennett (1997) 60 points out that 'with a birth-date of 69 Cleopatra VII was certainly conceived before Cleopatra V disappears from the record'.

⁴⁴ For the sources on the death of Ptolemy XIII, see Huß (2001) 719 n.149; the alleged murder of Ptolemy XIV: Josephus, *AJ* 15.89 and *Ap.* 2.58; Porphyry, *FGrHist* 260 F2 (16-17).

⁴⁵ Dio Cass. 42.35, 42.44. 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.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS: GENETICS AND TABOOS

The Ptolemaic dynasty is surely the *locus classicus* for the question of royal inbreeding, and its allegedly deleterious effects. Most recently, Daniel Ogden has sought to find the answer to various Ptolemaic problems in the excessive inbreeding of this dynasty.⁴⁶ He believes that the viability of the male children born of these unions was undermined, and that Ptolemaic offspring were persistently ‘genetically compromised’.⁴⁷ Such ‘genetic compromise’ would have resulted in reduced fertility, increased mortality rates and genetic disorders of various kinds. The Ptolemaic dynasty – or at least its incestuous unions – would thus have been rendered ‘virtually infertile’. Ogden restricts his speculation to the physical ramifications of inbreeding, though others have not always been so cautious. Peter Green implies that moral depravity was also the result:

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.⁴⁸

Michael Grant takes it one step further in his biography of Kleopatra VII:

[C]ertain 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.⁴⁹

We are probably safe in assuming that Ptolemaic moral behaviour is likely to have been the result of nurture (or perhaps the lack thereof), rather than nature. It does not seem that we need spend much time on the question of whether Kleopatra, a kind of Ptolemaic bad seed, actually inherited a concentrated set of chromosomes genetically programming her to murder her siblings. But what about the genuine physical effects of inbreeding on the Ptolemies?

In 1996 Walter Scheidel published an exceptionally detailed study of the potential genetic effects of the incestuous marriages attested among the common people of Egypt (chiefly from the Arsinoite nome) during the Roman era.⁵⁰ He correctly makes the point that an assessment of the phenomenon of historical incest (whether royal or common) requires a cross-disciplinary approach, a prefatory remark to his own plunge into the gene pool. It is not my intent to reproduce here the elaborate and meticulous analysis he devotes to the question of the genetic downside of inbreeding. I hope rather to give a brief (and comprehensible) summary of the scientific side of the issue of Ptolemaic incest. Before embarking on it, however, it would be well to quote Scheidel’s own remark at the end of some seventeen pages of painstaking mathematical, scientific, and statistical analysis:

All in all, the available evidence from Roman Egypt cannot be taken to refute the model of increasing inbreeding depression and its potentially disastrous consequences 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.*⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ogden (1999) 67-116 on the Ptolemies. Walter Scheidel’s expansive study (1996a) deals with the genetic question in detail, but is primarily focused on the Roman-period marriages among commoners, rather than the Hellenistic dynasty.

⁴⁷ Ogden (1999) 86 (on Ptolemy Eupator) and 94 (on the two sons of Ptolemy IX and Kleopatra Selene).

⁴⁸ Green (1990) 554.

⁴⁹ Grant (1972) 27.

⁵⁰ Scheidel (1996a). The marriages are attested in census returns; see n.14 above.

⁵¹ Scheidel (1996a) 28 (my emphasis).

Such a remark is cautionary, and adumbrates my own conclusions about the Ptolemies, who did not form part of Scheidel's study.

Sexually reproducing organisms such as human beings replicate the species through a constant recombination of genetic material in each generation, the offspring incorporating randomly half of the father's genes and half of the mother's. As the number of genes and the number of combinations are virtually endless, each human is genetically unique. The chief benefit of sexual reproduction as a means of propagation, at the level of the species, is the opportunities it provides for species fitness and enhancement through the process of evolution and natural selection: organisms with 'bad' genetic material are likely to die young or be unable to reproduce ('reproductive death'), while organisms with 'good' genetic material will survive to pass on those genes to their own offspring.

The classification of genetic material here as 'good' or 'bad' is to some extent a subjective one, and is certainly simplistic. Whether a gene is good or bad depends to an extent on its combination with other genes, on the nature of the organism, and on the environment within which the organism lives. Briefly (and again simplistically) put, 'bad' genetic material would be that which kills, disables, or prevents from reproducing its bearer within the bearer's natural context. A more objective classification of genes is their designation as dominant or recessive, or rather the designation of alternative alleles (variants) of the same gene as dominant or recessive. A dominant allele of a gene will 'mask' the recessive allele of the same gene. Thus, 'sex allows a beneficial allele inherited from one parent to "complement", or mask, a deleterious allele inherited from the other parent'.⁵² The potential danger of human inbreeding – for instance, in a sibling marriage – lies in the increased opportunities it provides for recessive alleles of the same gene to match up and become manifested in the organism. Since brothers and sisters share much more genetic material than unrelated individuals, they have a much higher likelihood of carrying the same recessive alleles. Furthermore, recessive genes on the whole stand a higher chance than dominant genes of being noxious in some way (even though the majority of recessives are in fact more or less neutral). Precisely because they *are* recessive, they have not been 'cleansed' from the breeding population in the same way that a dominant gene would be. A dominant gene that had a significantly damaging effect would tend to kill off its bearers, or otherwise prevent them from reproducing, and hence would wipe itself out; deleterious recessives, on the other hand, can lurk forever.⁵³

On the face of it, then, significant inbreeding, such as was practised at several points in the Ptolemaic line, would seem to have been likely to produce genetic complications. But 'likely' is not the same as 'inevitable'. Combinations of genetic material are random, not determined by a genetically (or divinely) mandated programme of punishment for offenders against the taboo.

⁵² Durham (1991) 297. For a fuller discussion of the genetics of breeding and inbreeding, see Scheidel (1996a) 15-28; Durham (1991) 296-309; Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 549-69.

⁵³ The risk of various degrees of inbreeding can be expressed mathematically through the 'relationship coefficient' (r), which is an expression of degree of relatedness through the potential of shared genetic material, and which can be employed to determine the 'inbreeding coefficient' (F), a mathematical expression of the degree of inbreeding between two persons with a relatedness of r . The formula to determine F in a population where there is no built-up inbreeding (e.g. between siblings whose parents themselves are unrelated) is $F = r/2$. Thus, since the relationship coefficient of siblings is 0.5, the inbreeding coefficient for the potential offspring of such a couple would be 0.25. The formula is more complicated

when there is already a certain amount of generalized inbreeding in the population; see Durham (1991) 300-1; Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 550-2.

A closed population that has been inbreeding regularly for a long time has a tendency to cleanse the lethal recessives from the gene pool, and can reach a point of equilibrium where inbreeding no longer presents the same dangers as it does to a normally outbreeding population (see, e.g., Reddy (1992)). It is impossible to say whether this tendency had any effect on the Ptolemies, beyond pointing out that there may have been enough 'foreign' genes brought in from time to time (e.g. Kleopatra I) to offset the possible benefits of continual and rigorous inbreeding (since a whole new set of lethal recessive genes might be imported). See Moore (1992) 930; Scheidel (1997).

There have been numerous anthropological and medical studies of inbreeding groups carried out in the last four or five decades, in India, in Japan, in Czechoslovakia, in the United States and elsewhere.⁵⁴ The majority of these studies tend to focus on first-cousin matings, since none of the societies involved actually sanctions anything closer. The number of studies on true nuclear-family incestuous unions, and their offspring, remains therefore relatively low, which means that we must be cautious about relying on them as statistically representative.⁵⁵ While these studies do seem to bear out some of our expectations about genetic damage – higher rates of malformations, infant mortality, mental disabilities – there are still many unanswered questions and contradictory findings.⁵⁶ The empirical has not always borne out the theoretical. In some cases, the sample size is probably too small to be statistically significant.⁵⁷

There is also at times a question of appreciable bias in some of these studies.⁵⁸ There may not be an appropriate corrective taken for socio-economic or other factors. As Eva Seemanová points out in her study of 161 offspring of nuclear-family incest published in 1971, '[u]ndoubtedly, the parents of the children of incest are not a representative sample of the general population'.⁵⁹ Factors of general health, access to education, family income, parental mental ability, and so on, could have a clear impact on the offspring of incestuous and non-incestuous unions alike.⁶⁰ The bias in some studies particularly comes into play when it is a matter of estimation of the impact of inbreeding on intelligence levels, perhaps because the measurement of these qualities can be so subjective. Some decades ago, for instance, a study of intelligence levels was carried out among the highly inbred population of the remote island of Tristan da Cunha in the south Atlantic.⁶¹ The study was based on a scale that recognized only one 'normal' category, no 'above-average' category, and five categories below normal, ranging through 'slow cerebration' and 'very slow cerebration', down to 'low-grade mental defective'. Clearly the investigator went there expecting to find subnormal mental activity, and not unnaturally found what he was looking for.⁶² Furthermore, even when the potential for a skewed sample is recognized, and a corrective is applied, the end result is that we are still left with little to no statistically significant data on the viability of the offspring of incestuous parents from a well-to-do, well-educated, hygienic environment with access to all that wealth and position have to offer (which the Ptolemies of course were, at least by the standards of their own era).

Nevertheless, there do seem to be clear indicators that genetic problems – diseases and deformities, some severe enough to cause death – are more likely to arise in a closely inbreeding

⁵⁴ Among these studies are Reed and Reed (1965) 62-4; Cook and Hanslip (1966); Adams and Neel (1967); Adams *et al.* (1967); Seemanová (1971); Schull and Neel (1972); Bashi (1977); Chakraborty and Chakravarti (1977); Ansari and Sinha (1978); Lindelius (1980); Baird and McGillivray (1982); Al-Awadi *et al.* (1986); Reddy (1992). For surveys and summaries of these studies, see (*inter alia*) May (1979); Bittles (1981); Arens (1986) 16-24; Durham (1991) 305-9; Scheidel (1996a) 20-2; Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 566-7.

