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Finding-Retrieving-and-Bringing-Back to Egypt the Cultic Implements of the Egyptian Gods: The Development of an Innovative Device for the Ideological Discourse of the First Ptolemies

Efstathia Dionysopoulou

The death of Alexander III (surnamed the Great) in Babylon in 323 BCE was followed by intense negotiations among his commanders for the division of his vast empire, which extended from Greece to India. Ptolemy, son of Lagos, one among the numerous generals of Alexander, was quick to hold his ground in these negotiations. He took over control of Egypt, first as governor (or satrap) of this territorial subdivision of Alexander's empire and then as king and Pharaoh of his independent kingdom. As such, he founded a new royal dynasty, which ruled until the defeat of the Egyptian fleet at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE and the capture of Alexandria by the Roman general Octavian in the subsequent year.

The new political landscapes that emerged from the fierce rivalry between the *Diadochoi* and *Epigonoï* of Alexander III for control over territories of the former empire and delimitation of their kingdoms' sphere of influence led to the development of new motifs that articulated meaningful ideological discourses of dominance and supremacy. One such motif had emerged since the early years of Ptolemaic presence in Egypt. It revolved around the recovery and return of the stolen cult statues and their restoration to the Egyptian temples from which they had been removed. Through an analysis of the situational and historical contexts of the texts in which the motif appears, this paper examines the possible origins and stages of development of this innovative ideological device, which appears to have been successfully and rapidly embedded into the frame of Hellenistic Egypt's social representations.¹ It also suggests a reading of the motif's

¹ On the concept of social representations, see S. Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology* (Cambridge 2000) xiii: "a system of values, ideas, and practices with a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history."

representational meaning alternative to the interpretations that have been proposed so far, which chiefly focus on ideas of Ptolemaic military triumph along with universalistic and imperialistic tendencies or rely too heavily only on certain configurations of political semiosis to derive its meaning.²

The Emergence of a New Motif: The Satrap Stela and the Time of Alexander's Successors

Ineke Sluiter defines *innovation* as:

the adoption by a relevant social group of an idea, practice, technique, or object, where this adoption has not yet occurred. The ideas, practices, techniques, or objects are forms of purposeful or intentional change to solve newly identified problems or to cope with old issues in as yet unexplored way.³

² The motif has already been discussed on several occasions. The most important studies on the topic can be found in J.K. Winnicki 'Carrying off and Bringing Home the Statues of the Gods: On an Aspect of the Religious Policy of the Ptolemies towards the Egyptians', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 24 (1994) 149-190; P. Briant 'Quand les rois écrivent l'histoire. La domination achéménide vue à travers les inscriptions officielles lagides' in: N. Grimal ed., *Événement, récit, histoire officielle. L'écriture de l'histoire dans les monarchies antiques* (Paris 2003) 173-186; C. Thiers, *Ptolémée Philadelphe et les prêtres d'Atoum de Tjékon. Nouvelle édition commentée de la 'stèle de Pithom'* (CGC 22183) (Montpellier 2007) 39-49, 97-106; D. Schäfer, *Makedonische Pharaonen und Hieroglyphische Stelen. Historische Untersuchungen zur Satrapenstele und Verwandten Denkmälern* (Leuven, Paris, Walpole, MA. 2011) 74-83; S. Müller, 'Arrian, the Second Sophistic, Xerxes, and the Statues of Harmodios and Aristogeiton' in: S. Svärd and R. Rollinger ed., *Cross-Cultural Studies in Near Eastern History and Literature* (Münster 2016) 173-202; D. Agut-Labordère, 'Persianism through Persianization: The Case of Ptolemaic Egypt' in: M.J. Versluys and R. Strootman ed., *Persianism in Antiquity* (Stuttgart 2017) 147-162; S. Pfeiffer, 'Finding the Gods of Egypt'. The Motif of Bringing Home the Statues of the Gods from Asia as a New Pharaonic Ideal of Ptolemaic Times' in: F. Coppens ed., *Continuity, Discontinuity, and Change. Perspectives from the New Kingdom to the Roman Era* (Prague 2021) 375-403, and recently C. Fisher-Bovet, 'The Power of Statues: Constructing Imperial Narratives under the Ptolemies', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 144 (2024) 261-279.

³ I. Sluiter, 'Anchoring Innovation: A Classical Research Agenda', *European Review* 25.1 (2016) 20-38, especially p. 21.

