

## Incest in Ancient Egypt

### **1. Introduction**

Incest avoidance, proscriptions and statues have generally been regarded by anthropologists as culturally universal. However the veracity of this supposed universality is contingent on whether or not well-known exceptions can be regarded as factually significant. With that in mind, formally accepted forms of consanguineous relationships are a particularly troublesome and yet exposing study. The Incas, Hawaiians and ancient Egyptians are among the most widely referenced exceptions to the incest taboo (Bixler 1982: 264, Middleton 1962: 603). While these aberrations have been noted, scholars are often quick to maintain that they are sanctioned solely in order to protect royal bloodlines and that the practice is rarely, if ever, found amongst the general populace (Middleton 1962: 603). Despite academic consensus for the presence of brother-sister marriages between Egyptian royalty there is much less emphasis on the pervasiveness of this custom throughout Egyptian society as could be seen during the Graeco-Roman period (332 BCE - 395 CE). This paper will attempt to examine both the chronological and sociological range of near-kin marriages in ancient Egypt, and offer potential explanations for its popularity.

### **2. Classical Testimony**

Before discussing the origins of incestuous marriages in ancient Egypt and its progression into a widespread phenomena during the Graeco-Roman period, it may be useful to briefly discuss one of the main proponents of the practice, i.e. Classical (Greek and Roman) authors. While it can be noted that the Greeks were notorious for exaggerating, and their chronicles of “barbarians” are often considered questionable, when their accounts are

taken in conjunction with further evidence (which will be examined later), they foster additional validation. Diodorus of Sicily, a Greek historian, wrote “The Egyptians also made a law, they say, contrary to the general custom of mankind, permitting men to marry their sisters, this being due to the success attained by Isis in this respect; for she had married her brother Osiris” (Heinemann 1946: 85). Other Classical historians, i.e. Philo Juadeus, Seneca, Pausanias, etc., also made similar comments on the tradition of incestuous marriages in Egypt (Middleton 1962: 608), many of which, like Diodorus, linking the origins of its practice to religion.

### **3. The Religious Connection**

The earliest accounts of celebrated incest in ancient Egypt can be found in religion. For example the sibling deities Shu and Tefnut were married and gave birth to two children, Geb and Nut, who in turn married and had offspring (Adamson 1982: 85). Perhaps of more importance was the incestuous relationship between the god Osiris and his sister Isis (mentioned above), who gave birth to the famed Horus. This myth was widely known by the time of the first dynasty (Adamson 1982: 85), and Horus would continue to be one of most significant deities through to Graeco-Roman times. This may help to explain why incest was acceptable for Egyptian royalty as early as the Pharaonic period, for if the pharaohs were regarded as embodiments of the gods, they may be free to act as the gods do. Hence, if incest is acceptable for the gods, it must be acceptable for pharaohs as well. While the concept of incest among deities is not unique to Egyptian religion, the extension of this practice to humans is what makes the Egyptian case such a compelling one.

### **4. The Pharaonic Period**

It is said that incestuous marriages were present in various pharaonic dynasties. Russell Middleton (1962: 604) suggested that incest was particularly common in the 18th

and 19th dynasties, and that pharaohs such as “Tao II, Ahmose, Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, Thutmose II, Thutmose III, Amenhotep II, and Thutmose IV probably [all] married half-sisters”. However one must be mindful of literal interpretations of Egyptian jargon concerning relationships, for it is known that spouses were often referred to as ‘my brother’ or ‘my sister’ in inscriptions. Middleton’s conclusion therefore may be seen as somewhat of an exaggeration concerning the number of incestuous marriage in the royal family. It may even be possible that none of the so-called “sisters”, were in fact related to their husbands by blood.