⁵⁵ Scheidel (1996a) 20 puts it well when he says 'in general, the availability of empirical data might be said to be inversely correlated with the intensity of inbreeding'.

⁵⁶ See Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 562-3; Leavitt (1990) 974-5; Bittles *et al.* (1991); Bittles (2005).

⁵⁷ E.g. Adams and Neel (1967) (the basis of Adams *et al.* (1967)); Baird and McGillivray (1982).

⁵⁸ See Bittles ((1981), *ap.* van den Berghe (1983) 103-4 and Bittles (2005)); Baird and McGillivray (1982); Durham (1991) 307; Scheidel (1996a) 20-1; Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 557.

⁵⁹ Seemanová (1971) 118 (still the single most important study of nuclear-family incest); *cf.* Reed and Reed (1965) 63 and Baird and McGillivray (1982) 857.

⁶⁰ See the comments made by Cook and Hanslip (1966) 95, 98; Schull and Neel (1972) 425-6; Lindelius (1980) 190; Bittles (1981, 2005).

⁶¹ Roberts (1967), reporting on a study done by L. Woolley in 1942; see Arens (1986) 20 for criticism of the subjectivity of the Tristan da Cunha study. For criticism of the methodologies of the standard studies, as applied to IQ, see Kamin (1980); for another problematic study of the effects of incest on mental ability, see Jancar and Johnston (1990).

⁶² In his 1967 paper, Roberts acknowledged the methodological flaws of the 1942 survey, but in 1992 he reiterated the 'mental dullness' of the inhabitants of Tristan da Cunha, only a few pages after he had examined the poor educational system on the island, itself surely a socioeconomic factor bound to affect the *apparent* intelligence levels of the islanders.

population. *But they do not inevitably arise in all offspring of incest* – that is the important point.⁶³ In Seemanová's study, a very significant percentage (roughly 50%) of the 161 children exhibited the negative effects of inbreeding: they either died or had some major defect. Yet it is worthwhile stating the obvious here: 50% of the children survived without defect. In any case, we must also ask the question, are we justified in finding evidence of such inbreeding depression in what we know of the Ptolemies? Scheidel was unable to demonstrate inbreeding depression among the incestuous commoners of Roman Egypt from the available sources; are the sources on the Ptolemies any more helpful in this regard?

Certainly there is nothing to suggest that the dynasty suffered from mental defect in any way that we can detect, though we might want to qualify Ptolemy XI's ill-advised murder of the beloved Kleopatra Berenike as a singular instance of 'very slow cerebration'. Moreover, the Ptolemies and the Kleopatras really do not seem to have sustained a noticeable reduction in fertility, certainly not by comparison with other dynasties such as the Antigonids or the woefully infertile – but not inbred – Attalids.⁶⁴ Except for the marriage of Arsinoë and Ptolemy Philadelphos, and the putative marriages of Kleopatra VII to her younger brothers, virtually every incestuous Ptolemaic marriage resulted in offspring.⁶⁵ Some of these children died young, to be sure, but infant mortality among the Ptolemies does not seem to have been any more demonstrably pronounced than in any other family in the ancient world.

Ray Bixler's objections are overdrawn. In an article designed to debunk the extent of royal sibling incest that actually went on in the royal families of Ptolemaic Egypt, Inca Peru and old Hawaii, he rightly draws critical attention to the naïve generalizations made by Ruffer and others who claimed (a) that the Ptolemaic rulers were all the product of incest, and (b) that all that inbreeding never hurt them (which is not quite the same thing as arguing that we cannot conclusively demonstrate that inbreeding hurt them).⁶⁶ But Bixler's protests are themselves based on generalizations and outdated historical reconstructions. He focuses only on sibling marriage, failing to note that the offspring of an uncle and inbred niece would also have had a high inbreeding coefficient;⁶⁷ he does not note the production of children other than those who eventually inherited the throne; he traces the rulers only through the male line, in a dynasty which produced such powerfully assertive and effective female co-regents (and daughters of sibling incest) as Kleopatra III, Kleopatra Berenike, Berenike IV, and Kleopatra VII; and finally, he places too much emphasis on strenuously arguing that these marriages entailed little or no sexual attraction. Few would claim that they did, but that is not the same as claiming that they entailed no sexual activity.

As far as Ptolemaic fertility goes, it is true that Ptolemy IV and Arsinoë III only had one child – but then both of them died at a relatively young age. Furthermore, Ptolemy IV was notorious for a sex life that did not include his sister-wife, and it is very easy to suppose that, apart from siring his heir, he largely ignored her. It is worth noting as well that their child, Ptolemy V, is specifically attested in the ancient record as being very fit and athletic.⁶⁸ He too died young, but

⁶³ '[The] effects of inbreeding are probabilistic, not deterministic': Durham (1991) 301.

⁶⁴ Ogden (1999) believes the Ptolemaic sibling marriages to have been 'virtually infertile' (67), whether through failure to conceive, stillbirth, or post-natal/pre-reproductive mortality of inbred offspring. But see Scheidel (1997) 367: 'In general, there is no evidence that inbreeding increases the incidence of sterility ... or the incidence of fetal death'; and Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 562-3.

⁶⁵ In the case of Kleopatra it is almost certain, and in the case of Arsinoë possible, that these marriages entailed no sexual activity; the question of their fertility is there-

fore moot. The nineteen-day marriage of Ptolemy XI and Kleopatra Berenike seems hardly worth mentioning in this context.

⁶⁶ Bixler (1982a; see also 1982b); Ruffer (1921) 341-56.

⁶⁷ The inbreeding coefficient (F) of an uncle-niece pair when there is no family background of inbreeding is 0.125; but for Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra III, multiply related as they were, F would have been 0.25, the same as for a brother-sister or parent-child pair (this figure was calculated using Wright's method of 'path coefficients'; see Vogel and Motulsky (1997) 551-2 and n.53 above).

⁶⁸ Polyb. 22.3.

not before siring three healthy children, and his death came as enough of a surprise to give rise to the supposition that he had been murdered.⁶⁹ The marriages of Kleopatra II to both her brothers were quite remarkably fruitful, especially when we consider that she may have been over 40 when she bore Memphites to her much-despised brother Ptolemy VIII. If Memphites failed to survive long enough to inherit the throne, his genes were hardly to blame (except insofar as they linked him to a spectacularly bad choice of a father). Kleopatra III, herself the child of full brother-sister incest, and married to her uncle on both sides, seems to have had no trouble producing five healthy babies in quick succession, all of whom went on to produce children of their own, and none of whom seem to have been in any need of ‘hybrid vigour’.⁷⁰ And if Ptolemy IX could not get an heir from a Ptolemaic sister-bride, it was surely because his marriages kept ending in divorce, not because they were infertile (they were not).

In his argument for Ptolemaic ‘genetic compromise’, Ogden makes much of the (arguably) freakish corpulence of Ptolemy VIII, who was known popularly as ‘Physkon’ or ‘Pot-belly’.⁷¹

To the Romans ... he 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.⁷²

Justin’s description of him is fleshed out (as it were) by John Whitehorne’s comment: ‘Justin ... invites us to imagine Ptolemy VIII dressed in a sort of see-through nightdress as he dragged his great weight, puffing and panting, towards his brother’s widow ...’⁷³ But while Physkon may have been gross, in more ways than one, he was not himself the child of incest; in fact, since his parents were only third cousins, he probably had a share in some of the freshest genetic material that had been in the family for some time. A tendency to fleshiness ran in the family anyway, as we can see in many of the coin portraits. Athenaios reports that Ptolemy VIII’s great-great-grandfather, Magas of Cyrene, who was not in any way inbred, ‘abandoned himself to luxury, and was weighted down with monstrous masses of flesh in his last days; in fact he choked himself to death because he was so fat, never taking any exercise and always eating quantities of food’.⁷⁴ There is no need to view the obesity of Ptolemy VIII, or of his son Ptolemy X, as springing from a freak recessive gene, brought to the fore only by inbreeding. That this was a lifestyle disease for both of them, a matter of their gluttonous living, is clear from the passage in Athenaios:

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

⁶⁹ Porphyry, *FGrHist* 260 F48; cf. Diod. 29.29.1.

⁷⁰ Whitehorne (1994) 117 thinks all five children were probably born by 135, less than a decade after Kleopatra’s relationship with her uncle began.

⁷¹ Ogden (1999) 97-8; cf. Grant (1972) 27. For official pudgy portraits (and discussion) of Ptolemy VIII, see Kyrieleis (1975) 63-4, pls 52-3; Smith (1988) 93-4, cat. 73, pl. 75.17; Plantzos (1999) 45 and pl. 2 (8); Ashton (2001) 55; Walker and Higgs (2001) 54-7, cat. 21-2; Stanwick (2002) cat. 79-104. For a possible caricature of

Ptolemy VIII (enormously fat and clothed in transparent draperies), see Walker and Higgs (2001) 64-5, cat. 37. See Ashrafiyan (2005), and other references cited there, for speculation about medical conditions in the Ptolemaic dynasty linked to ‘morbid obesity’ and brought on by consanguinity.

⁷² Justin 38.8.8-9 (Yardley translation 1994).

⁷³ Whitehorne (1994) 107.

⁷⁴ Athen. 550b-c (Gulick translation 1955).

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 bare-foot as he was, and perform the figures in a livelier fashion than those who had practised them.⁷⁵

Once again, the answer surely lies in nurture rather than nature.