Following this definition, this paper considers the emergence of this motif as an innovative ideological device which appears, as such, in Egypt for the first time in priestly and royal inscriptions from the third century BCE. Of course, numerous pre-Ptolemaic narratives recount episodes of Egyptian gods and their statues in movement, as well as their return to Egypt.⁴ However, it must be noted that—as is true for this frequently-attested *topos* elsewhere in Near Eastern and Mediterranean ancient traditions—the narratives presented in these inscriptions make it seem as if the statues of the gods came back to Egypt miraculously of their own volition, even though the Pharaoh, in the background, took the necessary steps to ensure their return.⁵ By contrast, the motif of Finding-Retrieving-and-Bringing-Back to Egypt statues and other cult implements of Egyptian gods explicitly presents the Ptolemaic ruler as the main actor of the events.

The earliest known instance of this motif appears in the Satrap stela, dated to the year 7 of Alexander IV, in the month of Thot (November-December 311 BCE).⁶ At that time, Ptolemy, son of Lagus, governed Egypt as a satrap on behalf of Alexander IV. The text of the inscription was composed by the priests of Wadjet and Horus of Buto on the occasion of the satrap Ptolemy's restoration of a land donation which had been originally granted by the Pharaoh Khababash (338-336? BCE) and later revoked by a Persian King, whose name is transcribed as Ḥšr̥yš.⁷ The donation part of the inscription is preceded by an eulogy celebrating Ptolemy's military prowess,

⁴ For an overview, see the cases discussed in Pfeiffer, 'Finding the Gods', 382-393. Cf. Fisher-Bovet, 'The Power of Statues'.

⁵ See, for example, the episode of the return of statues to Egypt in the so-called Naos of Saft el-Henna from the reign of Nectanebo I in G. Roeder, *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Caire* Nr. 70001-70050 (Leipzig 1914) § 314.

⁶ For an extended commentary of the inscription, see Schäfer, *Makedonische Pharaonen*, 31-201.

⁷ K. Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden der Griechisch-Römischen Zeit* (Leipzig 1904) II 17,3-18,4. For an overview of scholarly debates on the identity of the Great King identified as Artaxerxes III or IV, or as a symbolic *persona* incarnating Xerxes, the arch-enemy of the Greeks, see L.A. Ladynin, 'Two Instances of the Satrap Stela: Tokens of the Graeco-Egyptian Linguistic and Cultural Interrelation at the Start of the Hellenism?' in: P. Kousoulis and K.D. Magliveras ed., *Moving Across Borders. Foreign Relations, Religion and Cultural Interactions in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Leuven 2007) 337-354; G. Gorre, 'The Satrap Stela: A Middle Ground Approach' *Journal of Egyptian History* 10 (2017) 59-62. For the donation account of the text, see Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden*, II 19,3-22.1.

highlighting his victories in crucial battles against *Asiatic* enemies. These campaigns had bestowed upon the satrap Ptolemy—who was officially acting as representative of Alexander’s dynasty—legitimate royal power over both the land of the Nile and the foreign territories.⁸ The Ptolemy’s military praise that the clergy of Buto had composed, which highlights the satrap’s dominance over the territories of the *Asiatics*, could not but have been of significance within the specific historical conjuncture that framed the composition of the text.

The erection of the stela and the composition of the praise for Ptolemy in return for the restoration of Khababash’s land donation to the temple of Buto followed the reconquest of the entire region of Syro-Palestine by Antigonos during the spring-summer of 311 BCE.⁹ Ptolemy did not regain control of the region until 301 BCE. At the time of the composition of the stela’s text, the primary challenge for Ptolemy was to protect Egypt from potential reprisals by Antigonos following the battle of Gaza.¹⁰ This threat was more real than ever, since Egypt no longer controlled the buffer zone of southern Syria. So, the clergy of this local sanctuary, fully aware of the temple’s strategic location in the northwestern Nile delta, a key defensive zone for Egypt, provided local divine support for the satrap Ptolemy by affirming his rightful claims over the contested territories of Syria and Palestine.

The eulogy opens with a list of the military virtues that Ptolemy had supposedly demonstrated in past conflicts over ‘*Koile Syria*’ with Alexander’s Successors. The priests identify Ptolemy’s opponents as *Asiatics*, a generic term rooted in Egyptian collective memory as the archetypal designation of Egypt’s eastern enemies. The first confrontation to which the priests

⁸ Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden* II 13,3-5: ‘He [i.e., Alexander IV] is as a king in the Two Lands and the foreign territories, his Majesty is among the Asiatics, while exists a satrap in Egypt; his name is Ptolemy’. *ἰwꜣf m nsw m t3.wy h3s.wt ἰw ḥmꜣf m-ḥnt(j) s tꜣ.w ἰw wn sr ‘3 m B3q.t Ptwlmys rnꜣf*

⁹ G. Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (New York, NY 2001) 18. Cf. Fisher-Bovet, ‘The Power of Statues’, 264, who has suggested a link between the erection of the stela and the victory of the Ptolemy at the battle of Gaza in 312 BCE. It should be noted that Ptolemy regained southern Syria after this battle, but this did not last. During the spring and summer of 311 BCE Ptolemy’s army was withdrawn from Syro-Palestine after its defeat by Antigonos. On an overview of the events following the battle of Gaza, see Grainger, *Syrian Wars*, 27-28.

