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Ptolemy's Political Tool: Religion

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In the modern world the President of the United States of America is often called the most powerful person in the world. Such a grand title is no doubt impressive but pales in comparison to being called a living god. A human, even the most powerful human, is still a mere mortal. In the ancient world, the trend for having great kings called a living god or son of a god became quite popular, and Egypt serves as a perfect example of how this grand title worked to connect two cultures under a single crown and authenticated the Ptolemaic dynasty’s sovereignty over Egypt. The Ptolemies not only established their own ruler-cults in Egypt but also, with a shrewd understanding of the geopolitics of Egypt, used religious cults and temples to further their political agenda.

After the death of Alexander the Great, Ptolemy I Soter seized the opportunity to establish himself king over Egypt. In addition to having to solidify his position as ruler of Egypt externally in the diadochoi wars, Ptolemy I had to fortify his kingship internally. Ptolemy I, being a foreigner, had to appeal to the native population and had to adapt to their customs; as a result, Ptolemy I became a pharaoh of Egypt. For the Egyptians, tradition dictated that pharaohs were living gods; therefore, by extension the Ptolemies were living gods. On the other hand, the Greco-Macedonian elite living in Egypt did not immediately honor the Ptolemaic rulers as living gods; however, Greek culture did allow for deification posthumously. Eventually, the Greeks, influenced by the native traditions of Egypt, extended their deification of dead persons to living persons and thus awarded members of the Ptolemaic dynasty with the title of sunnaoi theoi, “gods who share the temple.” These factors became the first steps towards the establishment of the ruler-cult of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

The Ptolemaic dynasty-cult did not become officially established until Ptolemy II Philadelphus deified his late father Ptolemy I Soter and his wife. Around 280 b.c.e. he also created a festival in his father’s honor called the Ptole-

This act preceded and even opened the way for Ptolemy II to later declare himself a living god. Over the centuries, each successive Ptolemaic ruler adopted himself or herself into the long line of pharaohs and living gods. The deification of Ptolemy I proved just as useful to the later Ptolemaic rulers, not only as a god but also as “founder of the royal cult” as Alexander as a god had proven to be to Ptolemy I Soter. Whether or not the Ptolemies believed that they truly descended from the gods and ruled in Egypt as gods has less importance than why the Ptolemies took on this role. The answer comes down to one word, power. The Ptolemies need the support of both the native Egyptians and the Greco-Macedonian settlers, and manipulating the traditions of each group proved an effective tool for securing their sovereignty. Ptolemaic dynasty lasted longer than any other dynasty founded by the successors of Alexander the Great, which demonstrated that the Ptolemies had a shrewd knowledge of politics and control of the masses. Furthermore, they were able to sustain their sovereignty with little violence compared to their contemporaries; in fact, “the mass of the Egyptian population did not, at any time during the Ptolemaic regime, deeply desire to rid itself of the Ptolemaic dynasty.”

The Ptolemaic rulers recognized the effective system of government long established by the Egyptians; so rather than implementing a completely foreign system, the Ptolemaic rulers adapted to and adjusted the status quo. Fortunately for the Ptolemies, the status quo meant they were living gods ruling a prosperous nation. It is important to note that the Ptolemaic dynasty did not become pharaohs on their own; rather, the native Egyptians simply “cast the Ptolemies in the role of pharaoh” because it was the only form of rule they knew. Furthermore, the idea of worshipping the pharaoh as a god and the concept of ruler-cults in general essentially “was the worship of power;” the Pharaoh or king was seen as the force preventing chaos from destroying society and that force deserved the respect and honor of the people.

Ptolemy I and his successors understood that while the “key principle of government was kingship”, they also recognized that they themselves “were not simply pharaohs but also Macedonian kings ruling a Graeco-Macedonian elite within the country, as well as the subjects beyond.” Therefore, Ptolemy I cautiously established a ruler-cult acceptable to both the Greeks and the Egyptians and so provided “an opportunity to Greek subjects for the corporate acknowledgement and reaffirmation of the Ptolemies’ political position,” satisfying the native population by continuing many of the ancient customs of pharaoh worship.

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family, along with the other Macedonian successors in the Near East, related themselves as Macedonians first and foremost and thus, by extension, inheritors and advocates of Greek culture. Yet the Ptolemaic rulers controlled a non-Greek nation and had to rule accordingly. Consequently, the Ptolemies had to devise a way of bringing the Greeks and Egyptians together politically.