It is important to emphasize that the point here is not so much that the Ptolemies were *not* negatively affected by their incestuous behaviour – perhaps at times they were – but rather that the available evidence does not demonstrate that they were in any clear or incontrovertible way. If we did not already know that there was a significant amount of inbreeding in the Ptolemaic dynasty, nothing in their other records would prompt us to posit unusual genetic problems in this family. Like Woolley on Tristan da Cunha in the 1940s, we approach the Ptolemies with a preconceived notion in mind, and, also like Woolley, we tend to find what we are looking for. In an amusing passage on Ptolemy VIII, that ‘overweight and ugly manikin’, Whitehorne evinces the not uncommon tendency to seek a genetic degeneracy *beyond what the sources suggest*:

Had [Ptolemy VIII’s] contest [with the Romans] been on the grounds of his own choosing – feasting or fornication – then despite his physical shortcomings (*and perhaps other congenital defects of which we know nothing*) the fat little king could have left most others struggling in his wake. Devoted as he was to the lower appetites, he managed to father seven children that we know of, a far better score than many of his more illustrious predecessors.⁷⁶

Bixler is right to criticize Ruffer for his naïvety, but in fact Ruffer’s general thesis requires only a slight, though crucial, modification: rather than arguing that there is in general no evidence that inbreeding is likely to cause genetic harm, we need argue only that such evidence is not provided by what we know of the Ptolemies. Perhaps, simplistic a conjecture as it may be, the family was just lucky in the genetic lottery.

The genetic risks posed by inbreeding were not the only potential barrier to the success of the incestuous strategy of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Reference was made earlier to the near universality of the human aversion to incest. The claim that incest avoidance is prevalent in human society naturally requires several caveats: royal incest is an exception to this rule, as is socially approved incest among non-royals in the documented cases of Roman Egypt and ancient Iran; the definition of kin embraced by incest regulations, and the sanctions employed, vary considerably from culture to culture; and of course sexual abuse within the family can be a problem within any society at any level. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that, regardless of the stringency or laxness of their regulations on the matter, *most* societies have some form of incest prohibition, and *most* humans are emotionally antipathetic to committing incest.

This is not the place to discuss all the various theories proposed to account for the origin and/or the persistence of the incest taboo(s). Whether it developed out of a need to prevent the family disruption that would arise out of rivalries and confusion of roles (Malinowski), or the requirement to ‘trade’ and interact with the larger group represented by society (Tylor, Lévi-Strauss), or the need to repress universal incestuous desires that would be destructive to family and society if allowed to flourish (Freud), or through natural selection favouring groups with a genetic tendency to outbreed (the view of sociobiologists), is not immediately germane to this discussion.⁷⁷ Most of the proposed theories probably have some merit, if not necessarily for the

⁷⁵ Athen. 549e; 550a-b (Gulick translation 1955).

⁷⁶ Whitehorne (1994) 123; 109 (my emphasis).

⁷⁷ Discussions of various theories on the incest prohibition: Fox (1967) 56-63; Bagley (1969); Bischof (1972, 1975); Schneider (1976); Cohen (1978); van den

Berghe (1980, 1983); Ember and Ember (1983) 65-108; Shepher (1983); Willner (1983); Arens (1986) 25-101; Spain (1987); Leavitt (1989); Durham (1991) 316-18; Walter (2000); Wolf and Durham (2005).

genesis of the incest prohibition, then at least for its functional benefits, and hence its continuance. The mere existence of the taboo itself is significant when it comes to discussing royal incest, as we shall see. But what about the implicit complement to the explicit taboo: what of the apparent instinctual human aversion to committing incest?

The prevailing reasons for royal incest are unlikely to have anything to do with genuine sexual desire, but most of these marriages must have entailed at least some sexual activity, enough to produce an heir. In the late 1800s, however, the sociologist Edward Westermarck first proposed the view that incest came to be more or less universally taboo largely because people raised in very close proximity to one another in early life are naturally indifferent to each other sexually once they reach puberty:

Generally speaking, there is a remarkable absence of erotic feelings between persons living very closely together from childhood. Nay more, in this, as in many other cases, sexual indifference is combined with the positive feeling of aversion when the act is thought of. This I take to be the fundamental cause of the exogamous prohibitions.⁷⁸

This notion was ridiculed by Freud and his followers, who had a stake in claiming that people desired incest rather than were repelled by it, but it has gained a great deal more ground in recent decades, through studies not only of certain human groups, but also of animal behaviours.⁷⁹ It does indeed seem as though most human beings – and a large cross-section of the animal kingdom when not in captivity or otherwise interfered with – simply do not desire incestuous mating. This is so regardless of the presence of a moral prohibition, though the explicit prohibition may of course reinforce the aversion.

The so-called ‘Westermarck effect’ might therefore seem to be one of the inhibitors to royal incest, not so much because of any moral issues or religious concerns springing from the existence of a taboo, but rather because it presents a barrier in the form of potential sexual dysfunction owing to a simple lack of interest. To this problem there are two responses. One is that royal marriage is not – and never has been – primarily sexual. Royals, kin or not, who are sexually uninterested in one another have always managed, in one way or another, for the purposes of getting an heir. Once Ptolemy IV successfully fathered a son on his sister, he was free to pursue affairs more to his taste. The other response is that the Westermarck effect arguably only operates among children raised in truly close proximity to one another from a tender age, and it is questionable just how intimate the infants of a large royal household are with one another.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, although I would argue that the problem of the Westermarck effect is in fact largely irrelevant when it comes to royal incest, it does raise another issue of interest here. It has been pointed out that familial incest and the patterns that give rise to it should also be linked to familial strife.⁸¹ The link between sexuality and aggression is one that has long been recognized. The Westermarck hypothesis is implicitly based on the notion that aversion to incest develops among individuals who experience feelings of familial amity and security with one another. Conversely, it may be that in families where strife, aggression and conflict are the norm, sexual

⁷⁸ Westermarck 2 (1925) 192-3.

⁷⁹ See Aberle *et al.* (1963) (rejecting the Westermarck hypothesis, but presenting ethnological data that tends to support it); Bischof (1972, 1975); Cohen (1978); Fox (1980) 29-48, 83-107; Murray and Smith (1983); Shepher (1983) 51-67; Burling (1985); Kitcher (1985) 273-4; Arens (1986) 61-101; Blouin and Blouin (1988); Pusey (1990); Durham (1991) 309-15; Bevc and Silverman (1993, 2000); Wolf (1993, 1995); Scheidel (1996a) 39-44; Pillay (1999); Schneider and Hendrix

(2000); Griffin *et al.* (2003); Lieberman *et al.* (2003); Walter and Buyske (2003); Weisfeld *et al.* (2003); Wolf and Durham (2005). Efforts to integrate Freud and Westermarck: Fox (1962, 1980); Spain (1987).

⁸⁰ Fox (1980) 48; Bixler (1982a) 267; Shepher (1983) 61, 131; Arens (1986) 109; Wolf (1993) 160-1; Mitterauer (1994) 246.

⁸¹ Roscoe (1994); see also Erickson (1989, 1993) and Hardy (2001).

feelings may also arise. We may recall the mythic and symbolic link between incest, cannibalism and familial murder discussed at the beginning of this article. Roscoe interprets these long-standing cultural symbols in a bio-psychological light: 'sexual and aggressive behaviours may be linked at some physiological or neurophysiological level'.⁸² In other words, it may not be too much to suggest, at least for some of the Ptolemies and Kleopatras, that the same psychological mechanisms that led them to murder one another may also have allowed them to embrace one another.

One final word on anthropological theory about the incest prohibition before we proceed to examine reasons why the Ptolemies would have breached it. Reference was made earlier to the notion that incest taboos arose because *not* to have them would result in an intolerable confusion of the order on which the family and society are based: roles, relationships, age distinctions, appropriate emotional affect, all would be scrambled and the result would be chaos. Oedipus' ultimate cry of despair articulates that sense of inappropriate role behaviours: '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'.⁸³

This view, that the incest prohibition arose to combat familial confusion, has come under attack. Fox calls it 'really too silly to dwell on', and Melvin and Carol Ember express scepticism that *sibling* marriage in a royal house, at any rate, should be 'disruptive of family unity' or create confusion.⁸⁴ It is true that royal incest has many qualities that set it apart, and true also that the brother-sister relationship specifically is often seen as naturally analogous to the husband-wife relationship. It is important to keep in mind, however, in an evaluation of Ptolemaic incest, that sibling incest was not the only form practised by this family, and that some of the patterns of incest pursued were indeed confusing and disorderly, confounding relationships and disrupting family unity hideously. The most egregious example of course is that of Ptolemy VIII and his marriage to mother and daughter. This triangular relationship in and of itself would probably have created no little trouble, even if the personalities of the individuals involved had not been as intense as they were.⁸⁵

ROYAL INCEST: PRAGMATISM OR SYMBOLISM?

The examination of potential barriers to success in the previous section suggests that despite all the drawbacks the Ptolemies may have found incest and inbreeding a supportable and viable method of dynastic propagation. Still, supportable is not the same as desirable. Why should they have adopted this pattern in the first place, and adhered to it so stubbornly? The short answer is that the phenomenon of incestuous marriage in the Ptolemaic house is something that is likely to have had complex causation, and theories which seek explanations in a single cause are likely to be flawed. We saw above that the reasons for the origin of the incest taboo might 'not be the same as the reasons for its persistence'.⁸⁶ Likewise, the reasons for the original adoption of incest among the Ptolemies might not be the same as the reasons underlying their continuation of the practice. We need to examine the marriage of Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II in order to discuss 'genesis'; but 'persistence' can only be understood by looking at the dynasty as a whole.⁸⁷

⁸² Roscoe (1994) 55; see also Hooper (1976); Labby (1976); Arens (1979) 148-9.

⁸³ Soph. *OT* 1184-5.

⁸⁴ Fox (1967) 57; Ember and Ember (1983) 70. See also Arens (1986) 48-60 for discussion and criticism.