Evidence for brother-sister marriage between members of the populace during pharaonic times is meager. In 1954 Jaroslav Cerny published an important study examining 358 documents (stelae) yielding 490 marriages listing the names of the mothers and fathers of both parties involved. His study revealed a complete lack of evidence for the practice in the Old Kingdom (i.e. up until 2100 BCE), but he managed to find two “practically certain” cases of incestuous marriages between commoners from the Middle Kingdom, and one “certain” case from the 22nd Dynasty. Prior to Cerny’s study being published, Egyptologists assumed that the existence of incestuous marriages was self-evident and commonplace throughout all of Egypt’s almost three millennia long history prior to Alexander’s conquest in 331 BCE (Frandsen 2009: 37). Cerny proposed that this misunderstanding was due to “(1) the fact that such marriages are well-attested for the Graeco-Roman period in contemporary papyri... (2) the testimony of classical authors... (3) [as aforementioned] that in Egyptian texts... wives were called ‘sisters’” (Cerny 1954: 24).

Since Cerny’s study, other examples of incestuous marriages among commoners have been noted, and yet remain controversial (Frandsen 2009: 38). While it is generally understood that incest in the royal family did occur during the Pharaonic period, it was probably only amongst half-siblings, and the practice did not, except perhaps for a few instances extend to commoners.

## 5. The Graeco-Roman Period

The Graeco-Roman period can be described as the period following the conquest by Alexander the Great that marked the end of independent rule in Egypt. From 332 BCE until CE 359, Egypt would be ruled by a succession of Macedonian kings and Roman emperors. For the purposes of this paper, this period will be divided into two parts, i.e. the Ptolemaic period (305 BCE - 30 BCE), and the Roman period (30 BCE - CE 324), in which incestuous marriages were common.

### *5.1 Ptolemaic Period*

Incestuous Marriages among Egyptian royalty are said to have peaked during the Ptolemaic Period (Ager 2005: 8, Frandsen 2009: 24, Middleton 1962: 606). Prior to the reign of the Ptolemies only cases of half-sibling incest could be proven among the royal families in Egypt. Arsinoe and her younger brother Ptolemy II were the first to depart from tradition and engage in a full-sibling marriage (Ager 2005: 4). It has been suggested that this practice was a deliberate attempt by the Ptolemies to establish “an innovative basis for dynastic cult”, in the hopes of unifying the Egyptians and the Greeks (Frandsen 2009: 24). King Ptolemy II is noted as making incest “a major theme of propaganda”, emphasizing the divine nature of the couple, who he considered to be beyond the limits of conventional humanity (Frandsen 2009: 24).

The descendants of Ptolemy II had the tendency to follow his example. “Of the thirteen Ptolemies who came to throne seven contracted [full brother-sister] marriages” (Middleton 606: 1962). Incest came to govern the marriage patterns of the Ptolemaic house, and the progeny of royal unions became progressively more inbred (Ager 2005: 8). However from the Ptolemaic period there is no non-literary and non-royal material dealing with incestuous marriages (Frandsen 2009: 48). Due to this lack of evidence, scholars believe that brother-sister marriage

during Ptolemaic reign was restricted to royalty, with neither Egyptian or Hellenistic commoners engaged in the practice.

## *5.2 The Roman Period*

The Roman period marks a time in Egypt where there is an abundance of evidence for the widespread practice of sibling marriages, i.e. incestuous marriages among all social classes (Frandsen 2009: 48, Hopkins 1980: 303, Middleton 1962: 606). The majority of the evidence stems from documentary papyri of several sorts: marriage contracts, petitions, census documents etc. It is important to note that unlike evidence from earlier periods, which, as seen, can be subject to a variety of interpretations, the documents from the Roman period possess a “technical character... [and an] indisputable precision” (Middleton 1962: 606).

In 1980 Keith Hopkins conducted a study of incestuous marriage in Roman Egypt which is recognized as the “most sophisticated and analytically satisfying [study of its subject]” (Shaw 1992: 269). Hopkins researched household census returns dating to the period between CE 19-20 and 257-258 in which 270 censuses were preserved. From this, Hopkins concluded that brother-sister marriages were the norm during Roman times, adding “it is worth stressing that we are dealing here not with occasional premarital sex between siblings... but with lawful, publicly celebrated marriage between full brother and sister” (Hopkins 1980: 303). He estimated that one-third, and maybe more, of all men who had a marriageable sister chose intra-familial marriages over marrying a woman from outside their family and he further argued that “the surviving census returns are probably representative of a wider Egyptian population” (Hopkins 1980: 304). This claim, however, was met with criticism. In 1992 Brent Shaw argued that the returns study by Hopkins mainly came from Greek settlements and that the persons who completed the census “were direct descendants either of Greek settlers or of those Egyptians who were trying to ‘pass’ as such persons” (Shaw 1992: 279). While Shaw’s argument attempts to negate Hopkins’s claim that incestuous marriages were common among all persons living in Egypt at the time, Hopkins’s