Religious cults became the answer to bringing the two cultures of Egypt together. The Greeks and Egyptians came to identify their respective deity in the other’s religion: Apollo as Horus, Hermes as Thoth, Zeus as Amon, and Aphrodite as Hathor. Over time the Greeks influenced the Egyptians, and the Egyptians influenced the Greeks, and new cults emerged in Egypt. Unfortunately, the study and analysis of the numerous cults derived from the combination of the many Greek and Egyptian gods cannot possibly be properly addressed in this paper; therefore, the cult of Sarapis and Isis will serve as an example of these cults.

As founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Ptolemy I Soter devised a plan to unite the subjects under his rule, namely the Egyptians and the Greeks; he created a new cult that embodied both Egyptian and Greek deity, the cult of Sarapis. Sarapis embodied the characteristics of Osiris and Apis, both Egyptian gods. Furthermore, the Greek god Hades was brought to Egypt and became directly linked to Sarapis: “Hades became known as Osiris-Apis, or Serapis, who was worshipped under the form of a bull wearing a disk and uraeus.” In Egyptian culture, Osiris was deeply rooted in the afterlife and often considered a god of the underworld; therefore, the Egyptians had very little difficulty accepting the Greek god of the Underworld, Hades, as equal to Osiris and embracing the new cult of Sarapis. Clearly, the Ptolemies understood the sociopolitical climate in Egypt, and as Budge described it, the creation of Sarapis “was a masterpiece of statecraft” because it “reconciled the Egyptians to being ruled by a dynasty of Macedonian kings more quickly and surely than anything else would have done.”

When Ptolemy developed the cult of Sarapis he used two men who were influential in Greek and Egyptian society, respectfully: Timotheus, an Athenian and “member of the Eumolpid family, one of the priestly clans associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries,” and Manetho, an Egyptian priest and historian. These two men and their immense knowledge of each culture’s religious traditions enabled Ptolemy to create a cult that pleased both the Greco-Macedonian elite and the native Egyptians. Furthermore, Ptolemy’s efforts paralleled predecessor Alexander the Great’s efforts to solidify his rule over Egypt by claiming divine right from Ammon, whom he identified with the Greek god Zeus; similarly, Ptolemy I Soter established his divine right

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9. Bell, Cults and Creeds in Greco-Roman Egypt, 15.
to rule from Sarapis. Soter’s use of religious cults had profound consequences on the Ptolemaic dynasty, Egypt, and the rest of the Mediterranean. One of the most significant was the widespread popularity of Isis who was originally subordinate in the cult of Sarapis; the cult of Isis ended up being a main rival for Christianity. The cult of Sarapis brought the Greeks and Egyptians together in such a way that they were able to support Ptolemy in the own individual ways while still sharing a common belief; truly, Ptolemy I proved himself as a master politician in the development of the cult of Sarapis.

The Ptolemaic rulers’ efforts to maintain sovereignty over Egypt through religion and to connect the two cultures under their domain did not stop with cults; rather, they naturally continued into the logical manifestation of cults, temples. The many temples of Egypt played an overwhelmingly prominent role not only in the religious domain of Egyptian society but also in the political and economic spheres as well. When Ptolemy I Soter—being one of the diadochoi, or successors of Alexander the Great—established himself as ruler over Egypt, he understood the power of the temples and their guardians, the priests and scribes. The priests—especially the influential priests of Memphis—served as a connection to native Egyptians and “their goodwill was evidently seen by the Ptolemies as key to the acquiescence of the Egyptian population”; therefore the Ptolemies went to great lengths to secure their allegiance. Thus, to maintain the good favor and support of the native populations, he and subsequent Ptolemaic rulers had to sustain a prudent relationship with the priest class. While the Egyptians had welcomed Alexander the Great and the Greeks as liberators from the Persians, the memories of Persian rule would fade with time and consequently require the Ptolemies to take necessary steps to solidify their political control in many ways, one being through building, restoration, and administration of temples.