⁸⁵ This ménage would have been doubly incestuous, not just because of Ptolemy VIII's blood relationship to both his wives, but because of the women's own blood relationship with one another (see Héritier-Augé (1994/5)

and Héritier (1999) for discussion of this 'incest of the second type'). The Bible prescribes burning alive for all three participants in such a liaison (*Lev* 18.17 and 20.14; Ziskind (1988)).

⁸⁶ Fox (1967) 56.

⁸⁷ Carney (1987), who makes many good points, may put too much emphasis on the early days and the marriage of the Philadelphoi.

Some of the motivations, or rationales, might well have become apparent to the Ptolemies themselves only after the fact, if at all. While political pragmatism may have had a role to play, it is my view that there were symbolic reasons underpinning the whole practice, and these may never have reached the point of conscious apprehension.

Enough has already been said to rule out any notion that these marriages were primarily inspired by love or sexual attraction. Affection may have played a part in some of them – possibly the marriage between Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II, and perhaps also that between Ptolemy VI and Kleopatra II, in addition to the explicitly attested love in the match of Ptolemy IX and Kleopatra IV – but that it was primarily erotic love of the sort to inspire the union in the first place is doubtful. Carney suggests that Ptolemy II was enough of a ‘sensualist’ that he might ‘actually have been titillated by the idea of an incestuous union with his sister’.⁸⁸ But that he ‘conceived a violent passion’ for her, that he was ‘captive to her charms’,⁸⁹ or that this was primarily a love match may be dismissed, I think. Moreover, Burstein, Carney and Hazzard have already done an adequate job of demolishing the notion that the conniving and strong-willed Arsinoë actually manipulated the weak-willed Ptolemy into marrying her.⁹⁰

Motivation for that first incestuous marriage between the Philadelphoi has been found in the ‘Egyptian angle’: that Ptolemy Philadelphos and his sister were trying to emulate the native Pharaohs of Egypt, who were known to practise endogamous marriage.⁹¹ This notion is often criticized on the grounds that the early Ptolemies took little or no heed of what the Egyptians thought of them,⁹² and on the further grounds that the amount of incestuous marrying that actually went on in the Pharaonic dynasties has been greatly exaggerated in the popular mind.⁹³ Nevertheless, we cannot deny that there is something to this argument when we consider that the Greeks themselves were clearly convinced that Egyptians, whether royal or common, married their siblings.⁹⁴ The early Ptolemies were moreover not so dismissive of the desirability of disarming the Egyptians as was once claimed – the marriage of the Philadelphoi itself should be allowed to play its proper part in the evidence for early Ptolemaic concern for Egyptian opinion.⁹⁵ Still, despite its significance, the Egyptian angle does not provide the only answer. In a sense, it only begs the question: after all, why should the *Pharaohs* have practised incestuous marriage (even to the limited extent that they did)?⁹⁶

Another partial answer, and one perhaps also connected to the Ptolemaic interaction with their Egyptian subjects, is suggested by the passage of Theokritos cited above. Full sibling marriage is the prerogative of the gods – the Greek gods Zeus and Hera, as well as the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris – and to behave like the gods is to assimilate oneself to them.⁹⁷ The Zeus and Hera association is the one made explicit by Theokritos, whose work was certainly intended for the Greek audience that might be thought to balk at the marriage.⁹⁸ Yet the Isis-Osiris connection

⁸⁸ Carney (1987) 425; cf. Green (1990) 145.

⁸⁹ Chamoux (2003) 72.

⁹⁰ Burstein (1982); Carney (1987); Hazzard (2000) 81-100 (for criticism see Huß (2001) 306).

⁹¹ Macurdy (1932) 118; Hombert and Préaux (1949); Burstein (1982); Turner (1984) 137-8; Ogden (1999) 77-8.

⁹² E.g. Carney (1987) 432; Hazzard (2000) 86.

⁹³ Černý (1954); Middleton (1962); Bonhême and Forgeau (1988) 319; Robins (1993) 26-7.

⁹⁴ Diod. 1.27.1; Paus. 1.7.1; Memnon, *FGrHist* 434 F1 (8); see also Philo, *De spec. leg.* 3.4.23, and *Lev.* 18.3, passages which demonstrate that the Greeks were not the only people in antiquity to hold this view of the Egyptians.

⁹⁵ Interaction of Greek and Egyptian cultural influence from an early period on the construction of Ptolemaic

royal ideology: Dunand (1973) 33-40; Thompson (1973) 120; Kyrieleis (1975) 163; Winter (1978); Quaegebeur (1978, 1988); Koenen (1983, 1993); Peremans (1987); Samuel (1993); Huß (1994b) 51, 181; Reed (2000); Ashton (2001); Hölbl (2001) 307-9; Stanwick (2002); Stephens (2003).

⁹⁶ Furthermore, sibling marriage appears also in the Seleukid dynasty, which was certainly not imitating the Pharaohs (though it may have been imitating the Achaemenids or Hekatomnids; Ogden (1999) 125-6).

⁹⁷ See Cerfaux and Tondriau (1957) 208-13; Grant (1972) 26-7; Thompson (1973); Griffiths (1980) 194-207; Hauben (1989); Hölbl (2001) 111-12.

⁹⁸ See also Plut. *Mor.* 736e-f; Kallimachos, *SH* 254. Hazzard (2000) 89 thinks the assimilation to Zeus and Hera was the *only* reason for the marriage of the Philadelphoi.

cannot be ignored; indeed, Stephens argues that it is the association with Isis and Osiris that is the more significant.⁹⁹ It is true that the living Pharaoh was assimilated to Horus, the son of the divine pair, rather than to Osiris himself (who was identified with the deceased Pharaoh), but the association with the gods, even with specific gods, provided by the royal incest was not based purely on a mechanical one-to-one correspondence. It was achieved through suggestion, approximation, association and evocation, not merely through identification. Moreover, there were ways other than incestuous marriages in which the Ptolemies definitely evoked Osiris; and Arsinoë II, perhaps more than any other Ptolemaic queen until Kleopatra VII, was associated with Isis in a variety of ways.¹⁰⁰ The first official written documentation we have of a Ptolemaic queen actually being identified with Isis while still living was Kleopatra III, in 131 BC, during the civil war between her husband and her mother.¹⁰¹ Perhaps Ptolemy VIII, who approved this unprecedented honour for his *niece*-wife, was deliberately and openly denying that his quondam *sister*-wife had any claim to be associated or identified with Isis. It is tempting too to wonder if, in sending his sister the murdered and dismembered body of her son, he was challenging any such claim that she might put forth by making a cruel mockery of the goddess' mythic role in reconstituting her murdered and dismembered brother-spouse.

Linked to the religious rationale just discussed, though more general in its application, is the notion of the singularity and integrity of the dynasty. Royalty lives in a 'gilded cage', after all, and animals which normally choose unrelated mates will inbreed when in captivity.¹⁰² Whether grounded in the conviction that royalty is divine or simply in the belief that royal blood itself has special qualities, endogamy keeps the strain uncorrupted.¹⁰³ One might question whether at the early stage of their monarchy the Ptolemies would truly have thought of themselves in that way, particularly as the extreme endogamy represented by incest was not yet the rule in the third century (not until the very end of that century was there a king born of sibling incest). Still, as time passed, this may have been a factor. Such convictions (real or affected) about the peerless and unapproachable quality of one's own dynastic blood might have become a barrier not only to mating with commoners, but even to mating with other royalty.¹⁰⁴

Pierre van den Berghe and Gene Mesher contend that 'royal incest is best explained in terms of the general sociobiological paradigm of inclusive fitness'.¹⁰⁵ By eschewing marriage not only with commoners but also with unrelated royals, and by pursuing a sibling marital strategy, Ptolemaic rulers would have increasingly concentrated their own genetic material, generation by generation, eventually creating a situation where the king would come close to 'cloning' himself. And from the point of view of female members of the dynasty, an incestuous marriage with the king represents 'the ultimate logical outcome of hypergyny'.¹⁰⁶ Hypergyny is the marital strategy whereby females seek to 'marry up'. The sister of the king, therefore, would have to marry the king; otherwise, 'What is a poor princess to do? She has almost no way to go but down.'¹⁰⁷

Sociobiological explanations have attracted considerable criticism, and the genetic arguments presented by van den Berghe and Mesher are in some ways simply a restatement in other terms

⁹⁹ Stephens (2003) 147-69 on Theokritos, *Idyll* 17. See also Dunand (1973) 34-5.

¹⁰⁰ On Ptolemaic queens' (especially Arsinoë II's) association with Isis (and Aphrodite, equated with Isis), see Tondriau (1948b); Fraser 1 (1972) 197-8, 237-44; Dunand (1973) 80-92; Thompson (1973) 121; Quaegebeur (1978, 1988); van Nuffelen (1998/9); Ashton (2001).

¹⁰¹ Fraser 1 (1972) 240, 244; Thompson (1973) 121 n.5; Dunand (1973) 41.

¹⁰² See, e.g., Pusey 1990.

¹⁰³ See Grant (1972) 26; Heinen (1978); Mitterauer (1994); Chamoux (2003) 223.

¹⁰⁴ Whitehome (1994) 91.

¹⁰⁵ Van den Berghe and Mesher (1980) 300.

¹⁰⁶ Van den Berghe and Mesher (1980) 303.