¹⁰ Cf. I. Worthington, *Ptolemy I. King and Pharaoh of Egypt* (Oxford 2016) 124.

retrospectively alluded would then go back to 319/8 BCE, when Ptolemy sought to consolidate his satrapy after the Treaty of Triparadeisos. Recognizing the strategic importance of controlling Palestine and central Syria as military buffer-zones at the eastern frontiers of Egypt, he dispatched his general Nicanor to annex the region, expelling the local satrap, Laomedon, and establishing Ptolemaic garrisons in Syrian cities.¹¹ The second major conflict referenced by the Buto priests is the Battle of Gaza in late 312 BCE, fought within the framework of the Third War of the Successors (315–311 BCE). Ptolemy's forces decisively defeated the Antigonids,¹² allowing him to regain control over southern Syria and temporarily mitigate the risk of an Antigonid invasion to Egypt.¹³

Between the list of Ptolemy's military virtues and the onset of the campaign to Syria in 312 BCE, the priests of Buto interposed two events that must have carried strong ideological overtones, as suggested by the priests' decision to single them out. First, the satrap Ptolemy is reported to have brought back to Egypt the statues of the gods ('ḥm.w n nṯr.w) found among the Asiatics, along with all the required ritual equipment (dbḥ.w) and liturgical scrolls (b3.w R') of the temples of Upper and Lower Egypt and restored them to their initial place.¹⁴ Secondly, he made Alexandria—referred to as the fortress (p3 sbt) of the king Alexander—the seat of his administrative power, thus pointing to the transfer of Egypt's capital from Memphis to the Mediterranean coast.¹⁵ The exact date of this relocation remains uncertain. To believe the Satrap stela, he did so before the battle of Gaza, since the priests recount that the military preparations for the campaign to Syria in 312 BCE took place in the new capital.¹⁶ Diodorus mentions that Alexandria served as the base of Ptolemaic army during the revolt of Cyrene,¹⁷ thus suggesting that the transfer had already taken place before the summer of 313 BCE. It has been argued that Ptolemy's decision to relocate the capital was a political gesture of defiance against Antigonos' pretensions, who sought to emulate Perdiccas and establish a central authority within Alexander's former

¹¹ J.D. Grainger, *The Syrian Wars* (Leiden and Boston, MA 2010) 11-29. Cf. Worthington, *Ptolemy I*, 103.

¹² Grainger, *Syrian Wars*, 26-27; Worthington, *Ptolemy I*, 117-122.

¹³ Grainger, *Syrian Wars*, 25-26.

¹⁴ Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden* II 14,9-14,11.

¹⁵ Idem, 14,13-14,16.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Diod. 19.79.1.

empire.¹⁸ Thus, a date of the capital's relocation at the beginning of the Third War of Successors (315/4 BCE) seems highly probable.¹⁹ However, if we follow the order of the events, as they are listed by the priests of Buto, the return of the cult statues and ritual implements to the Egyptian temples must have preceded both the relocation of the capital and the battle of Gaza.²⁰ Given that Ptolemy lost control over Syria during 314 BCE—after Antigonos had successively expelled all the Ptolemaic garrisons from Syria—²¹ the return of the Egyptian gods' statues and ritual implements, which appears to be linked to a context of strife against the *Asiatics*, might date to back to 319/8 BCE. As previously noted, it was during this expedition of the Ptolemaic army that the newly (re)appointed satrap of Egypt first established his dominion over Syria-Phoenicia, thus building on the Pharaonic tradition of eastern conquests. In the particular context of rivalry among Alexander's Successors, this expedition aimed to provide Egypt with defensive ramparts on its Asian side. Whether forgeries or authentic relics that would have been abducted by past invaders of Egypt—particularly the Assyrians—²² the retrieval of cultic implements and their restoration in the Egyptian temples occurred for the first time and continued to recur, as we will see below, within the specific context of rivalries among the competing kingdoms of Alexander's successors in the East.