As pharaohs of Egypt, the Ptolemy dynasty had the responsibility to pay tribute to the gods through the building and restoration of temples and monuments. Eventually, the period rivaled the great building periods of the Old and New Kingdoms in the number of temples built. Starting with the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty himself, many new temples were built throughout Egypt in honor of both Egyptian deity and Greek deity; the Ptolemies focused much of their building and restoration in Edfu and Philae. Ptolemy II built at both Edfu and Philae: at Edfu he “built a granite gateway in the wall to the north of the temple of Mut,” and at Philae he “began to build a large temple in honor of the goddess of Isis and her son

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Ptolemy I Soter began several building projects—many to be later finished by his son Ptolemy II Philadelphus—a number of which included temples to Egyptian gods. For instance, when Soter established the city of Ptolemais Hermiu, which became the Ptolemaic capital, he built an Egyptian temple. Philadelphus built many monuments that depicted himself and often his wife offering gifts to Egyptian gods. Of these, the Stone of Pithom is quite important: the relief represents Ptolemy II offering gifts to Egyptian gods who in turn promise Ptolemy II “dominion, and power, and a long reign.” Furthermore, “both Arsinoe and Ptolemy I Soter also promise to give him gifts; this shows that they were worshipped as gods.”

Such a depiction begs the question of whether Philadelphus or any of the Ptolemaic rulers built temples in honor of Egyptian gods and offered them gifts out of a sense of true faith or for a political agenda. Some historians have argued that the Ptolemies honored Egyptian gods because they respected and admired the Egyptian religion and culture, whereas others have argued that the Ptolemies shrewdly manipulated the politics and socio-cultural atmosphere of Egypt to secure their rule. Perhaps it was both. To the Greeks, the Egyptian culture was an ancient civilization that had thrived for centuries and had a rich history; in fact, the ancient historian Diodorus wrote that a “number of those . . . celebrated among the Greeks for intelligence and learning, ventured to Egypt in the olden times, that they might partake of the customs and sample the teaching there.” Therefore, the Ptolemies and other Greco-Macedonians likely shared this respect for the Egyptian civilization, but respect did not necessarily lead to genuine conversion. Furthermore, the Ptolemaic rulers like any astute politician—past, present, or future—understood the religious and political links in Egyptian society and exploited them to their full advantage. Consequently, the Ptolemaic dynasty lasted longer than any to dynasty founded by the successors of Alexander the Great.

Unlike modern-day temples, ancient Egyptian temples acted as more than a place of worship and sacrifice. The Egyptian temples had economic functions as well; in fact, temples served as “important foci of economic activity.” The Ptolemaic kings recognized this economic factor and took full advantage of it to increase the wealth of Egypt. The Ptolemies, while greatly maintaining the current structure, established new officials and policies to dictate the economic administration of the temples. For instance, “the crown appointed an epistates or overseer in each temple and above him was a higher official, the epistates ton hieron, who had a complex of temples under his charge,” and these appointees

had the responsibility to implement tax policy and collect any state tax; actually, taxes was the temples’ largest expense.\textsuperscript{23}

Under Ptolemaic rule, temples largely “continued to perform their ancient functions” as the Ptolemaic kings recognized the important role the temples played in the geopolitics of Egypt.\textsuperscript{24} The Ptolemies built many more temples and restored the ancient temples of the pharaohs before them. Over time, these temples and various buildings began to create a visual representation of the blending of the Greek and Egyptian cultures and peoples. The efforts of the Ptolemaic rulers to continue the tradition of the Late Period of Egypt and incorporate Greek’s own classical style led to more and more blending “so that works in a rather incongruous mixed style become more and more common.”\textsuperscript{25} Ultimately, the architecture of the Ptolemies has become often identified as simply Egyptian by the layperson.

Ptolemaic Egypt is “a tale of two cultures” being brought together by a Greek dynasty that used ruler-cults, religious cults, and temples as tools to legitimize their rule. As a consequence, the Egyptians became hellenized, and the Greeks became “Egyptianized.”\textsuperscript{26} Truly, the Ptolemaic dynasty represents a remarkable example of how religion was used as a political tool in the ancient world to justify the conquest and domination of a nation.

\textsuperscript{23} Evans, “A Social and Economic History of an Egyptian Temple in the Greco-Roman Period,” 158.
\textsuperscript{24} Lloyd, “The Ptolemaic Period,” 413.
\textsuperscript{25} Lloyd, “The Ptolemaic Period,” 414.
\textsuperscript{26} Lloyd, “The Ptolemaic Period,” 395.