¹⁰⁷ Van den Berghe (1983) 100; see also Shepher (1983) 130; Arens (1986) 110; Herrenschmidt (1994). It is interesting to note that female gorillas eschew hypergyny if it means sibling incest; if the dominant male of the group is a full brother, 'she will seek an even less dominant male who is not a sibling' (Arens (1986) 91).

of the ‘purity of blood’ issue.¹⁰⁸ It is clear that, while the Ptolemies as time passed favoured reserving a royal sister for marriage to the heir, they did not object to marrying excess females to royalty outside the family: several Ptolemaic women married Seleukids. The idea of hypergyny as a notion driving female marital strategies presumes more choice-power for the female than we can necessarily assume in the Hellenistic world. As several scholars have pointed out, no matter how strong-willed Arsinoë II was, she could not have made Ptolemy II marry her unless the marriage was something that benefited *him*. Nevertheless, while it cannot be related to a female ‘strategy’ of hypergyny, the increasing significance of the Ptolemaic woman over time is clear in marriages such as Kleopatra II and Ptolemy VIII, or Kleopatra Berenike and Ptolemy XI. These marriages, to an exiled or absent heir, bolstered the shaky legitimacy of the male’s claim to the throne.

Marital isolationism could also have its roots in simple political pragmatism. Barriers against marriage alliance with (for instance) their Seleukid neighbours operated only when the Ptolemies felt it would be to their advantage (or when the Egyptian dynasty was too weak to resist such marriages). The Ptolemies did from time to time take part in their share of inter-dynastic marriage. Over the centuries, several Ptolemaic women were married out to Seleukids: Ptolemy II’s ill-fated daughter Berenike in the third century, and several Kleopatras in the later second. But inter-dynastic marriage, while it may be used to cement a political alliance, also has its downside. When Antiochos III married his daughter Kleopatra to Ptolemy V, he was said to have done so in a deliberate effort to undermine and overthrow the Ptolemaic kingdom.¹⁰⁹ This was an exogamous marriage forced on the Ptolemaic family at a time of political and military weakness, and it later gave Antiochos IV an excuse to intervene in Egypt in the Sixth Syrian War. Marrying within their own dynasty when it suited them was therefore one way the Ptolemies had of keeping themselves free of such awkward entanglements.¹¹⁰ Carney argues that political isolationism was thus at least one of Ptolemy II’s rationales for marrying his sister.¹¹¹ But Ptolemy II did not have to marry at all, and should not have felt obliged to marry his own sister in response to isolationist factors. After all, his heirs came from Arsinoë I, and after Arsinoë II’s death, he remained unmarried until his own death over two decades later.

An incident during Ptolemy XII Auletes’ endless, and seemingly hopeless, efforts to get the Romans to recognize his claims to the throne highlights another potential reason for incestuous marriage. In 75 BC, his aunt, Kleopatra Selene, vigorously argued that her sons by the Seleukid Antiochos X had a superior claim to the throne of Egypt, a claim that was obviously only valid through the female line, through Kleopatra Selene herself.¹¹² It was certainly awkward for Auletes that in this instance a Ptolemaic female had been outbreeding, rather than inbreeding. Thus, a further advantage to incestuous marriage, at least from the point of view of the male Ptolemies, was that it controlled the reproductive potential of the female members of the line, and neutralized possible rivals.¹¹³ This seems a motive particularly apt in the case of Ptolemy VIII, who impregnated Kleopatra III, perhaps forcibly, in spite of the fact that he already had a son and potential heir from her mother. Binding his niece to himself prevented her from

¹⁰⁸ For criticism of the sociobiological approach to royal incest, see Kitcher (1985), especially 275-9 (against Kitcher, see Sesardic (1998) and Leavitt (1990); against Leavitt, see Moore (1992)). It is difficult to see how any of the sociobiological notions about dynasties seeking *genetic* fitness and survival could ever have been consciously determined.

¹⁰⁹ Jerome, *in Dan.* 11.17.

¹¹⁰ See Carney (1987) 434-5, 436.

¹¹¹ Carney (1987) 434-5; see also Vatin (1970) 60 (Vatin also argues that Rome – which did not like inter-dynastic marriages – would have influenced the Ptolemies

in this regard, but the Roman attitude could scarcely have had any impact on a pre-existing custom). Cf. also Shaw (1992), who connects incestuous marriage practices among both the Ptolemies and commoners to a colonialist frame of mind barring the Greek minority from mingling with the Egyptian majority. But there were other choices available to the Ptolemies if they chose not to marry Egyptians.

¹¹² Cic. *Ver.* 2.4.61.

¹¹³ Carney (1987) 434; see also Arens (1986) 115-16; Huß (2001) 309.

breeding rivals elsewhere. The abolition of rival lines, and the consolidation of the royal family around the person of the ruler was, in Burstein's view, the primary reason for Ptolemy II's marriage to his sister.¹¹⁴ One might be tempted to speculate that Arsinoë, who had already married one half-brother (Keraunos), might have suggested that she would be prepared to marry another (Magas of Cyrene, the thorn in Ptolemy II's western side), if her full brother did not offer her the greater prize of Egypt.¹¹⁵

The fact that several Ptolemaic princesses did indeed 'marry out' should caution us against too great a reliance on the motive of controlling their production of offspring as the sole or primary cause of Ptolemaic incest. Ogden offers still another perspective. He argues that sister-marriage came to be the preferred union for production of a legitimate heir:

Unfortunately, the highly endogamous nature of these now specially 'legitimate' unions meant that they became virtually infertile, with the paradoxical result that only those non-endogamous children now successfully differentiated and defined as 'bastard' survived long enough to be able to succeed to the throne. ... Philadelphus' precedent ... was to be so successful that virtually all subsequent Ptolemaic marriages were to be to sisters, and there were overriding reasons for those that were not.¹¹⁶

While the scenario painted by Ogden was indeed on occasion the case, the statement is too sweeping, and can be refuted by various examples from the three-hundred-year span of Ptolemaic history. Sister-marriage was not the only incestuous pattern pursued by the Ptolemies; though it may well have been the preferred pattern, there is no indication that marriage to a niece (for example) was considered somehow to be a lower status union.

Whether or not the various reasons suggested here applied equally to each of the Ptolemaic unions, pragmatic rationales for dynastic incest would still have been conscious ones. Even notions about purity of blood or assimilation to the gods are likely to have been deliberately formulated. Certain symbolic motivations, on the other hand, may have remained below the threshold of conscious recognition. It is often stated, erroneously, that the incest 'taboo' is universal, and that cases of royal incest represent a 'breaking' of that taboo. But such an interpretation is not quite accurate to the original meaning of the word. 'Taboo' means '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; inviolable, sacred', as well as 'forbidden; unlawful'.¹¹⁷ Ptolemaic kings did not 'break' a taboo by marrying their sisters. It would be better to say that they fulfilled a taboo and gave it meaning by crossing a boundary that is barred to ordinary people. In so doing they demonstrated that they were *extra*-ordinary. This extraordinariness is about more than a simple assimilation of royalty to specific gods. It is about power, and about subconscious and perhaps universal human instincts that there is something 'numinous' about those who transgress such boundaries. If a taboo is a thing that is 'set apart', then the Ptolemies by their actions *became* 'taboo'¹¹⁸ – truly set apart, unreachable by ordinary humans, and not to be judged by ordinary standards of human behaviour.

Incest is often linked with notions of chaos and disorder. We saw above that the Chinese and Indonesian terms for it emphasize concepts of disorder and disharmony. The later Greek compound *haimomixia* also has implications of undifferentiated mixing and mingling. When the incest taboo is breached by a member of the community, it is as though a door has opened into the world of chaos – unnatural births and natural disasters may be inflicted on the community as

¹¹⁴ Burstein (1982). Also agreeing that dynastic solidarity was a particular motive for Ptolemy II: Turner (1984) 138-9; Walbank (1984) 67; Carney (1987); Whitehorne (1994) 91. For criticism, see Hazzard (2000) 87-9.

¹¹⁵ Will I (1979) 149 suggests a connection between Magas' revolt and the marriage of Ptolemy II and

Arsinoë II, though he acknowledges he cannot determine cause and effect.

¹¹⁶ Ogden (1999) 67, 80.

¹¹⁷ *OED* (2nd edn). See also Arens (1986) 6-7.

¹¹⁸ See Bischof (1972) 28.

a whole¹¹⁹ The (soon-to-be) incestuous Oedipus confronts such a manifestation of chaotic disorder in the monstrous Sphinx – woman, lion and bird. To step out of the area of folk belief and into that of scientific investigation for a moment, anthropologists too have associated incest with disorder: ‘complete social chaos ... the upsetting of age distinctions, the mixing up of generations, the disorganization of sentiments, and a violent exchange of roles’.¹²⁰

Breaching the boundary between civilization and the chaotic forces of disorder, however, is not without its compensations, provided such a breach is enacted by the approved individual(s). Incest appears to unlock power, particularly creative power. Numerous creation myths emphasize the power of sexuality, especially incestuous sexuality, to create order out of chaos. In Greek myth the mating of Gaia with her son Ouranos is instrumental in the creation and ordering of the world; in Zoroastrian belief, Ohrmazd joins with his daughter Spendarmat (the earth) to further the task of creation;¹²¹ in the Bible, Lot and his daughters repeople the race after the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah;¹²² and the creation beliefs of many cultures feature ‘the representation of brother and sister as a symbolically parental couple in descent ideology’.¹²³ Rudhardt emphasizes the transformative power of incest in Greek mythology in particular, where many tales featuring incest result in a metamorphosis. Myrrha, for example, after seducing her father Kinyras, flees from his anger and is transformed into a tree from which is born the infant Adonis. Although both Myrrha and Kinyras are human, the offspring of their incest achieves a divine status, though Adonis remains a liminal deity, enduring an endless cycle of death and rebirth (and like other gods of this type, able to extend his power of resurrection to his human worshippers).¹²⁴

Royal incest should be seen in the light of this powerfully creative incest of the cultural imagination. Royalty too is a liminal state, at the boundaries of society, and perhaps at the borders between human and divine. By committing incest, by stepping beyond those bounds, royalty evokes that creative power. Mary Douglas points out that those in a transformative state – for instance, those undergoing a rite of passage – bring back with them from the liminal and disordered places to which they go, beyond the margins of the community, a power to recreate order.¹²⁵ By indulging in an act representative of chaos, royalty may deliberately provoke and flirt with disaster, only to overcome it and restore the order necessary for the continuance of society. In effect, royal incest fights fire with fire, or rather, chaos with chaos.

