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3 On Imperial Intermediaries: Elites and the Promotion of the Hellenistic Ruler Cult in Ptolemaic Phoenicia and Cyprus

3.1 The Hellenistic Near East between Imperialism and Middle Ground

Alexander's conquest of the Near East has been repeatedly explored through the lens of continuity or rupture with the Persian Empire (Briant and Joannès 2006). Recent literature has emphasized the Achaemenid heritage in Alexander's management of the Eastern territories, as well as the resilience of local cultures or "micro-identities" (Briant 1996; on the concept of "microidentities," see Whitmarsh 2010). In my book on Hellenistic Phoenicia, entitled *Les Enfants de Cadmos. Le paysage religieux de la Phénicie hellénistique* and published in 2015 (Bonnet 2015), I made use of the concept of *middle ground* in order to grasp the subtle mutations that have occurred after 332 BCE, the fall of Tyre and the occupation of Phoenicia, Palestine, and Egypt by Alexander. The notion of "middle ground," coined by Richard White in his famous book on *Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (White 2010), refers to concrete and symbolic spaces or commonalities shared by different groups in a multicultural or multiethnic context. The middle ground implies processes of mutual and intricate accommodation and consists of practices that different actors or groups would find intelligible and profitable. In our case, the middle ground involves the Greek conquerors and the conquered Near Eastern populations, within a new political and cultural deal (cf. a parallel Roman case discussed by Rüpke, this volume, pp. 101–134).

The adoption of a middle ground perspective does not necessarily mean simple continuity nor does it obliterate violence, competition, and conflict. It only implies that in cross-cultural contexts due to war, conquest, business, etc., it is necessary to pay a special attention to the need for feasible and viable compromises, and consequently to cultural creativity. As a win-win zone, where asymmetrical positions tend to blur, the middle ground fosters the emergence or reconfiguration of individual and collective networks. Since Alexander's Empire and the resulting Hellenistic kingdoms of his successors are deeply cross-cultural, what kind of religious middle ground do we observe through the available evidence?

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In this contribution, I will not trace the role of religion in the building-up, maintenance, or fall of the Hellenstic Empire(s) (for which see Hauben and Meeus 2014; Thonemann 2016), but would like to consider the effects of Alexander's and the Lagids' venture on religious interactions, with a specific focus on the role of imperial intermediaries involved in promoting the cult of the kings, dead or alive, outside Egypt, where these practices resonated with a long tradition of pharaonic cults. Religious honors attributed to human recipients represent an important religious innovation of the Hellenistic period, which has profound religious and political significance (Caneva 2016a; 2020; 2023; Heller and Van Nijf 2017). Honors for Hellenistic rulers question the traditional boundary between mortals and immortals in the Greek religious conceptions and practices. They also use the rituals to design horizontal and vertical relationships between traditional and new recipients of cults, between different ritual and political agencies displayed in public spaces. Within the Lagid kingdom, that extended far beyond Egypt, local and international elites express their loyalty to the imperial project through cult foundations and prestigious offerings, while at the same time taking advantage of and even promoting local/regional cultic traditions (for "religion of loyalty," see Introduction, p. 6). Religious practices could thus help bringing legitimacy to new rulers, foster personal ties between the Empire's ruler and different agents,as well as an original and efficient middle ground for local and global religious issues.

