

Appropriation and Approximation: Tensions between “Greekness” and “Otherness” in the Ptolemaic Dynasty

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The Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt were primarily seen by their contemporaries as Greek in nature throughout their reign. In fact, they stressed this feature through their connection with Alexander the Great, even going so far as to have Alexander’s preserved body sent to Alexandria, where it was made a cult object. Although the Ptolemies did embrace aspects of Egyptian culture, and incorporated them into their rule, they were used for various purposes which have more in common with propaganda than with a sincere attempt at cultural integration. The most obvious cases of this merging of Greek and Egyptian cultures are the practice of dynastic incest throughout their rule, the portrayal of Ptolemaic kings in an Egyptian manner, the association of Ptolemaic rulers with Egyptian Pharaohs and with both Greek and Egyptian gods, and the frequent deification of individual rulers after their deaths. Although aspects of the Ptolemaic dynasty were accepted in Greece, the later Romans used the same aspects to vilify the Ptolemaic rulers and more closely associate them with a more barbaric, foreign, and eastern Egypt. The Ptolemaic rulers ultimately saw themselves as Greeks ruling over a land populated with Egyptian “others,” appropriating some elements of this other culture to their own in ways that best suited their needs.

Within Egypt at the time of the rule of the Ptolemies, there was a division between Greek Egypt and Egyptian Egypt. This was perhaps most keenly evidenced in the fact that Alexandria was referred to as *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*, “Alexandria by Egypt,” emphasizing “proximity to Egypt, not integration with it.”¹ Throughout its history as capital of the Ptolemaic Empire, Alexandria was seen not as a part of Egypt but rather an addition to it, removed from the rest of the kingdom. There was a further divide between city and country in Ptolemaic Egypt. This divide encapsulated the many differences between the Greek minority and the Egyptian majority. For the most part, the native Egyptian population resided in the countryside along the Nile, where they worked primarily as farmers, while the Greeks who settled in Egypt primarily resided either in Alexandria or in the towns established along the Nile where they often worked in the local bureaucracy and oversaw the organization of the countryside. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, though they are relatively few. The native Egyptians and settling Greeks were by and large relatively restricted in their interactions and mixing of the two cultures.² There are multiple reasons behind this divide between the cultures, including “racial and linguistic situations [...] involving discrimination [which was] embedded” in

1 Paul Edmund Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies: Greek Kings as Egyptian Pharaohs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 16.

2 Jean Bingen, *Hellenistic Egypt: Monarchy, Society, Economy, Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 104.

the foundations of the Ptolemaic world.³ Ptolemaic Egypt was comprised of both these distinct groups, and although the government was made of elements from both cultures, at the personal level it seems as if there were relatively limited opportunities for mixing cultures. There were, of course, Egyptians in government positions, though for the most part they were “passive tasks” rather than real government work despite their high status within the government.⁴ Although the Greek and Egyptian groups were neither entirely homogeneous nor “totally impervious” to certain aspects of mixing culture⁵, it was the “lack of interest [...] in abandoning the fundamental cultural signs” of both Greeks and Egyptians in Egypt which prevented the growth of a truly mixed culture.⁶ Ultimately, it was the “intrusion of [...] Greek habits [...] into the Egyptian milieu” which “constitute[d] the distinctive character” of Ptolemaic Egypt, with some level of cultural borrowing on the part of the ruling Greek minority in existence.⁷

The Ptolemaic regime very frequently stressed their Greek connection and, except for a few scenarios, spent very little effort sympathizing or identifying with the Egyptian culture over which they ruled. The organization of the Egyptian state under the Ptolemies was responsible for the previously mentioned sharp divides between city and country, and the Greeks and Egyptians, which were so prevalent in the kingdom. The Ptolemies imported Greek styles of government to Egypt, but also were keen on adapting and appropriating pre-existing institutional structures in the interests of preventing rebellion.⁸ Because Alexandria, Naukratis, and Ptolemais were the only three fully Greek cities within Egypt, the Ptolemaic rulers relied on a “centralized administration” to run their country.⁹ Greek elites were tied to the Ptolemaic court at Alexandria, kept loyal (at least in theory) by the “granting of elaborate court titles and land.”¹⁰ In the countryside, the Ptolemies relied on the Egyptian priests and temples to form the basis for their support among the native population. Some rulers even went so far as to build new temples and involve themselves in Egyptian religious practice to gain popular support. The Ptolemies also encouraged their subjects to become “Hellenes” and to learn Greek in order to participate in their new government system.¹¹ While the Ptolemies did adopt certain methods of Egyptian kingship, and even continued pre-existing political and economic practices from the days of the pharaohs, the governing system was predominantly that of the powerful Greek minority.