Interestingly, testimonies of classical authors credit the former ally and later rival of Ptolemy, Seleukos I, with similar symbolic gestures toward Hellenistic cities. Pausanias, for instance, praises the righteous and religious

¹⁸ Grainger, *Syrian Wars*, 25; Worthington, *Ptolemy I*, 124-125.

¹⁹ Cf. Schäfer, *Makedonische Pharaonen*, 86-98.

²⁰ J.K. Winnicki, 'Militäroperationen von Ptolemaios I. und Seleukos I. in Syrien in den Jahren 312-311 v.Chr.', *Ancient Society* 22 (1991) 147-201:168; Winnicki 'Carrying off', 171, who has suggested a link between the return of the statues and the participation of the Ptolemaic army in the battle of Gaza, has proposed that the mention of the statues comes in first place in the text due to the importance that this act would have held for the priests who composed the text. Similarly, Pfeiffer, 'Finding the Gods', 377-378. However, such a non-sequential ordering of events does not appear to be part of priestly discursive strategies—at least in those of the priestly synodal decrees promulgated in the aftermath of battlefields, in which the motif recurs only after the end of the battles, as an outcome of the successful military campaigns conducted by the Ptolemaic army in the East.

²¹ Hölbl, *A History*, 17; Worthington, *Ptolemy I*, 124-125.

²² On Assyrians as possible perpetrators of such abductions, see Thiers, *Ptolémée Philadelphe*, 100-102; Agut-Labordère, 'Persianism', 156-158.

attitude of Seleukos who returned to the Milesians the statue of Apollo, which had supposedly been taken to Ekbatana by Xerxes.²³ He is also credited with returning the statue of Artemis to Brauron.²⁴ In addition, according to Aulus Gellius, Seleukos is credited with the repatriation of a significant number of writings carried off by Xerxes' troops during the sack of Athens—²⁵ a gesture that strongly recalls the recovery in the region of Syria-Palestine and return to Egypt of liturgical scrolls by Ptolemy's army some years earlier.

As Jennifer Finn and Sabine Müller have suggested, such episodes of repatriation of stolen artifacts should be viewed as deliberate performances by the first generation of Alexander's successors, who sought for ideological purposes to fulfill and/or reproduce Alexander's plans.²⁶ In fact, several classical authors describe Alexander in Susa and Babylon proclaiming the return of artifacts supposedly stolen by Xerxes to their original cities.²⁷ This act, scholars have argued, was intended to imitate Cyrus and pose Alexander as panhellenic avenger of the violation of the cities' rights and the gods' properties.²⁸

In such a context, it appears that the motif of Finding-Retrieving-and-Bringing-Back cultic objects would have entered the realm of the Egyptian social representations on historical grounds. It would have been part of Ptolemy's broader policy to imitate elements of the ideological discourse of Alexander (*viz. imitatio Alexandri*), with which the satrap sought to present his government over Egypt under the patronage of Alexander's legacy. This legitimizing effect would have been of paramount importance in the context of the intense rivalries among the emerging Hellenistic kings, each vying for control of the territories derived from the dismantlement of Alexander's empire. So, it seems that the priests of the local sanctuary of Buto were not only aware of the wider political situation and the ideological

²³ Paus. 1.16.3.

²⁴ Paus. 8.46.3.

²⁵ Gell. *NA* 7.17.1-2.

²⁶ J. Finn, 'Alexander's Return of the Tyrannicide Statues to Athens', *Historia* 63.4 (2014) 385-403; Müller 'Arrian, the Second Sophistic', 173-202.

²⁷ Arr. *Anab.* 3.16.7-8; 7.19.1-2; Plin. *HN* 34.70; Val. Max. 2.10 ext. 1.

²⁸ Cf. T.S. Scheer, 'Die Geraubte Artemis. Griechen, Perser und die Kultbilder der Götter' in: M. Witter and S. Alkier ed., *Die Griechen und der Vordere Orient: Beiträge zum Kultur- und Religionskontakt zwischen Griechenland und dem Vorderen Orient im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Göttingen 2003) 59-85, especially p. 83 for the hypothesis of *imitatio Cyri* regarding Seleukos' motives behind the return of the statues of Apollo and Artemis.

principles guiding the actions of the new satrap of Egypt, which resulted from the productive pressure of present supra-local situations. They were also able to integrate and skillfully articulate its innovative components essentially anchored in Alexander's legacy—i.e., the return of the Egyptian gods' cult implements and the transfer of the capital—with elements of the local past that were anchored in specific timeframes. Thus, the local Egyptian clergy seems to have produced a discursive frame that fusions different *chronotopes*,²⁹ historical references, and political contexts. Besides the recognition of his military prowess proven in similar conflicts in the past, this frame provided the satrap Ptolemy with guarantees for local divine support in case Egypt—the core of his territory—would have been came under attack by the Antigonids.