Imperialism had been common in the Near East since Assyrian dominion in the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Babylonian and Persian Empires inherited an imperial expertise in managing multifaceted territories, with their own languages, customs, gods, and ambitious upper classes (Liverani 2014). The small Phoenician and Cypriote kingdoms were used to being part of a big empire, since even the second millennium BCE, but they nonetheless became able to claim some local autonomy from the central powers, taking advantage of their geopolitical environment and economic assets (Elayi 2018). After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, Phoenicia and Cyprus were integrated in the Lagid or Ptolemaic Empire, a kingdom ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty, which started with Ptolemy I Soter, son of Lagos, and which ended with the death of Cleopatra and the Roman conquest in 30 BCE. Ptolemy, who was originally a Macedonian general of Alexander's army, declared himself pharaoh of Egypt and created a powerful Macedonian Greek dynasty which ruled a large area stretching from southern Syria to Cyrenaica and south to Nubia (Map 3.1). Phoenicia remained under the Ptolemies' dominion until 200 BCE, when the Seleucids took over the power on that region, while Cyprus remained a Lagid possession until the Romans annexed the island in 58 BCE (Hölbl 2001). The Seleucid kingdom was ruled by another Macedonian dynasty founded by Seleucus I Nicator, another prominent figure of Alexander's entourage. At the height of its power, the huge Seleucid Empire expanded from Thrace, Ana-

tolia and Syria to Mesopotamia, Persia, and the border of India. It ended in 64/3 BCE with the Roman conquest of the Near East.

Map 3.1 Hellenistic Egypt and Near East: Lagid and Seleucid Empires ca 260 BCE. From Jean-François Salles. "The Hellenistic Age (323–30 BC)". In: *Atlas of Jordan: History, Territories and Society* [en ligne]. Beyrouth: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2013 (généré le 29 septembre 2023). Disponible sur Internet: http://books.openedition.org/ifpo/4894. ISBN: 9782351594384. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifpo.4894.

Considering the specificities of the Phoenician and Cypriote areas, and their strong religious traditions before the Graeco-Macedonian conquest, what was the impact and significance of the emergence of a royal cult devoted to the Ptolemies, the dynasty that had found its new basis in Egypt's Alexandria? Who was responsible for the promotion of rituals in which kings, queens, royal couples and royal families were considered as worthy of receiving honors "equal to the gods"? Were these cultic agents triggered by necessity or interest, or both? How should we evaluate their personal commitment in the royal cult? And finally, can we figure out the target of these specific rituals? The complete lack of Phoenician literature and the

scarcity of information provided by the Phoenician inscriptions leave us with a Greek point of view, from above. This top down perspective sheds light on the elites' agency, but almost totally masks the bottom up dynamics. The recipients of the royal cult remain therefore shadowy.

3.2 Imperial Intermediaries

This chapter will focus on these "go-between" figures, members of local or international elites, and actors of a new imperial "order." Through an accurate analysis of some Greek and bilingual dedicatory inscriptions from Phoenicia and Cyprus, I will highlight the elites' attitudes and strategies that sought to legitimize the new rulers through a "politics of difference" based on local traditions reframed in a global setting. My paper will move from the specific case of the Ptolemies' cult to more general considerations on cross-cultural dynamics as an opportunity for the Empire to improve its capacity for political appropriation. My main argument will be that the oft-used notion of "imperialism" does not do justice to the various levels and patterns of agency that the evidence reveals in the Hellenistic Near East considered as a religious middle ground. A new cultural and religious framework was obviously imposed from above, but bottom-up initiatives and new social agencies able to take advantage of the Hellenistic New Deal easily coexisted. Between constraints and creativity, I will show how people used the different resources of polytheism in order to create profitable interactions.

Before getting into some piece of the evidence, let me briefly focus on the notion of "Empire" and "imperialism," drawing on the recent and inspiring book of J. Burbank and F. Cooper (2010), *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference.* I would define an empire as a vast and complex web of different territories and peoples united by force and ambition. In contrast to nation-centered states, as Burbank and Cooper stress, empires rely on diversity to shape a global, all-encompassing order. The various local traditions become part of "imperial repertories" that constantly vary but aim at providing longevity to the empire and stability to the people. Because they are large, expansionist, cross-cultural political units, empires are incorporative, although in a different way than nation-states. While a nation-state tends to homogenize different regions, an empire implies that different peoples will be governed differently. The "politics of difference" is thus one of the four main issues that Burbank and Cooper tackle to thematize the notion of "empire," together with "imperial intermediaries" (agents in charge of the territories, mainly elites who take advantage of the cooperation), "imperial intersections" (imitation, conflict, or transformation between neighboring empires), and finally "imperial imaginaries," including religious narratives and devi-