Seen in such a light, royal incest ‘draws attention to actors engaged in cultural performance rather than reproductive strategy’.¹²⁶ William Arens has argued that incest, particularly royal incest, is primarily a symbol of power, rather than a means to attain heirs of ‘pure’ blood.¹²⁷ Speaking of the African Shilluk and their king, who is considered to be divine, he says, ‘The theme of incest plays a major part in the deification procedure, 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

¹¹⁹ See Seligman (1950) 308; Fox (1980) 6; Reynolds and Tanner (1995) 170.

¹²⁰ Malinowski (1927) 251. The term ‘chaotic’ is also used (not unnaturally) by sociologists and clinicians to describe not only family circumstances which are conducive to incestuous sexual abuse (see Rudd and Herzberger (1999); Bourcet *et al.* (2000)), but also the internal mental state of incestuous abuse victims (Brown (1993) 32-3).

¹²¹ See Herrenschmidt (1994), who connects Zoroastrian *xwētōdas* (incestuous marriage) with creation myth. This type of marriage was considered a religious duty; it evoked the ancient creation, and assured the continued survival of the world (Mitterauer (1994)).

¹²² *Genesis* 19.30-8; see Arens (1986) 120.

¹²³ Moore (1964) 1309 (based on a survey of 42 peoples, including the Greeks). See also Durham (1991) 346-7 on the connections between incest, creation myths and culture heroes; Davenport (1994) 15, 36-7.

¹²⁴ Rudhardt (1982) 745-6, 762-3.

¹²⁵ Douglas (1966) 94-104; see also Turner (1967); Endsjø (2000).

¹²⁶ Arens (1986) 122.

¹²⁷ Arens’ arguments linking incest with power are compelling, though both Arens and Bixler (1982a, b) are too insistent in denying the link between royal incest and royal reproduction, at least insofar as it applies to the Ptolemies; as noted above, almost all Ptolemaic incestuous marriages resulted in offspring.

and creation.¹²⁸ Luc de Heusch, in his discussion of royal incest among certain African cultures, argues that the incest is bound up with the sacralization of the new king and the new order which he establishes.¹²⁹ Oedipus' incest too was inextricably bound up with and emblematic of his ascent to the throne. The power unlocked by royal incest is not merely a demonstration of personal potency, a potency which, if exercised selfishly, would be no more than tyranny. It is (or should 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.'¹³⁰

To bring this discussion back to the Ptolemies, it is important to note the well-established cosmic role of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Pharaoh is not only a ruler on earth who hears petitions from and renders judgements for his human subjects, he is also the defender of cosmic order against cosmic chaos. As part of his battle against chaos and destruction, the new Pharaoh is seen as the avenger of his father, the dead Pharaoh; on the divine plane, the new Pharaoh is the god Horus, avenging the death of his father Osiris at the hands of Set.¹³¹ He replays the cosmic drama of the gods and their creation of the world, a creation threatened by chaos with the death of each Pharaoh, a creation whose order is restored by the power of each new Pharaoh.¹³² The king is responsible for Maät, for cosmic order and justice.¹³³ In assuming the role of Pharaoh, the Ptolemaic rulers would also, at least in Egyptian eyes, have borne this crucial cosmic responsibility. Clearly these cosmic roles did not *necessitate* royal incest, either for the Pharaohs or for the Ptolemies. If they had, we would have expected the Pharaohs in particular to have been much more rigorous about pursuing incestuous marriages than they appear to have been. Nevertheless, the symbolic power inherent in incest would certainly resonate with these roles. The pairing of male and female is by definition a creative one, and the symbolic creative power of incest may be one factor in the unusually prominent role played by Ptolemaic women in comparison with other Hellenistic dynasties.

The symbolic link between incest and power may not always have been a conscious one: 'the participants [are not] necessarily aware of this cultural intent or message'.¹³⁴ But there is another symbol – a fundamentally Ptolemaic one – which may be connected with incest, and this is a link which may well have been forged deliberately and consciously by the Ptolemies themselves.

LUXURY, DECADENCE AND PREJUDICE

'Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damnèd incest'
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5)

We have seen that the Greeks linked incestuous behaviour with other behaviours implying a lack of restraint in general, especially in the area of overindulgence in food. Ptolemy VIII is the supreme example of excessive and illicit indulgence in the areas both of sex and of food. He is also the Ptolemy most reviled in the literature, whether ancient or modern. To Mahaffy, he was 'a monster steeped in murder and incest'; to Grace Macurdy, a 'mountain of corrupt and sinful flesh', a sort of Hellenistic Jabba the Hutt.¹³⁵ Incest has become the clearly marked signpost of a more generalized decadence, and the effects of incest – inbreeding – have provided to more scientifically minded contemporary scholars a convenient answer to the putative degeneration of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

¹²⁸ Arens (1986) 123.

¹²⁹ De Heusch (1958).

¹³⁰ Arens (1986) 129.

¹³¹ Koenen (1983, 1993); Bonhême and Forgeau (1988) 63-70.

¹³² See Winter (1978); Heinen (1978); Bonhême and Forgeau (1988) 110-20; Koenen (1983, 1993). De Heusch

argued that the African cultures which practised royal incest adopted it because of diffusion from Pharaonic Egypt.

¹³³ Quaegebeur (1978) 246; Bonhême and Forgeau (1988) 132.

¹³⁴ Arens (1986) 148.

¹³⁵ Mahaffy (1895) 377; Macurdy (1932) 155.

The revilement of Ptolemy VIII and other members of his family in the ancient sources, however, is on the whole far less linked to the notion of incest specifically than to the notion of their luxurious decadence, their *truphê*, the very opposite of that cardinal virtue of *sôphrosunê*. That pampered lifestyle of luxury, soft living, gourmandizing, intoxication, displays of wealth and lack of self-control in general contrasted sharply both with Greek notions of *sôphrosunê* and with Roman ideals of stern Catonic *simplicitas*. That contrast appears nowhere more clearly than in the tale of Scipio's visit to Alexandria, an occasion marked by a walkabout by the Romans and their host, Ptolemy VIII Euergetes:

Scipio [Aemilianus] Africanus and his fellow ambassadors came to Alexandria to survey the entire kingdom. Ptolemy welcomed the men with a great reception and much pomp, held costly banquets for them, and conducting them about showed them his palace and other royal treasures. Now the Roman envoys were men of superior virtue, and since their normal diet was limited to a few dishes, and only such as were conducive to health, they were scornful of his extravagance as detrimental to both body and mind. ... [The envoys] apprehended that a very great power could be built [in Egypt], if this kingdom should ever find rulers worthy of it.¹³⁶

The king could hardly keep up with them in walking because of his inactive life and his pampering of his body, and Scipio whispered softly to Panaetius, 'Already the Alexandrians have received some benefit from our visit. For it is owing to us that they have seen their king walk.'¹³⁷

As Heinen has pointed out, it is unthinkable that Ptolemy VIII would have intended to cut such a poor figure in front of his arrogant Roman guests.¹³⁸ Euergetes was merely the best paradigm of a longstanding dynastic self-presentation, a presentation that deliberately laid emphasis on the wealth, luxury, and magnificence of the ruling family.¹³⁹ To the Ptolemies, *truphê* was a measure of their wealth and power, and was the logical outcome of a dynastic propaganda that emphasized the generosity and beneficence – the *euergetism* – of the monarchy.¹⁴⁰ They deliberately highlighted their luxury and magnificence by taking on the epithets *Tryphon* and *Tryphaina*, and by staging such staggering public displays as the great procession of Ptolemy II, the fantastic Bacchic tesseract of Ptolemy IV, and the unforgettable arrival of Kleopatra VII at Tarsos.¹⁴¹ Emblematic of the liberality of the Ptolemies is the cornucopia, the horn of plenty associated with Ptolemaic queens on coinage and on ritual vases.¹⁴² It was noted earlier that the corpulence of Ptolemy VIII and Ptolemy X, among others, was clearly a lifestyle 'disease'; seen in the context of deliberate propaganda, their well-fleshed persons were one more visible symbol of royal *truphê*. Far from attempting to disguise their obesity, their official portraits enhance and emphasize it.¹⁴³

Aside from the beneficence to one's subjects implicit in the adoption of luxury and magnificence as a dynastic signature, *truphê* is representative of power. The equation between wealth (and its display) and power is easily made, and requires no elaboration. But there is a more subtle connection as well. *Truphê* is the inverse of *sôphrosunê*. Alexander the Great was famous

¹³⁶ Diod. 33.28b.1-3 (Walton translation 1967). Cf. Athen. 549e; Justin 38.8.

¹³⁷ Plut. *Mor.* 200f-201a (Babbitt translation 1931).

¹³⁸ Heinen (1978, 1983); Gehrke (1994).

¹³⁹ *Truphê* as a deliberate tool of Ptolemaic propaganda was first discussed by Tondriau (1948c).

¹⁴⁰ Heinen (1983). On Ptolemaic *truphê*, see also Préaux (1965); Marasco (1979/80) (on Ptolemy IV); Cozzoli (1980); Nenci (1983); Samuel (1993) 184 (who connects to this motif the vast military forces of Ptolemy II (Athen. 203c-d)); Weber (1997) 35; Thompson (2000a); Hölbl (2001) 92, 133, 188, 196; Huß (2001)

469, 675; Chamoux (2003) 245-6.