However, it must be noted that there is, I think, a major difference between the gesture of Alexander and Seleukos on the one hand and that of Ptolemy on the other—one that suggests the reframing and adaptation of the motif to the needs of the Ptolemaic ideological agenda. Whereas Alexander and Seleukos retrieved and restored looted artifacts to cities in the periphery of their territory or sphere of influence, Ptolemy and his successors, as we will see below, retrieved objects related to local cults in annexed regions and restored them to the core of their territory. This shift suggests a more locally oriented ideological framework which this innovation might have addressed, tailored to the needs of the Ptolemaic state and its claims to legitimacy.

Reception and Development of the Motif: Priestly and Royal Inscriptions and the Time of the Successor's Descendants

The royal gesture of Finding-Retrieving-and-Bringing-Back to Egypt cult implements associated with the Egyptian gods from territories annexed to Egypt appears to have had a particular resonance with the ideological agenda of the first four Ptolemies, while the same does not seem to apply in the case of the Seleucids. With the sole exception of a passage in Pausanias—which,

²⁹ I use the Bakhtinian concept of *chronotopes* to refer to the multiple available temporally and spatially determined possibilities conditioning human action. On an overview of uses and meanings of the concept, see L. Steinby, 'Bakhtin's Concept of the Chronotope: the Viewpoint of an Active Subject' in: L. Steinby and T. Klapuri. ed., *Bakhtin and his Others. (Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism* (London 2013) 105-125.

in any case, should be treated with caution³⁰— that credits Antiochos I instead of Seleukos I³¹ with the return of the statues looted by Xerxes of Harmodios and Aristogeiton to Athens,³² the rest of the classical authors unanimously attribute such acts to Seleukos I, if not to Alexander himself.

In Egypt, the motif reappears during the reign of Ptolemy II. The retrospective compilation of events in the so-called ‘Pithom stela’, composed around 264 BCE by the Egyptian clergy of Amun of Tjeku in the eastern Nile delta, also commemorated an episode of retrieval and restoration of Egyptian gods’ statues that were found in Palestine during an expedition of the Ptolemaic army in Syria at the very beginning of the First Syrian War. The priests praised Ptolemy II for having found the Egyptian gods (nṯr.w) [i.e., their statues] in Palestine and took all the necessary actions for returning them to Egypt.³³ They also commemorated the statues’ reception ceremony and their reintegration into the Egyptian temples. Based on the order of events compiled by the priests, the retrieval of the statues must have occurred between 279 BCE and January 1, 273 BCE, when Ptolemy II and his wife, Arsinoe II, visited the eastern Nile delta to inspect the defense preparations in response to the advance of Antiochos’ I troops into Syria.³⁴ Before that, the Ptolemaic troops had invaded Syria in early 274 BCE, which, according to the Babylonian Astronomical Diaries,³⁵ prompted the mobilization of Antiochos I and part of the Seleukid army, who moved to that region against

³⁰ Paus. 1.8.5. On the passage in question and its problems, see Müller ‘Arrian, the Second Sophistic’, 175.

³¹ It has been suggested that the return of Harmodios’ and Aristogeiton’s statues might have taken place under the co-regency of Seleukos and Antiochos. This might be the reason of Pausanias’ confusion regarding the identification of the restoration’s author. See Müller ‘Arrian, the Second Sophistic’, 176n. 19.

³² Paus. 1.8.5. On the passage in question and its problems, see Müller ‘Arrian, the Second Sophistic’, 175.

³³ Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden* II 91-94. For the most recent edition of the stela, see Thiers, *Ptolémée Philadelphe* and especially p. 39-49, 100-106 for a thorough commentary on the passage related to the return of divine statues to Egypt.

³⁴ Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden* II 94-95. See also the commentary in Thiers, *Ptolémée Philadelphe*, 99, 107-117.

³⁵ A. Sachs and H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia. Vol. I. Diaries from 652 B.C. to 262 BC* (Vienna 1988) 344-345, ll. 29-32.

the Ptolemaic troops, which had been already encamped there.³⁶ Logically, it must have been this invasion of the Ptolemaic army into Syria that marked the beginning of hostilities of the First Syrian War, prompting the retrieval and return of the Egyptian god's statues to Egypt.³⁷ Once again, if not forgeries created for the purpose of enabling the performance of Ptolemy II, these statues would have been carried off from Egypt by the Assyrians. In any case, the priests of Tjeku do not refer to any specific perpetrator of the divine statues' abduction. Rather, the text emphasizes the ideological legitimacy that the statues themselves bestow upon Ptolemy II:

they [i.e., the divine statues] came before his Majesty, so that he [i.e., Ptolemy II] would be distinguished from (the rest of) the kings in order to exalt his royalty.³⁸