ces, which provide a moral framework, even a legitimacy for rulers or, on the contrary, a means for contestation and rebellion against imperial intrusions. Like Richard White (2010), Burbank and Cooper refrain from any binary approach to empires, and from unproductive dichotomies such as inclusion versus exclusion, intimidation versus protection, or loyalty versus resistance. Although no dazzling array of archives is available to study the Hellenistic Near East, comparable to the prolific evidence that historians have for modern or contemporary issues, still a certain amount of inscriptions pertaining to the religious life can shed a light on original ritual configurations involving political leaders and traditional gods.

3.3 Learning to Revere the Greek Gods

When it comes to Alexander's political and cultural project in the Near East, which aimed at unifying the Greek and Near Eastern territories by force, but also through a shared cultural framework, Plutarch provides in his *De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute* an amazing piece of "imperial imaginary," built on the Greek notion of *paideia*, which means "education," "culture." According to Plutarch, who lived four centuries after Alexander's conquest, Alexander had a civilizing mission consisting in teaching the Oriental peoples how to adopt the Greek cultural model and how to venerate Greek gods (Bonnet 2016):

> But if you examine the results of Alexander's instruction, you will see that he educated the Hyrcanians to respect the marriage bond, and taught the Arachosians to till the soil, and persuaded the Sogdians to support their parents, not to kill them, and the Persians to revere their mothers and not to take them in wedlock. O wondrous power of Philosophic Instruction, that brought the Indians to worship Greek gods, and the Scythians to bury their dead, not to devour them! (…) When Alexander was civilizing Asia, Homer was commonly read, and the children of the Persians, of the Susianians, and of the Gedrosians learned to chant the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. And although Socrates, when tried on the charge of introducing foreign deities, lost his cause to the informers who infested Athens, yet through Alexander Bactria and the Caucasus learned to revere the gods of the Greeks.

Plutarch concludes:

> Thus, Alexander's new subjects would not have been civilized, had they not been vanquished; Egypt would not have its Alexandria, nor Mesopotamia its Seleuceia, nor Sogdiana its Prophthasia, nor India its Bucephalia, nor the Caucasus a Greek city hard by; for by the founding of cities in these places savagery was extinguished and the worse element, gaining familiarity with the better, changed under its influence. (Plutarch 1.5.328c–f)

This narrative provides an idealized and "colonial" picture of Alexander's impact in the East, presented as a real and ambitious process of "Hellenization". In other words, from the point of view of Plutarch as a Greek, but widely-traveled observer, Alexander spread the Greek *paideia* as a shared, but imposed, cultural framework, made of great classics and panhellenic gods, new cities and new moral standards. Hellenism is presented as an effective, all-encompassing cultural standard that unifies and sees from a higher point of view the many local identities. As Irad Malkin (2011) convincingly argued for the archaic colonial movement, the construction of a distinctive and shared Hellenic identity—which corresponds to the concept of "Hellenism" (Bowersock 1990; Gruen 1998; Stavrianopoulou 2013)—is a result of distance, which produces convergence in terms of the frequent occurring/the active use of cultural references within this wider world. Certainly, Persians, Gedrosians, and Bactrians did not renounce their own gods, but Plutarch observes that the Greek gods became common to them all. While providing legitimacy, in the eyes of Plutarch's Greek and Roman, audience to Alexander's military violence over the conquered people, such a "civilizing" mission does not however imply the decline or disappearance of local traditions. To say it in Plutarch's words, "savagery" not only survived but even flourished under specific conditions, in specific spaces, thanks to specific agents. By taking a close look at different local contexts, which appropriated Hellenism as spread by the conquerors in a creative way, we will observe intricate top down and bottom up dynamics fostered by Alexander himself, then by his successors, and different kinds of "imperial intermediaries."