3 *Ibid.*, 107.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 245.

6 *Ibid.*, 245.

7 Roger S. Bagnall, “Introduction” in *Hellenistic Egypt* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 3.

8 J. G. Manning, *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 33.

9 Dorothy J. Thompson, “The Ptolemies and Egypt,” in *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. Erskine (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 113.

10 Manning, 35.

11 *Ibid.*, 88.

The most important way by which the Ptolemies expressed their Greekness was through the association of the Ptolemaic ruler, and therefore the Ptolemaic state, with the person of Alexander the Great. The term “Greekness” here is used rather loosely, as Alexander himself was Macedonian, and had troubles integrating with the Greeks to the south. The dynasties established by his successors were modeled on the Macedonian tradition, and the bloodlines of those dynasties would remain relatively exclusive and largely Macedonian. Yet Macedon remained closely tied with Hellenic culture, and the language, customs, literature, art, and architecture of Greece were propagated by Alexander in the lands he conquered. Alexander was thus the source not only for the transmission of Hellenism abroad, but also for the “Greekness” which is attributed to the Ptolemaic dynasty.¹² Therefore Alexander was the figure from whom the Ptolemies derived their power, and as the Ptolemaic monarchs were at first dependent upon Greek military power, it made good political sense for them to stress this connection. Ptolemy I had Alexander’s body sent to Alexandria where it became a cult object. The newly established cult of Alexander became a state cult in Ptolemaic Egypt and had explicit political importance. Alexander was made a “state god” and the high priest of his cult, who was chosen from the aristocracy,¹³ was the “highest state priest” in Egypt.¹⁴ Ptolemy I took it upon himself to write a history of Alexander’s life, which now is lost to us, and which very likely further emphasized the connection of the Ptolemies to Alexander and provided more legitimacy to their rule. By emphasizing their Greek connection, especially through the establishment of the religious cult of Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies were able to appease the Greek minority in Egypt and the Greek soldiers on whom they relied. By maintaining proper Macedonian bloodlines, they were also able to present themselves as legitimate heirs of Alexander around the Mediterranean world, especially to the other kings who ruled in what remained of Alexander’s empire.

The Ptolemies retained and presented their Greek heritage through the institution of Greek-style ruler cults throughout their reign. These ruler cults were different than the Egyptian tradition of associating the pharaoh with a divine being. However, as with many of the monarchies which were established after Alexander’s death in his empire, the local traditions of the pre-existing national kingdoms were often merged with the Macedonian monarchic tradition.¹⁵ The Greek-style ruler cult became not only the fundamental aspect of Greek kingship but was also an important means by which the Ptolemies maintained their Greek status in the eyes of other Greeks. The key element in Greek ruler cults was that the king possessed a “charismatic invincibility which was upheld by the gods,”

12 The terms “Greek” and “Macedonian” will be used somewhat interchangeably throughout this paper, especially as the former ultimately subsumed the latter (particularly in the minds of the ethnic Egyptian population).

13 Bingen, 20.

14 Gunther Holbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire*, trans. Tina Saavedra (New York Routledge, 2001), 94.

15 *Ibid.*, 90.

unlike the Egyptian style of ruler cults where the pharaoh was a divine being.¹⁶ Rulers could be, and often were, associated with a particular god, who would often be considered the founder of the dynasty or family or who was believed in some way to have a special interest in the affairs of the family. In the case of the Ptolemies, this god was Dionysus, a supposed “ancestral father” of the family.¹⁷ Through the practice of his cult, the ruler could be brought into “the company of the gods,” but was not actually one of them; this sort of practice likely stemmed from the Greek tradition of worshipping “outstanding individuals as heroes” which had existed for some time in Greek culture.¹⁸ Although the key aspect of the Greek ruler cult was that it did not make the ruler divine, there were changes made to the Greek ruler cult as practiced by the Ptolemies from the very beginning of their reign. In 304 BCE, Ptolemy I was honored by the Rhodians as a god, not just as an outstanding mortal individual.¹⁹ Additionally, the Ptolemies began to deify not only their deceased ancestors but their living selves as well. Around 272 BCE, Ptolemy Philadelphos joined the living royal couple (styled the *Theoi Synnaoi*) with the cult of Alexander, which resulted in the cult of the *Theoi Adelphoi*, brother-sister-gods, who were then closely associated with Alexander.