¹⁴¹ The *pompê* of Ptolemy II: Athen. 196a-203b (quoting Kallixeinos); cf. Philo, *Mos.* 2.29-33. The ship(s) of Ptolemy IV: Plut. *Demetr.* 43; Athen. 203e-206c. Kleopatra's barge at Tarsos: Plut. *Ant.* 26. See Tondriau (1948c); Heinen (1983). Gates (2005) 153 points out that this 'repertory of cultural flamboyance accords well with the shock value of royal incest, though she does not identify the Ptolemies among the cultures practising these 'theater state tactics'.

¹⁴² Thompson (1973); Heinen (1978).

¹⁴³ See above, pp. 13-14 and n.71.

for his *sôphrosunê*, at least in some respects, and his mastery of his own sexual passions was indicative of the ultimate power, power over oneself. Yet others – such as the Ptolemies – might adopt a different stance. *Sôphrosunê* implies restraint; *truphê* results from the lack of all restraint, whether internally generated or externally imposed. If no checks or restraints bind one, then one is omnipotent: no superior power is capable of coercion, and excessive indulgence in things forbidden drives home to all witnesses the absolute quality of one's power. It is in this context that we should see Ptolemaic incest: in the context of a freedom which springs from power and which gives rise to power's expression both in luxurious display and uninhibited sexuality. Indeed, incest – the most unhallowed of sexual delights – is almost demanded by a philosophy determined to exploit and exhibit a power that breaches all limits and recognizes no authority beyond itself. It was Ptolemy II who set the stage for dynastic magnificence and display, just as it was Ptolemy II who inaugurated the custom of sibling marriage. The typically Ptolemaic cornucopia may be read as a visual symbol of both royal *truphê* and royal incest. Again, it was Ptolemy II who introduced the horn of plenty as an iconographic attribute of his sister-wife; and the *double* cornucopia associated with Arsinoë may well have been meant to evoke the pairing of the two Philadelphoi.¹⁴⁴

Truphê and incest also find common ground in the gods of the Ptolemies. Linked to Ptolemaic dedication to the good life is the worship of Dionysos, who is also *Lusios*, the deliverer, the releaser from restraint and inhibition. As early as the reign of Ptolemy I, we can trace a special relationship between the Ptolemies and this god.¹⁴⁵ The great procession of Ptolemy II placed Dionysos front and centre, and emphasized the luxuriance of nature and indulgence in the good things of life.¹⁴⁶ Ptolemy III, in his great boast of eastern conquest, claimed descent from Dionysos and explicitly evoked the god in his Asian campaigns.¹⁴⁷ Ptolemy IV elevated the worship of Dionysos to new heights, and was the first Ptolemy to emulate the god in a lifestyle of abandonment and excess; it is perhaps no coincidence that the stern Polybios also condemned him as the first Ptolemy to set the empire on the course to ruin (5.34). It was not until the twelfth Ptolemy that the king actually identified himself with the god – Auletes proclaimed himself *Neos Dionysos* – but as far back as Ptolemy I we find the king portrayed visually as Dionysos, and all the Ptolemies associated themselves with him to some degree.¹⁴⁸ Rather than associating either of her feckless brother-husbands with Dionysos, Kleopatra VII chose a much more qualified individual for the role: Mark Antony. Upon their grandly stage-managed meeting at Tarsos, 'the

¹⁴⁴ See Heinen (1978); Thompson (1973) 33. Ptolemy II's introduction of the cornucopia: Athen. 497b-c. Cf. also the pairing of Ptolemy II and Arsinoë II on their famous jugate-portrait coinage (Mørkholm (1991) 103-4, cat. 297-8). Brenk (1992) 164 sees the *dikeras* as symbolizing Isis and Serapis/Osiris.

¹⁴⁵ Tondriau (1950); Cerfaux and Tondriau (1957) 215.

¹⁴⁶ Athen. 197e-201e. See Fraser I (1972) 194, 202-7; Dunand (1981); Rice (1983) 45-115; Walbank (1996); Thompson (2000b). On Dionysos and his link with Ptolemaic *truphê* in general, see also Tondriau (1946, 1948c, 1950, 1952); Cerfaux and Tondriau (1957) 192-3, 206, 207; Heinen (1978, 1983); Dunand (1986); Hauben (1989); van Nuffelen (1998/9).

¹⁴⁷ *OGI* 54 (the Adoulis inscription).

¹⁴⁸ Portrait of Ptolemy I as Dionysos: Heinen (1978). On association of individual Ptolemies with Dionysos, see Tondriau (1948a); (1952) 457-61. For other iconographic associations with Dionysos in Ptolemaic portraiture, see Lunsingh Scheurleer (1978); Heinen (1978);

Queyrel (1984, 1985); Sullivan (1990) 230. The long robe worn by Ptolemy VIII, which Athenaios terms a *chitoniskos* (549e, cited above), was probably a deliberate affectation of Dionysiac dress (Heinen (1978, 1983)), or perhaps even an approximation of Pharaonic dress (Bevan (1968 [1927]) 308 n.1). Whitehorne (1994) 108 and Ogden (1999) 98 make much of Athenaios' use of the diminutive term, and argue that for a 'little tunic' to reach the ground, Ptolemy VIII must have been short 'to the point of dwarfism' (Whitehorne). It is true that Justin says Ptolemy VIII was short, but given that Ptolemy's official garb must always have been selected with a view to the message the king wanted to send, it is impossible that he would have tolerated a garment that did not fit. It seems more likely that the term, if it was really used by Athenaios' Stoic source, might have been used in a derisory fashion ('the king's little frock'). The *chitoniskos* remark is very flimsy testimony to take as evidence of an inbreeding depression that imposed dwarfish stature on Ptolemy VIII (especially when we consider that he was not as inbred as some members of the family).

word went out to all that Aphrodite was making merry with Dionysos for the good of Asia'.¹⁴⁹ With the return to Alexandria, Kleopatra and Antony pursued the Dionysiac lifestyle with intensity and abandon, cultivating a group of associates-in-indulgence known as the *Amimetobioi*, the 'Inimitable Livers'.¹⁵⁰

Dionysos of course is Egyptian Osiris, and Ptolemaic queens, as we saw above, were associated habitually with Isis as well as with Aphrodite.¹⁵¹ In an Egyptian context, then, the god of *truphê* is a god of incest. If Dionysos is the divine poster-child for luxury, bounty and magnificence, his Egyptian avatar Osiris is the embodiment of sibling love, the power of that love, and its association with the royal throne.¹⁵² The sister-spouse of Osiris, Isis, *is* the throne – that is the meaning of her name – and it is she who collects the dismembered body of her brother-spouse and (at least partially) restores life to it.¹⁵³ Incestuous love here, as in other myths and tales of creation, has a creative, transformative power, and can restore life to the dead. In mainstream Greek myth, Dionysos is not primarily associated with incest, though he does inspire sexual licence (and can provoke his enemies to doom themselves by acts of forbidden sexuality).¹⁵⁴ In Orphic myth, however, Dionysos is both the child of incest and the victim of cannibalism.¹⁵⁵ He is the son of Zeus and Zeus's daughter Persephone, and, like Osiris, he undergoes a *sparagmos* – torn limb from limb, he is devoured by the Titans. We have seen how incest and cannibalism are often associated, and how both are representative of borderline states, of the breach of limits, and the power that may be brought back by those who pass beyond those limits. Both Osiris and Dionysos are liminal deities who pass the ultimate boundary of death, and return, bringing power back with them.¹⁵⁶

Incest and *truphê* were thus twin pillars of the Ptolemaic royal programme, though whether all the symbolic values of both were explicitly understood by the Ptolemies themselves is irrecoverable. In any case, it is certainly not to be supposed that the pioneering Ptolemy II ever tried to *downplay* the incestuous marriage to his sister, any more than he or any of his successors would have tried to downplay their display of magnificence.¹⁵⁷ Both incest and *truphê* would lose all their symbolic value if the spotlight of public attention was not focused on them. Sarah Pomeroy has queried why Arsinoë Philadelphos would have drawn attention to her own 'highly questionable' marriage through her patronage of marriage in the festival of Aphrodite and Adonis; the answer surely is that attention is precisely what she and her brother wanted. Other scholars too have I think been misguided in interpreting royal actions in the light of an assumption that Ptolemy II wanted to mitigate the impact of the marriage. Fraser thinks that the

¹⁴⁹ Plut. *Ant.* 26. See Dunand (1973) 42-3. On Kleopatra and Antony as Isis and Osiris, see Brenk (1992).

¹⁵⁰ Plut. *Ant.* 28. Tondriau (1946) argues that this group, typically condemned as mere seekers after sensation, was in fact a Dionysiac *thiasos* typical of the Ptolemaic court. In any case, given the evidently inebriate lifestyle, one would hope they really did have inimitable livers.

¹⁵¹ Equation of Dionysos and Osiris: Hdt. 2.42; Diod. 1.13; Plut. *Mor.* 364e-365f.

¹⁵² Spells in Egyptian love-magic evoked the love of Isis and Osiris; the Trobriand Islanders, who were most horrified by sibling incest, also ascribed the formula for love-magic to a legendary brother-sister incestuous pair ('the most forbidden is the most potent', Fox (1980) 38-9).

¹⁵³ Diod. 1.21; Plut. *Mor.* 357f-358b. See Witt (1997) 37.

¹⁵⁴ Consumption of wine, Dionysos' drink, and the loss of control associated with it can lead to incestuous sex: Hyg. *Fab.* 132; Athen. 444c-d; see Nencini (1997);

Clarysse (2001). It is worth mentioning in passing that Dionysos is a first cousin (several times removed) of Oedipus.

¹⁵⁵ On the Alexandrian association of Dionysos both with Osiris and with Orphic elements, see Cerfaux and Tondriau (1957) 214; Fraser 1 (1972) 194, 202-7; Rice (1983) 80-1.