And elsewhere in the text:

they [i.e., the divine statues] distinguished his Majesty before his father Atum, the living great god of Tjeku, as a king eternally.³⁹

Here, again, the new motif clearly occurs in a context where both local and 'pan-Egyptian' support from gods and priests from the Upper and Lower Egypt —also central actors in this event—recognize the legitimate character of Ptolemy's power over Egypt. One can easily appreciate how significant this new motif was, especially considering the pressure under which Ptolemy II was under in 274 BCE. An uprising of his Galatian mercenaries, who claimed control over Egypt,⁴⁰ threatened his position, while the alliance of Antiochos I with Antigonos and Magas had completely encircled Ptolemy's territories. Thus, once again, the return of the Egyptian gods' cult objects would have acted as a token of securing local support to legitimize his authority over Egypt's core territory.

³⁶ J.K. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and her neighbours. Foreign Population in Egypt in the first Millennium BC* (Warsaw 2009) 118-119; Grainger, *Syrian Wars*, 84; Thiers, *Ptolémée Philadelphie*, 97-99.

³⁷ See also Thiers, *Ptolémée Philadelphie*, 99.

³⁸ Sethe, *Hieroglyphische Urkunden* II 91-92: jyꜣsn ḥft ḥmꜣf n-mrwꜣt tꜣnꜣt(w)ꜣf r nsw.w r sqꜣj nsj.tꜣf

³⁹ Idem, 93: tꜣnjꜣsn ḥmꜣf ḥft n jtꜣf Jtm nꜣr '3 'nh n Tkw m nsw r nhḥ

⁴⁰ Paus. 1.7.2. Cf. Call. *Hymn* 4.184-195.

The motif persists under the reign of Ptolemy III but appears to have been enriched with an element that had not been present in earlier reigns. While the Satrap and the ‘Pithom’ stelae do not indicate a specific perpetrator for the cult object’s abduction, the royal and priestly inscriptions from Ptolemy’s III reign impute this sacrilegious act to the Persians—sometimes identified as Medes.

According to the lost Greek inscription of the *Monumentum Adulitanum*, which preserves an encomium of Ptolemy’s III military campaign during the Third Syrian War (246-241 BCE):

[...] He [i.e., Ptolemy III] crossed the river Euphrates, and subjugating Babylonia, Susiana, Persia and Media, and all the countries as far as Bactria, and seeking the sacred objects (τὰ ἱερά) that had been taken from Egypt by the Persians, and bringing them back to Egypt along with the other treasures coming from these places [...]⁴¹

The inscription can be safely dated to the early years of the reign of Ptolemy III, between 245 and 243 BCE.⁴² A contemporary source for the same event is the so-called Alexandria decree, promulgated in 243 BCE. It is the first in the series of the famous trilingual priestly synodal decrees, issued by some of the regular and extraordinary synods of Egyptian priests’ representatives gathered from across the country to interact and/or negotiate with the Ptolemaic kings. Both the preserved versions, written in Traditional Egyptian and Demotic languages, credit Ptolemy III with the return of cult images (šm.w ntr.w) of the Egyptian gods that he had found in the subjugated foreign countries during his expedition in the Third Syrian War. The statues had previously been taken by the Medes, according to the Demotic version, or by the *Asiatics* of Persia, according to the Hieroglyphic version. The return of the cult statues took place once the victorious king had achieved dominance over a region extended from Syria to Susa. The Demotic version refers to his gesture as being ‘mnḥ’, ‘correct’ and ‘effective’ for Egypt, while the Hieroglyphic version implies that the restoration of the statues to their

⁴¹ W. Dittenberger, *Oriens graeci inscriptiones selectae* (Lipsia 1903), n° 54, ll. 17-22.