In addition to the Greek ruler cult, Ptolemaic rulers adopted Egyptian methods of expressing divine kingship. The primary means by which this was achieved was by portraying the Ptolemaic rulers as Egyptian pharaohs, thereby lending the Ptolemaic regime a sense of validity and of continuing a long-standing tradition of kingship. The Ptolemies provided a “revival in Egyptian kingship” with the help of the Egyptian priests on whom much of their support with the local population rested.²⁰ The image of the pharaoh was a very powerful one for both the Egyptian people and the Ptolemaic rulers, and accordingly, the Ptolemies increasingly began to participate in the traditional duties of the Egyptian pharaoh. This included being present for the start of the Egyptian New Year, taking royal progresses along the Nile, inaugurating temples, and overseeing various other religious practices.²¹ The Ptolemies obtained for themselves the support of the Egyptian priesthood “on the basis of their ancient cult of the king,” which they practiced in addition to their Greek-style ruler cults despite the differences between both systems.²² The continuation of these practices by the Ptolemaic regime both earned them support from the Egyptian populace and inserted them into the very long history of Egypt, which would strengthen their claims of ruling over Egypt with legitimacy.

As the Ptolemies subsequently became more invested in the Egyptian style of ruler worship, they not only incorporated Egyptian methods of ruler worship into their reign, but also began to associate themselves with Egyptian gods. No longer simply

16 *Ibid.*, 91.

17 *Ibid.*, 92.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, 91.

20 Manning, 94.

21 Thompson, 113.

22 Holbl, 95.

stressing their divine connection to a divine ancestor, the Ptolemies began to depict and associate themselves with the indigenous gods of their new land. Ptolemy I depicted himself on coinage with the attributes of many Greek gods and even the Egyptian god Ammon, from whom Alexander the Great had claimed divine lineage after visiting the oracle at Siwa.²³ Ptolemy “appropriated [...] Alexander’s divinity” for both himself and his dynasty through this association.²⁴ The connection with both Greek and Egyptian gods was strengthened in the later years of the Ptolemaic empire and especially in the first century BCE. Ptolemy XII was depicted in temple relief as Horus the king and is described as the “God Neos Dionysos,” and was further considered to be the “incarnation of the young Osiris-Dionysos.”²⁵ Cleopatra VII not only was associated with but was considered to represent the goddess Isis, as was traditional for royal Ptolemaic women; because of Isis’s association with Aphrodite and Venus she was connected to those goddesses as well.²⁶ Earlier in the dynasty, Arsinoe II was deified after her death in a way entirely congruent with ancient Egyptian tradition. Reportedly, the Egyptian priests found the installation of statues of her in temples “to be quite acceptable,” and Ptolemy II even went so far as to construct temples for her as an independent Egyptian goddess.²⁷ Even more importantly, Arsinoe became a Greek goddess as well, identified with Hera, Demeter, and especially Aphrodite, and it was in this last guise that many sanctuaries were built for her.²⁸ Additionally, festivals in her honor were conducted in both the rural area of Egypt and in Alexandria itself, and outside of Egypt she was worshipped alongside Isis and Serapis.²⁹ This deification created

a goddess who had emerged from the ruling family and who would be recognized in all of the eastern Mediterranean basin. At the same time, the dynasty began its first and most successful attempt at introducing a deceased member of the family into the Egyptian pantheon.³⁰

By the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty, the originally distinct styles of Greek and Egyptian ruler cults had blended into one almost unified cult, with the Greek ruler increasingly associated with the pharaoh and increasingly regarded as a divine being and not merely a representative of the divine or a mortal in the company of gods. The Ptolemies could strengthen their claims of legitimacy by spreading their ruler cults throughout both the territories they controlled and the Mediterranean. Inserting members of their family into the local pantheon, and associating those figures with various Greek and Egyptian gods,

23 *Ibid.*, 93. In the Greek world, Ammon was associated with Zeus and commonly known as Zeus-Ammon.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, 289.

26 *Ibid.*, 290.

27 *Ibid.*, 101-2.

28 *Ibid.*, 103.

29 *Ibid.*, 104.

30 *Ibid.*

also allowed the Ptolemies to gain acceptance among local populations which might otherwise have been opposed to their foreign dynasty.