¹⁵⁶ See Rudhardt (1982), who also points to Persephone and Adonis as deities who are the offspring of incest and who have a special power over death. Arsinoë II appears to have been particularly instrumental in fostering the cult of Adonis at Alexandria (Theokritos, *Idyll* 15; Cerfaux and Tondriau (1957) 216). Reed (2000) 324-34 notes the Ptolemaic tendency to assimilate Adonis and Osiris.

¹⁵⁷ The fact that he adopted his children to his sister, thereby creating in a sense offspring of the incest, would certainly have served to intensify the propaganda (I am grateful to one of the anonymous *JHS* referees for drawing my attention to this point).

epithet ‘Philadelphos’ would have been intended to ‘soften the incestuous nature of the relationship’, by emphasizing fraternal rather than erotic love – and yet such an epithet inevitably draws attention to the incest. Hazzard argues that Arsinoë is absent from Kallixeinos’ account of Philadelphos’ *pompê* in part because Ptolemy did not want to highlight the incest – but if he did not wish to do so, whatever would have prompted him to his marital emulation of Zeus and Hera in the first place (also Hazzard’s argument)? Hauben believes that Philadelphos established a cult of the royal couple, enhancing their divine nature, precisely out of a desire to sublimate the incestuous character of that couple – but as with the epithet, such an action surely accentuates rather than deflects attention.¹⁵⁸ The intense emphasis placed on the figure of Arsinoë II from the time of her marriage to her brother, and continuing after her death, an emphasis which has always drawn the attention of scholars, is no doubt a part of this picture.

Incest and *truphê* – those proverbial signs of decadence – were thus deliberate aspects of Ptolemaic propaganda, and were intended to symbolize the power of the dynasty, rather than its degeneracy. But the Ptolemies were walking a fine line, and in the end their choices backfired. *Truphê* and *luxuria*, to Greeks and Romans alike, were the mark of the tyrant. While Ptolemaic displays of bounty and munificence may have found an appreciative audience among many of the dynasty’s followers, this was a prejudice that died very hard, and it is the prejudice which dominates the literary record. Unrestrained luxury and unlimited power, bringing with them a complete (and frequently perverse) sexual licence, were associated with tyranny, whether the unconstitutional rulers of Archaic Greece like Periander or Hippias, or the legitimate but despotic Persian king Xerxes.¹⁵⁹ The sexual *hubris* of tyrants was the negative model of which the Ptolemies attempted to provide a positive inversion, with very mixed success.

The writers of antiquity largely adopted the view of the Roman embassy of Scipio, contemptuous of a lifestyle that pursued pleasure and indulgence beyond all measure and that resulted in such grotesque and unheroic figures as poor Ptolemy VIII. *Truphê* not only enfeebles those individuals who indulge in it, it is also disastrous for entire nations composed of such individuals. Athenaios emphasizes the *anandria* and *malakia* of peoples who abandon themselves to luxury.¹⁶⁰ Polybios was certain that the long decline of the Ptolemaic empire could be laid at the door of Ptolemy IV, who neglected the real business of government and empire for the sake of his own ‘shameful amours and senseless and constant drunkenness’.¹⁶¹

It is among modern historians that we find a more emphatic focus on the incest specifically.¹⁶² It seems that it is modern scholars who have shuddered most (with a kind of horrified glee) at the sexual escapades of the Ptolemaic dynasty. An ancient author such as Josephus, who abominated Kleopatra VII, is more critical of her for being cruel to her little brothers than for marrying them.¹⁶³ For Polybios, the shameful of Ptolemy IV’s sex life lay in his activities outside his sister-wife’s bed rather than those within it. Justin, who loved to revel in the sordid, does not include in the canon of crimes committed by Ptolemy VIII against Kleopatra II the fact that he married her. Even the Christian writer Orosius, writing in the fifth century AD, castigates Ptolemy VIII more for casting his sister aside than for marrying her in the first place.¹⁶⁴ This is

¹⁵⁸ Pomeroy (1984) 36; Fraser I (1972) 217; Hazzard (2000) 67; Hauben (1989).

¹⁵⁹ Herodotos associates all three with perverse sexual acts or desires, including incest (5.92, 6.107, 9.108); cf. Polyb. 6.7, and see Holt (1998); Vernant (2000). On links between tyranny, *truphê* and *hubris*, see Nenci (1983) 1028; Passerini (1934); Tondriau (1948c); Cozzoli (1980); and Fisher (1992) 111-17, 329-42, 350-2.

¹⁶⁰ 514d-515a (and see Book 12 *passim*).

¹⁶¹ 5.34.10 (Paton translation, 1923). Cf. Justin 29.1; 30.1; Porphyry, *FGrHist* 260 F44; Str. 17.1.11.

¹⁶² Note the comments of Morriss (1997) 276-80, who argues that contemporary Anglo-American culture is in fact much less tolerant of the blurring of boundaries (especially sexual ones) than many cultures perceived as less advanced.

¹⁶³ *Ap.* 2.57-8; *AJ* 15.89; *BJ* 1.359-60.

¹⁶⁴ *HAV* 5.10.6. No author speaks ill of the incestuous union of Kleopatra II and Ptolemy VI, no doubt because it was to all appearances an amicable one, and was such a contrast to Kleopatra’s subsequent marriage.

not to say that we find no negative characterization of Ptolemaic incest in the ancient sources (Sotades is the classic example), but such comments are very sparse compared to the emphasis laid on incest and its evils by modern writers. (As for Sotades, his unfortunate remark may have been intended more as a bad joke than a moral lecture.)

If the Ptolemaic dynastic model was ultimately a failure, at least in the eyes of posterity, Imperial Roman efforts to employ the same model met with little more success. Both Caligula and Claudius may have attempted to emulate the Ptolemies in their own unions. Caligula's alleged incest with his sister(s?) has been doubted, but it is possible that he was trying to present an Imperial model, at least in the Greek East, that would have met with recognition and acceptance.¹⁶⁵ Claudius' marriage to his niece Agrippina presents a more unequivocal case of royal incest. Indeed, it may be that, like Ptolemy II, Claudius deliberately drew attention to the incestuous nature of the marriage, and may have been inspired to do so by the example of the Hellenistic dynasty.¹⁶⁶ But Claudius was battling the same prejudices, and in the end faced the same outcome: rather than impressing his contemporaries with the unique and special qualities of the Imperial dynasty, he merely convinced posterity of the decadence of Imperial morals.

CONCLUSION

It has long been unfashionable for historical scholarship to exercise moral judgements, and we rarely find any more such latter-day Scipionic remarks as Bevan's comment on Ptolemy IV: 'love of ease, wine, lasciviousness, and literary dilettantism had swallowed up in this young degenerate every natural affection'.¹⁶⁷ And yet the time-honoured image of a crumbling dynasty choking on its own excesses, as Magas choked on his own fat, dies very hard indeed. Incest seems fated to be inextricably bound up with a continued notion of Ptolemaic decay, moral degeneracy and collapse, and it is now inbreeding that is indicted for compromising Ptolemaic 'vigour', a magic and marvellously vague word both in historiography and in genetics.¹⁶⁸ Although the historical queen Kleopatra VII was an energetic and effective monarch, the Kleopatra of the Western artistic and literary imagination has been for centuries endowed with a languidness characteristic of the best Ptolemaic *truphê* and inbred lassitude.¹⁶⁹

The tension between languor and vigour, between activity and passivity in Ptolemaic history, is an historiographic *topos* that can be traced back to Polybios, who commented on the (to him) unfortunate fact that the slothful and luxury-ridden Ptolemy IV was too inclined to be peaceful, and did not follow up his victory at Raphia with an all-out invasion of the realms of Antiochos III (5.87). While modern scholarship has distanced itself considerably from the male-dominated and military-oriented world inhabited by Polybios, there are still echoes of that world and its viewpoint in many modern assessments of Ptolemaic history. Military strength still tends to be equated with masculine 'vigour', and the softening and feminizing qualities of *truphê* are held to be at the heart of the disintegration of the Ptolemaic empire. Whether consciously or not, there still tends to be a ratification of the Polybian viewpoint that the loss of military dominance and the rejection of active imperialism is representative of a process of decay.¹⁷⁰ The Ptolemies are

¹⁶⁵ Caligula, like Ptolemy Auletes, adopted the title *Neos Dionysos* (Athen. 148d), and presented his sister Drusilla in the east with the iconography of Demeter, associated with fertility and rebirth, a representation found also among the Ptolemaic queens (Wood (1995); cf. Green (1998) 784; Moreau (2002) 93-6).

¹⁶⁶ Green (1998) 779-80; see also Smith (1963).

¹⁶⁷ Bevan (1968 [1927]) 221.

¹⁶⁸ See, e.g., Whitehorne (1994) 88; Scheidel (1996a) 16-17; cf. Mahaffy (1895) 307; Macurdy (1932) 222.

¹⁶⁹ See for example Théophile Gauthier's 1838 novel-la, *Une nuit de Cléopâtre*, in which his heroine exhausts herself walking from the bedroom to the bathroom.

¹⁷⁰ Hazzard's comment ((2000) 156) on the Ptolemaic kingdom ('it started as a military monarchy headed by a king and ended as a civilian monarchy headed by a queen') is a more up-to-date version of (but one that still resonates with) Kornemann's conclusion in 1923, that the Ptolemaic family, 'which had come from strong masculine Macedonian roots, fell to the force of feminism'.

still seen as somehow 'decadent', only now it is the science of genetics that explains their rottenness.¹⁷¹ Incest has led to inbreeding, which has led in turn to degeneracy and loss of vigour. But it is the argument of this article that we cannot use the new morality of science any more than we could use the old morality of Victorian prudery to seek a solution to the thorny problems of the Ptolemaic dynasty in the wormy heart of incest.

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¹⁷¹ Morriss (1997) points out that contemporary Western culture tends to think that its own taboos and prejudices are rationally based on hygiene and science, rather than superstition.

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