⁴² F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar ‘Les inscriptions d’Adoulis (Érythrée). Fragments d’un royaume d’influence hellénistique et gréco-romaine sur la côte africaine de la mer Rouge’ *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 109 (2010) 135-160 and especially p. 138 on the date of the inscription.

temples was an act capable of preserving Egypt—Ptolemies' core territory—from turmoil.⁴³

The same motif recurs in a passage from the subsequent decree of the reign of Ptolemy III, which was promulgated at Kanopus in 238 BCE. By that time, Seleukos II had already reconquered the majority of the regions that had been subjugated by Ptolemy III in the preceding years, while under the treaty of 241 BCE, Egypt retained from these territories only Seleukia-in-Pieria.⁴⁴ The focus of the 'benefaction' part of the decree is on the praise addressed to Ptolemy III and Berenike II for having preserved Egypt by averting the risk of famine. So, within this non-military context, the priests choose to emphasize, albeit briefly, the effort of the monarch to retrieve the looted by the Persians cult images of the Egyptian gods (šḥm.w nṯr.w), and refer to it as part of a long list of 'effective deeds' done by Ptolemy for the Egyptian gods. At the same time, they relegate the memory of his military expedition to the East during the Third Syrian War to the background. Moreover, unlike the *Monumentum Adulitanum* and the Alexandria sacerdotal decree, the phrasing of the Kanopus decree frames Ptolemy's III campaign to the East as a defensive, rather than an offensive, war. This suggests an adaptive retelling of past events in order to become better aligned with the contemporary context surrounding the composition of the decree.⁴⁵

The last occurrence of the motif known to date is found in the Raphia decree. This priestly synodal decree was promulgated in 217 BCE, at the aftermath of the unexpected victory of Ptolemy IV over Antiochos III near Gaza, in the outskirts of Raphia. The battle is the central episode of the Fourth Syrian War (219-217 BCE), in which Antiochos' troops approached the borders of Egypt. The narrative of the retrieval and return of the Egyptian cult images (sšm.w/šḥm.w n3 nṯr.w) which suffered from the vandalism of the Medes follows the episode of Ptolemy's victory over Antiochos and falls within the description of Ptolemy's broader initiative to restore cult equipment and support the temples which had suffered from Antiochos'

⁴³ For the discussed passage, see Alexandria decree ll. 8-10 (Hieroglyphic) and ll. 27-28 (Demotic) in H. Altenmüller, Y. el-Masry and H.J. Thissen, *Das Synodaldekret von Alexandria aus dem Jahre 243 v.Chr* (Hamburg 2012).

⁴⁴ Grainger, *Syrian Wars*, 167-170.

⁴⁵ For the discussed passage, see Kanopus decree ll. 5-6 (Hieroglyphic), ll. 11-12 (Demotic), ll. 9-11 (Greek) in S. Pfeiffer, *Das Dekret von Kanopus (238 v.Chr). Kommentar und historische Auswertung eines dreisprachigen Synodaldekretes der ägyptischen Priester zu Ehen Ptolemaios' III und seiner Familie* (München 2004).

presence in the region of Syria-Palestine. Here again, the Egyptian priests impute the abduction of the Egyptian gods' statues to the Medes (*alias* Persians), thus largely following the same pattern as the inscriptions from his father and predecessor, Ptolemy III. However, a new element emerges in the motif. Along with the cult statues of the Egyptian gods, Ptolemy IV is said to have returned to Egypt animal mummies found in the sites of Syria-Palestine which had come under his control.⁴⁶

It seems to me highly improbable that Egyptian-style animal worship would have been practiced outside Egypt.⁴⁷ Instead, it seems more likely that the authors of the decree would have invented and singled out a mention of divine animals' bodies as a token specifically related to the ideological agenda promoted by Ptolemy IV. Of course, the Ptolemies' concern for the maintenance of animal cults in Egypt was general and diachronic.⁴⁸ However, the overall symbolic cycle of kingship power and transfer of legitimate rule from the predecessor to the successor, as expressed in divine animals' enthronement and succession, as well as the links developed between the deceased divine animals and Osiris' cult, mirrored ideological trends specifically promoted by Ptolemy III. These ideological trends were further exploited by Ptolemy IV into the development of his own ideological program to address succession issues and uprisings contesting his legitimacy.

In the Raphia decree, in particular, the retrieval and ceremonial restoration of divine bodies—both statues and mummies—into the temples of Egypt's core territory is followed by a second campaign against the 'territories of his enemies'⁴⁹ (possibly hinting at a Ptolemaic invasion of Seleukid Syria) and the dealing with an incident that seems to be related with an episode of mutiny of his army. In order to legitimize his actions/decisions, Ptolemy IV invokes the authority of the Egyptian gods—namely, the divine

⁴⁶n3 ntr.w (n) Kmy n3w-gmꜥw (r) t3yꜥw w'b.(t)

For the passage in question, see Raphia decree ll. 17-23 (Tell el-Mashkuta copy), ll. x+2-x+8 (Memphis copy). The inscriptions are published and/or commented in H. Gauthier and H. Sottas, *Un décret trilingue en l'honneur de Ptolémée IV* (Cairo 1925); H.J. Thissen, *Studien zum Raphiadekret* (Meisenheim am Glan 1966).

