

# All in the Family: Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty

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In previous issues of Labyrinth, we've explored some of the tangled webs woven by the Ptolemies, the Greco-Macedonian dynasty that ruled Egypt during the Hellenistic Age [January 1991 - "Arsinoë II" and October 2002 "Ptolemy the Thunderbolt"]. In this issue, I'd like to take a brief look at the most convoluted skein of all: the Ptolemaic practice of incest.

We don't have room to examine all in the ins and outs of the various sibling (or otherwise incestuous) marriages of the different members of this family. A look at the [genealogical](#) chart will give you some idea of just how complicated it got. You can see that the first sibling-marriage was that of Arsinoë II to her half-brother Ptolemy Keraunos, an inauspicious start to the custom, as Keraunos celebrated the wedding by murdering his half-sister's two sons by her previous husband. Since this marriage got off rather on the wrong foot, it was considerate of Keraunos to get himself killed in battle not long after. By that time, Arsinoë may already have fled to Egypt, where she then took part in the first *full*-sibling marriage of the dynasty by marrying her younger brother Ptolemy II, a marriage that ultimately gave them both the epithet *Philadelphos* or "sibling-lover" (and that prompted much ruder remarks from some). Although this marriage had no issue, and Ptolemy II's heir, Ptolemy III, married a half-cousin rather than a sister, this remarkable breach of Greco-Macedonian custom was to be followed by others, down throughout the generations. Ptolemy IV married his full sister Arsinoë III. Their child, Ptolemy V, had to "marry out", since he had no sister, but his sons (by his Seleukid bride Kleopatra I) each married their sister, Kleopatra II, in succession. Both these marriages were reasonably prolific, but even more so was the marriage of Ptolemy VIII to his niece (and stepdaughter), Kleopatra III. One of their sons - Ptolemy IX - married not one, but two sisters (in succession), which seems rather greedy, given that the other, Ptolemy X, had to settle for a niece. After Ptolemy X's death, his son, Ptolemy XI, married the same woman, his cousin and stepmother - we are *fairly* certain she wasn't actually his real mother! Ptolemy XII, the father of the famous Kleopatra (VII) was married to a full or half-sister, though we don't know whether or not she was Kleopatra's mother. Kleopatra herself probably married both her brothers in succession, but each of them died before he was old enough to challenge successfully her dominance, and none of her children were sired by a brother. One might wonder what sort of emotional tone these marriages had. Did these siblings (and cousins and uncles and nieces) truly love each other as husband and wife? Occasionally, it seems that they did (Ptolemy IX, for example, is said to have "greatly loved" his sister-wife, Kleopatra IV, though he was unable to do so for very long, as their mother, Kleopatra III, forced them to divorce). But we've seen what kind of relationship the marriage of Arsinoë II and Ptolemy Keraunos was, and their story of cruelty and hatred is one that was echoed in later generations. The worst of the lot - far worse even than Ptolemy Keraunos - was evidently Ptolemy VIII, as Justin tells us:

"In Egypt, King Ptolemy [VI] had died, and an embassy was sent to the Ptolemy [VIII] who was king of Cyrene to offer him the throne, along with the hand of Queen Cleopatra [II], his own sister....As for [Ptolemy VII, the son of Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra], on the day of the wedding at which the king was taking his mother in marriage, Ptolemy killed him in his mother's arms amidst the arrangements for the banquet and the rites of the marriage, and entered his sister's bed still dripping with the gore of her son...." (Justin 38.8; Yardley translation)

Another inauspicious beginning (and suspiciously similar to Justin's account of the marriage of Arsinoë II and Keraunos). If Kleopatra II didn't already hate her younger brother - now her husband - 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. Either by rape or seduction, Ptolemy VIII fathered a son on her daughter, Kleopatra III, and subsequently married her. Whether he divorced Kleopatra II or not is unclear. The three ruled together in what's been called "an unholy *ménage à trois*" until 116, when Ptolemy died. It was a far from peaceful reign. At one point, for example, Kleopatra II succeeded in temporarily ousting her brother and her daughter from Alexandria, and reigned there alone for a time. On this occasion, Ptolemy once again displayed his peculiar hatefulness by murdering Kleopatra's last remaining son, Ptolemy Memphites - who was also his own child - dismembering the body, putting it in a box and despatching it to the boy's mother as a birthday present.