3.4 The Ruler Cults as a Political and Social Strategy in Phoenicia

Our first stop will be Phoenicia. After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, and until 200 BCE, the tiny but prosperous kingdoms of the cities of Arwad, Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre were part of the huge Lagid Empire, which was at the same time the heir of Alexander's conquest and of the pharaonic prestigious legacy. With their international and rich harbors opening onto the Mediterranean space, the Phoenician kingdoms shifted from Persian dominion to Greek, but always preserved some of their autonomy, particularly in the religious field. Each kingdom or city-state was pride of its own gods and cult places. In Tyre, for example, the divine and royal couple formed by Melqart (literally "the King of the City"), the Baal of Tyre (Bonnet 1988; Bonnet and Niehr 2014), and Ashtart (Astarte), the ultimate royal goddess (Bonnet 1996; Bonnet and Niehr 2014), remained at the very core of religious life. In Sidon, inscriptions mention the Baal of Sidon, probably Eshmun, and

Astarte again (Bonnet and Niehr 2014). In Byblos, the Baal and the (female) Baalat of Byblos are venerated together in a sacred area (Bonnet and Niehr 2014). Even though Greek language and culture permeated the whole Phoenician area before and after Alexander, the local gods were never completely obliterated by their Greek correspondents such as Heracles for Melqart, or Aphrodite for Astarte, the more frequent, although not unique Greek conceptualization of these divine powers (Bonnet 2015). Looking at the Greek and Phoenician evidence after 332 BCE, I discovered a complex and fluid religious landscape, in which Greek gods, habits, institutions, practices—to put it in a nutshell, "culture"—were certainly well established, while, at the same time, local customs remained vivid.

In Phoenicia as elsewhere, in Cyprus, Anatolia, Egypt and even in the Far East, Alexander adopted a strategy of legitimating his imperialistic power through the appropriation of local/regional tutelary gods or goddesses, like Artemis in Ephesus, Zeus Amon in Siwa, Apis in Memphis, and Melqart in Tyre (Caneva 2012; on Melqart see Bonnet 2015). The local supreme gods became Alexander's personal support and friends (*philoi*). In Siwa Alexander was even declared the gods' son, according to a pharaonic pattern. By coping directly with the supreme gods who symbolized a long lasting sovereignty over the territory and its people, Alexander displayed the new, human and divine, hierarchy of the Empire: at the top, the king or emperor "equal to the gods", then the gods, both Greek and local, considered and mobilized as his relatives, and finally the mass of people, his subjects. As a consequence of Alexander's imperial project, continued and extended by the Seleucid and the Lagid dynasties in the Hellenistic period, the local gods were diluted within a global framework, while still keeping their ancestral prestige. In his local context, each single god is rooted in a tradition and a territory, which make him/her unique and very strong. He or she is the "Lord"/"Lady" of the place and the people. Considered in a global perspective, each local "Lord" or "Lady" seems similar and may be reduced to a common "type," as it happens for the many different local Baal of the Syrian area who almost all became Zeuses. Their originality and force became less visible by comparison with other similar gods, because they were "dissolved" in a broader religious landscape.

We might call this phenomenon "Hellenism," if we emphasize the fact that local divinities did not disappear, but were reconfigured in a new environment. Their resilience—inherent to the flexibility of polytheistic systems—gave birth to creative compromises and reformulations.