⁴⁷ Cf. Thissen, *Studien*, 59-60.

⁴⁸ For an overview, see for instance, D. von Recklinghausen, *Die Philensis-Dekrete. Untersuchungen über zwei Synodaldekrete aus der Zeit Ptolemaios' V. und ihre geschichtliche und religiöse Bedeutung* (Wiesbaden 2018) 265-275.

⁴⁹n3 tš.w n3 yꜥ f d dy.w

Raphia decree, l. 23 (Tell el-Mashkuta copy), l. x +8 (Memphis copy).

powers whose bodies he had ordered to be transferred from the periphery (or, in the terms of the Egyptian priests, from the territories that Ptolemy IV controlled outside Egypt) to the core, the land of the Nile.⁵⁰ The decree itself mentions that he took action to ensure the repatriation of divine bodies, so as to make known to the people in these foreign lands how great his concern was for the gods of Egypt.⁵¹ These are the gods whose protection and authority enabled Ptolemy to vanquish Antiochos within the context of a defensive, rather than offensive, war for Egypt, while also addressing his army's mutiny.

Thus, the contextual analysis of the new motif in the texts in which it appears suggests that its (re-)invention primarily addressed—at times on a historical and at other times on a symbolic level—the discourse used by the Ptolemies to cope with issues related to the maintenance of their power over Egypt. First, the motif recurs in the context of challenges that the Ptolemies faced for the preservation of the core territory of their kingdom, as reflected by the series of defensive wars in the East (with the exception of Ptolemy III's campaign, which was later reframed by the priests as defensive) that enabled the annexation of buffer-zones at the eastern frontiers of Egypt. Second, its appearance also seems to have been associated with situations that were marked by legitimacy-related issues, having arisen from opposing relationships with other Hellenistic rulers and internal contenders of their authority.

This innovative motif appears to have been re-invented some years after its first appearance, under Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV, so as to become more relevant for the new circumstances surrounding the co-production of Egypt's elites' ideological discourse. The integration of the Persians as perpetrators of the abductions of the cult implements certainly appealed to the widespread anti-Persian sentiment among the Graeco-Macedonians.⁵² It was also anchored in the equally strong negative view that the Egyptians had for the two Persian dominations, as periods of molesting of the Egyptian temples.⁵³

⁵⁰ Raphia decree (Dem.), l. 25 (Tell el-Mashkuta copy); x+10 (Memphis copy).

⁵¹ Raphia decree, l. 20 (Tell el-Mashkuta copy).

⁵² Agut-Labordère, 'Persianism', 158-161.

⁵³ C. Thiers, 'Civils et militaires dans les temples. Occupation illicite et expulsion' *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 95 (1995) 493-516, especially 498-499; D. Klotz, 'Two Studies on the Late Period Temples at Abydos', *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 110 (2010) 127-163; Cf. D. Farout 'Je n'ai pas tué le taureau

However, the fact that from the priestly inscriptions the Persian perpetrator of sacrilege is mentioned only in the synodal decrees must not have been irrelevant to the need of the newly constituted 'Pan-Egyptian' decision-making body of the priests to perform a *polis*-related collective identity during the synods. Although the analysis of this innovation goes beyond the scope of this paper, it can be noted that for this new positional identity to be discursively effective, it needed to be anchored, among other things, in the framework of the social representations to whom it would have been addressed, namely the Ptolemies. To this end, the echoing nexus of pan-Hellenism, *polis* and Persian memory, transposed in local terms, would have been of importance.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has aimed to show that the motif of Finding-Retrieving-and-Bringing-Back to Egypt the cult statues and other cultic implements of the Egyptian gods emerged as an innovative gesture, most likely developed as an *imitatio Alexandri*, within the context of the Successors' rivalries for the division of Alexander's empire. The intense negotiations between the Ptolemies, local priestly elites, and representatives of the Egyptian temples from across the country, on the occasion of the priestly synods, led to the reinvention of this motif, such that it became more relevant to new circumstances surrounding the co-production of the Egyptian elites' ideological discourses. While the motif did not reappear among the Seleucids, or in other Hellenistic kingdoms, in Egypt, it was rapidly developed into a true ideological device which was successfully and rapidly integrated into local frames of reference. Its use recurred within specific situational contexts that demanded an effort to reiterate the Ptolemies' legitimate possession of the land before the Egyptian priests and the local population, but also against internal and/or external eastern contenders of their authority, by assimilating the 'imperial' to the local.

divin ! Sésostris, Cambyse et Apis. Un procès mal instruit', *Égypte. Afrique & Orient* 115 (2024) 3-12.