Small wonder that Peter Green has characterized the Ptolemaic dynasty as morally depraved:

"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." (*Alexander to Actium*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1990, p. 554). Michael Grant takes it one step further in his biography of Kleopatra VII: "certain 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." (*Cleopatra*, New York 1972, p. 27)

But Ptolemy VIII's and Kleopatra VII's behaviour cannot be ascribed to *inbreeding*. I think we're probably safe in saying that Ptolemaic moral behaviour is likely to have been the result of nurture (or perhaps the lack thereof) rather than nature. I don't believe we need spend much time on the question of whether Kleopatra, as a kind of Ptolemaic "bad seed", actually inherited a concentrated set of chromosomes genetically programming her to murder her siblings. Nevertheless, what about the actual physical effects of inbreeding on the Ptolemies?

Ptolemy VIII, popularly (or perhaps unpopularly) known as *Physkon* ("Pot-Belly") among the Alexandrians, is sometimes brought forward as an example of the deleterious physical effects of incest among the Ptolemies (despite the fact that Ptolemy VIII was not himself inbred). Coin portraits and sculptures of this member of the clan show him to have been quite heavy, and the picture is "fleshed out" (as it were) by literary descriptions of him:

"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." (Justin 38.8; Yardley translation.)

A repellent outer man to match the repellent inner man. But even leaving aside the issue of source bias (bound to exaggerate negative characteristics), it's very clear from other sources that Ptolemy VIII's weight problem was a matter of *lifestyle* - he is said to have lived a life of tremendous luxury and self-indulgence. There is no need to posit a freak recessive "fat" gene in the Ptolemaic clan, made dominant by repeated incest.

So while it is certainly true that inbreeding - especially when carried on at such a close degree of relationship as it was among the Ptolemies - can have harmful genetic effects, the fact remains that we really do not have sufficient evidence to demonstrate incontrovertibly that the Ptolemies were physically affected by their incestuous behaviour. They may therefore have found incest and inbreeding a supportable method of dynastic propagation. But supportability is not the same as desirability. Why should they have adopted this pattern in the first place, and adhered to it so stubbornly?

The phenomenon of incestuous marriage in the Ptolemaic house is no doubt something that had complex causation, and some of the rationales might well have become apparent to the Ptolemies themselves only after the fact, if at all. There may have been a desire to ingratiate themselves with the Egyptian population by copying the customs of the Egyptian Pharaohs, though this argument has certain weaknesses we don't have room to explore here. Another reason may be that there were times and political circumstances during which the Ptolemies preferred to "marry in" rather than risk entangling themselves with one of the other Greco-Macedonian dynasties such as the Seleukids or Antigonids, with whom they were often at war. Marrying their sisters themselves (rather than marrying them off into another dynasty) also controlled the offspring of those sisters - Ptolemaic women, and their sons by non-Ptolemaic men, could be a very feisty bunch. Incestuous marriage also had the advantage of maintaining the "purity" of the blood-line (though whether the Ptolemies truly thought of themselves as in any way "pure" is another matter). Furthermore, it assimilated those who practiced it to the divine world, since the gods - the Greek gods Zeus and Hera, as well as the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris - practiced sibling marriage. One motivation that may always have remained below the threshold of conscious recognition is the one most likely to have been shared with other human cultures which have also practiced royal sibling incest. It's 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" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). 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. We've come full circle to the issue of divinity again, but it's about more than a simple assimilation of royalty to the gods. It's about *human* power as well, and about subconscious and perhaps universal human instincts that there is something "numinous" about those who transgress such boundaries. It is precisely this transgression that gives Oedipus the numinous power he displays at the end of his life. If a taboo is a thing that is "set apart", then the Ptolemies by their actions *became* "taboo" - truly set apart, unreachable by ordinary humans, and not to be judged by ordinary standards of human behaviour.