Another instance by which the Ptolemies adopted Egyptian court practice was in their practice of dynastic incest. This element became a defining characteristic of the Ptolemies for their contemporary chroniclers, who were both hostile and sympathetic. At the outset of the dynasty, full-sibling marriages were relative rarities, but by the dynasty's end they had become more conspicuous and had become one of the established traditions of the dynasty. The question of why the Ptolemies deemed incestuous unions as a viable means of continuing their dynasty has been a matter of some debate. It is often suggested to be a product of the desire of the Ptolemaic rulers to appear more Egyptian by adopting the marital customs of the Egyptian pharaohs. While Greek historians maintained that incestuous marriages were a common aspect of all Egyptians, whether royal or common, evidence has shown that even among the pharaohs, the extent to which incestuous marriages took place had been exaggerated in the popular mind.³¹ Another compelling argument is that the practice of sibling marriage was meant to show that the Ptolemies were not only "following the example of Zeus and Hera" in terms of the practice of sibling marriage, but emulating Isis and Osiris as well.³² Although the earliest of the Ptolemies may not have cared for the opinions of the native Egyptian population, later Ptolemies may have desired to strengthen their association not only with the prior rulers of Egypt but also with the old Egyptian gods. A final theory put forward by scholars as to why dynastic incest became the norm for the Ptolemies suggests that in the later years of the dynasty, the "singularity and integrity" of the dynasty, that is, keeping the bloodlines pure from the blood of commoners or even of other royalty, was paramount.³³ However, women in the Ptolemaic dynasty would on occasion marry into other dynasties, most commonly into the royal family of the Seleucid Empire.³⁴ Regardless of the reasons, this practice of dynastic incest was to be one of the defining characteristics of the Ptolemaic regime in posterity. In many ways the emphasis put on maintaining pure bloodlines and keeping power within the very immediate family was another way in which the Ptolemies could exercise some level of control over integration with the cultures not only of the local Egyptian nobility but also with other Macedonian dynasties around the Mediterranean.

The union of both Greek and Egyptian elements in the character of the rule of the Ptolemies can best be seen in the artwork and sculpture which was produced at this time. In the sculpture and temple reliefs commissioned by the Ptolemies, the iconographical tradition of both Egypt and Greece is evident. The Egyptian style portraits of the

31 Sheila L. Ager, "Familiarity Breeds: Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty," in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 125 (2005): 1.

32 Holbl, 94-5.

33 Ager, 18

34 Ager, 19. Marrying outside the dynasty was typically reserved for "excess females," and that the Ptolemies "favoured reserving a royal sister for marriage to the heir."

Ptolemies remain “firmly rooted in native conventions” even when the sculptures possess Greek features.³⁵ Ptolemaic sculpture often “support[ed] time-honored ideological programs” in terms of the poses and materials used and the scale and placement of the sculptures.³⁶ The sculptural finds throughout Egypt are diverse, and artistic finds in Alexandria include many Egyptian-style sculptures, not merely Greek-style ones, including a sculpture of a queen in a traditional Egyptian Hathor headdress.³⁷ The attributes of Ptolemaic sculpture, such as things which are held or worn by the subject in the sculpture, are primarily Egyptian: the “uraeus, *nemes*, and Egyptian diadem are frequent” in the surviving sculpture of the Ptolemies.³⁸ The uraeus, the snake rearing up on the brow of the wearer, is a symbol which evokes “the essential meaning of kingship in Egypt” and, as such, is typically not depicted on Hellenized portraits of the Ptolemies.³⁹ Hellenized statues of the Ptolemies often feature the traditional double crown of ancient Egyptian pharaohs in place of the uraeus. Greek-style portraits of the Ptolemies, which feature stylistically “Greek hair” derived from depictions of Alexander the Great, and often feature the diadem (originally a Persian headdress which became the symbol evoking Greek kingship under the diadochi) more frequently than the traditional crowns used in Egyptian representation of the dynasty. Many of the sculptures feature the rulers wearing Egyptian-style garments which are traditional in the depiction of Egyptian rulers throughout the history of Egyptian sculpture. Ptolemaic rulers often were portrayed with ram horns in order to strengthen the connection to the gods Ammon, Horus, Osiris, and Khnum, both on Greek coins and in Egyptian reliefs.⁴⁰ Above all, whether in Egyptian or Greek styles of sculpture, the Ptolemies sought to convey the four concepts of “ethics, godliness, legitimacy, and ‘Greekness’” in their visual representations.⁴¹ The Egyptian elements in Ptolemaic sculpture are perhaps the best evidence of how important absorbing local political traditions were to the Ptolemies, and just how important it was to be recognized not as an outside group ruling from without, but as a legitimate group ruling from within Egypt in the style of the pharaohs.

The reception of the Ptolemaic rulers among their contemporaries varied depending on who these contemporaries were, and how favorably they looked on the Ptolemaic rulers. The Greeks, both in Egypt and in mainland Greece, were largely accepting of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt as Greek in name and nature, even going so far as to establish cults to Ptolemy Philadelphos in Byzantium and for Ptolemy Euergetes in Athens.⁴² Though the Greeks may not have accepted all elements of Ptolemaic rule – for example, criticism of the practice of dynastic incest saw one writer, Sotades, sealed

35 Stanwick, 4.

36 *Ibid.*, 11.