finds nevertheless demonstrate that the practice was existent and very common in the Roman period.

## 6. Explanations

While scholars have for decades explained the reasoning for incestuous marriages within Egyptian royal families as a means of protecting the purity of blood-lines, they have been at a loss in regards to explaining its translation to the public.

Scholars most often list economic reasons when trying to explain the custom of incestuous marriage in ancient Egypt (Frandsen 2009: 50). Many scholars have argued that in ancient Egypt such marriages would have been favorable in order to keep the family estate undivided and save the expense of a dowry. Frandsen (2009: 50) argues that these unions would not fully do away with economic problems, and could be annulled by divorce. He claims that “the stipulations found in marriage contracts about property, landed or chattel, are so detailed that it is hard to believe that the reason for the marriage would be the wish to avoid splitting family property”. Another objection to the economic explanation for incestuous marriages is that the practice could be seen in both propertied and “ordinary families”. Moreover, many of the families that were noted to have engaged in incestuous marriage had other children who chose to marry outside of their family.

Other scholars have attempted to explain Egyptian incest through a diffusion hypothesis. Russell Middleton (1962: 608) cites Kornemann (1949: 84) as suggesting “the Ptolemies copied the Persian custom and that the Egyptian commoners later began to follow the practices of the royalty”. However Middleton is quick to point out that it is controversial whether the Persian ever engaged in the practice themselves, and that it is nearly impossible to prove the direction of diffusion (1962: 609). Furthermore this hypothesis does not address the functional significance of practice and thus is not viable.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main evidence for incestuous marriage in ancient Egypt (as discussed above) comes from (1) the testimony of Classical authors (2) the custom of brother-sister marriages in the “extraordinary family”, i.e. the divine and the royal, present in both the Pharaonic period and the Graeco-Roman period, (3) and the documentary evidence, mostly from the Roman period for the commonality of this practice among commoners. The chronological and sociological progression of the practice was slow and dependent upon the political climate of the time. There is an abundance of scholars who suggest economic reasoning for the presence of incestuous marriages among commoners, yet this, and other hypotheses have been widely disproven. As of now, incestuous marriages in ancient Egypt are considered an enigmatic subject.

I would now like to suggest my own hypothesis for the adoption of incestuous marriage among commoners. As previously mentioned, King Ptolemy II was said to have introduced full-sibling incest into the royal family for the purpose of creating a “dynastic cult” that would unify the Greeks and Egyptians. This theory seems to propound that the rulers of the Ptolemaic Period were concerned kings, who wanted peace amongst their people (whether their motivation was personal or genuine is not an issue). Therefore it may be acceptable to propose that they would want to extend this “privilege” to commoners. What better way of having a populace except a cult, then to “allow” that populace to actively participate in its practices?

Although there remains no evidence for incestuous marriages among commoners in the Ptolemaic period, Frandsen (2009: 51) cites one scholar, Thierfelder (1960) who identifies the peculiarity of the “complete absence of non-royal evidence during the [Ptolemaic period]... and the sudden emergence of these endogamous associations under the exogamous Romans” (Frandsen 2009: 51). According to Frandsen, Thierfelder suggests that the chronological distribution of the evidence can be attributed to two different administrative practices; incestuous marriages between commoners only became visible “thanks to the precision and administrative genius of the Romans” (Frandsen 2009: 51). If such a theory can be proven, I

believe my conclusion to be a viable one. The Ptolemies extended the practice to commoners in order to seduce their new subjects and this practice then continued on under Roman rule.

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