A RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY BETWEEN
THE DYNASTIC AND PTOLEMAIC PERIODS?
SELF-REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY OF EGYPTIAN
PRIESTS IN THE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD (332–30 BCE)

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For many Greek and Roman visitors to Egypt, the continuity of religious life between the Pharaonic and Hellenistic periods seemed obvious. The same can be said for modern visitors, since most of the Egyptian temples still preserved today were built during the Ptolemaic period. However, during the Ptolemaic period, the social composition of the priesthood in Egyptian temples underwent a sweeping change due to the increasing control of the temples by the royal administration. This transformative process can be traced only by analyzing specific sources, such as statues and funerary monuments of priests, which demonstrate modes of self-representation and best reflect the identity of their respective dedicants. In contrast to official documents (royal or sacerdotal decrees) in which the priesthood usually appears as a community of anonymous priests, we obtain concrete information on the family origin or the precise functions of these priests through self-referential material.

The available material allows a chronological distinction between two phases, each characterized by the use of a distinct mode of priestly self-representation. In the first phase, which coincides with the first century of Macedonian domination, the emphasis was on establishing a relationship between Macedonian power and the priesthood, which in fact did not require a major shift in the self-representation of the Egyptian priests. This general picture can be refined through a further division into two sub-phases: the first, from 343 to 270 BCE, can be classified as a phase of continuity for the Egyptian priesthood despite the extensive political changes; in the second sub-phase, i.e. during the reigns of Ptolemaios II and Ptolemaios III

1 Baines 2004.
2 Owing to the limitations in the sources, only priests holding positions of primary importance will be considered.
(284–246 BCE and 246–222 BCE), institutional interactions between kings and priests can be observed as a consequence of several reforms.

The second phase can likewise be divided in two sub-phases: a) from the battle of Raphia (217 BCE) to the reign of Ptolemaios VIII Euergetes II (145–116 BCE), when soldiers and civil officials entered the temples, and b) after 125 BCE, when the majority of the temples were headed by royal officials.\(^3\) Little documentation survives from the period between the end of the third century and the last quarter of the second century.\(^4\) In contrast, after 125 BCE there was an increase in the number of monuments set up by those who were heads of the Egyptian temples. These priests are not connected with the priestly families known in the third century and the mode of their self-representation is totally different.

The study of the family background of the priests will be pursued first on the basis of their ‘ethnic’ affiliation (Egyptian, Greek, or Graeco-Egyptian),\(^5\) and, additionally, on the basis of their family links to the priesthood and the local temples. The nature of priestly functions can be determined by defining the connection between service to the local divinity and service to the Macedonian kings. In this regard it is important to note the different contexts in which Egyptian priests operate, such as serving exclusively a local deity, initiating the dynastic cult in a local temple and exercising local authority in the king’s name or even performing public functions (territorial and financial administration, military officialdom, or both).

**From 343 BCE to 270 BCE:**

*A Period of Continuity for the Egyptian Priesthoods despite Extensive Political Changes*

The first period is characterized by political changes, from the last Egyptian dynasty, the Nectanebids (XXXth Dynasty, 383–343 BCE), during the second Persian domination (343–332 BCE) and the beginning of the Macedonian Period, down to the reign of Ptolemaios II and the establishment of the Ptolemaic dynastic cult (c. 270 BCE).

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\(^3\) This is the case especially in the south of the country. For the north of the country the documentation is insufficient, yet the situation seems to have been the same.

\(^4\) It is difficult to determine whether this is due to an impoverishment of the priesthood at these times or to archaeological coincidence.

\(^5\) Strictly speaking, the Graeco-Egyptians constitute a cultural rather than an ethnic group. See below example 7.