37 *Ibid.*, 17.

38 *Ibid.*, 34.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 35.

41 *Ibid.*, 43.

42 Holbl, 93.

into a lead jar and throw into the sea – for the most part the Greeks recognized the Ptolemies' Greek background.⁴³ Unlike the Greeks, the Romans took an entirely different view of the Ptolemaic rulers, a fact which can only be seen as the logical conclusion of their having largely come to control the Ptolemies as a de facto client state by the first century BCE.

To the Romans, the Ptolemies epitomized luxury and decadence, even an excess of decadence that was the opposite of the Catonic *simplicitas* which they so esteemed.⁴⁴ The Ptolemies, instead of shying away from emphasizing their wealth, highlighted it by orchestrating elaborate public displays and processions, thereby equating their material wealth and its being on display with their political power⁴⁵ and attempting to use this display of wealth and knowledge of their practice of dynastic incest as a means by which to convey the “power of the dynasty, rather than its degeneracy.”⁴⁶ It was also the case that the Romans often saw the Eastern kingdoms as despotic and in opposition to the virtues (however theoretical) of their Republic.⁴⁷ The unrestrained luxury and unlimited power with which the Ptolemaic dynasty so closely identified themselves were frequently seen as the hallmarks of tyrants, and in Roman eyes especially the practice of dynastic incest was seen as a type of royal decadence from which the state could never recover.⁴⁸ There was also a definite attempt to associate the Ptolemies with Egypt rather than their Macedonian lineage: Roman historians refer to Cleopatra not by name, but as *Aegyptia*, or “Egyptian,” firmly connecting her with the country.⁴⁹ The writing of Roman authors produced during the first century BCE portrays the wealth and luxury of the Ptolemies as unappealing. Of course, one should take the writings of the Augustan poets with some measure of salt, given Augustus' interest in patronizing writers who vilified his rivals in the Eastern empire.⁵⁰ These Roman views of the Ptolemies are further complicated by the fact that the Ptolemies continued to utilize aspects of Egyptian culture essentially as propaganda throughout their reign. Roman writers encountered the Ptolemaic court at a time when the use of Egyptian-style statuary, certain practices of Egyptian kingship, and association with Egyptian gods had become firmly entrenched within the culture of the

43 Ager, 5.

44 *Ibid.*, 23.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, 26.

47 Manning, 37.

48 Ager, 26. In addition, see Ager, 1, regarding Lucan's “highly colorful” epic of the Roman Civil War that describes the marriage of Cleopatra VII to her younger brother Ptolemy XIII as an “unlawful passion.” While Lucan's epic is hardly concerned with “anything like historical truth,” it at least offers some idea of the way in which such a continuous and relatively well-known practice of dynastic incest, and the “depraved sexuality” of those who practice it, could come to typify the Ptolemaic dynasty in the later writings of the Romans.

49 Bingen, 60.

50 As can be seen in Horace's Ode 1.37. Here he portrays Cleopatra as a “demented queen” scheming against the Roman capitol and empire with a “polluted flock” of Alexandrian advisors. The pro-Augustus tone of Horace's ode is clear when he lauds Augustus for driving “a mind, frenzied by Mareotic wine”, to terror and retreat.

dynasty. The fusion between Greek and Egyptian cultures would ultimately come to be viewed by Roman writers as primarily “Eastern” in character, and only nominally Greek. The Augustan literary tradition presented the Ptolemies as a “crumbling dynasty choking on its own excesses” of ostentatious displays of wealth and incestuous decadence.⁵¹ These images, along with the “Eastern” nature of their regime, would typify the Ptolemies in the writings of the Roman literary tradition.

The Ptolemaic state was an oftentimes complex blending of Egyptian and Greek cultures. Though the two cultures were often kept separate, there were aspects of the native Egyptian culture which were adopted by the Greek court. The Ptolemies appropriated, where and when appropriate, elements of the Egyptian past in order to lend their regime more support and legitimacy in the eyes of the native Egyptians, often identifying themselves with the pharaohs and the traditions of Egyptian kingship, adapting their ruler cults and the practice of dynastic incest, and utilizing the artistic elements associated with the Egyptian monarchy in some of their officially commissioned portraits. However, the Ptolemies were ever mindful of emphasizing their Greek origins, which they did by stressing their association with and connection to Alexander the Great, importing Greek customs and monarchic traditions into the Egyptian setting, and mixing Greek artistic elements with the Egyptian forms they already found useful in their regime.

51 Ager, 27.