Let me now flesh out these connections between Empire and Religion with some specific evidence, mainly inscriptions, coming from Hellenistic Phoenicia. It is worth noticing that the first Greek inscription from Phoenicia, found in Tyre, was carved on an altar owned by Ptolemy II, son of Ptolemy I, and his wife (and sister) Arsinoe II, called *adelphoi theoi* ("divine siblings"). The royal cou-

ple was thus worshipped during their lifetimes, approximately between 272 and 268 BCE (Caneva 2016a; 2016b). Nobody knows who made this offering, but it is likely that for the Phoenician and Greek people, the royal and divine siblings evoke the divine couple Osiris-Isis, or Sarapis-Isis. In a Phoenician inscription found in Ma'ashuq, but most probably coming from Umm el-Amed, near Tyre (Rey-Coquais 2006, 156, n°386, fig. 386), the consecration of a portico dedicated to Astarte is dated "by the 26th year of Ptolemy[1], Lord of the Kings, the powerful, who does good,[2] son of Ptolemy and Arsinoe, the divine siblings, in the year 53 of the people of [Tyre]", which corresponds to 222–221 BCE. The divine siblings are mentioned only in the dating formula, and not as the recipients of the offering, but nonetheless, in the Phoenician language, king Ptolemy III and his wife were considered as a pair of *theoi adelphoi* (in Phoenician: *'ln 'ḥym*).

Osiris and Isis, the original divine siblings, had been rooted on Phoenicia since the Persian period at least and were very popular, as various personal theophoric names show, such as Abdosiris or Isisyaton. The link between the cult of the Ptolemaic sovereigns and the cult of Isis-Osiris/Sarapis has been repeatedly stressed in the recent literature (Caneva 2016a; 2016b, Bricault and Versluys 2014). Since there is a consensus on this point, I will not explore it further. It suggests that divine protection is bestowed by gods upon kings and people because of divine benevolent attitude towards mankind and thanks to human piety towards the gods. The benevolent rulers are inspired by the gods and their cult provides communities with a ritual tool to manifest allegiance to the current power without renouncing to their own cultural heritage.[3] Like at Byblos the Egyptian goddess Hathor was a possible counterpart for the local Baalat, the "Lady of Byblos," since the second millennium BCE (Tower Hollis 2009), Isis was considered as similar to Astarte, because they both protected the royal family and more globally the kingdom as a whole. Cultural commonalities fostered a new political agenda, namely unify Greece and the Near East within an all-encompassing empire, able to put an end to an endemic conflict, which is substantially different from Plutarch's mere colonial program.

A second inscription from Tyre, dating from the end of the third century BCE, sheds more light on the role of "imperial intermediaries." In this text Ptolemy IV Philopator, son of Ptolemy III Evergetes, who reigned between 221 and 203 BCE, is honored through the offering of an equestrian statue bearing a Greek inscription:

> King Ptolemy, god *Philopator* ("father-loving")
> Son of king Ptolemy and queen Berenike

1 This is Ptolemy III Euergetes (247–221 BCE).

2 In Phoenician *pʿl nʿm* is a translation of "Euergetes".

3 For a parallel with the Roman imperial cult, see Rüpke, pp. 111–114.

> *Theoi euergetai* (“benefactor gods”)
> (statue that has consecrated) Thraseas son of Aetos, of the deme Eusebeios,
> The *strategos* of Syria and Phoenicia. (Rey-Coquais 2006, 28–29, n°18, fig. 18a–b)

Thraseas was a high-ranking officer who decided to make a prestigious offering to celebrate the *reconquista* of the Phoenician territory by Ptolemy, who had been victorious over Antiochos III in Raphia in 217 BCE. Indirectly, by celebrating Ptolemy’s achievement, Thraseas also praised his own success as a *strategos* of Syria and Phoenicia. Indeed, the dedicant came from an influential Greek family since his father Aetos had been the Ptolemaic governor of Cilicia, and was responsible for founding the city of Arsinoe in that region, a city named after the queen. Some years later, Thraseas’ son Ptolemaios became one of Ptolemy IV’s leading generals, although he later defected to Antiochos III (on that family, see Gera 1987). Thraseas also appears in an Athenian inscription (IG II^3, 1, 1185), receiving honors for his role as an envoy to Athens. Thraseas’ family originally came from Aspendos in Pamphylia, an Anatolian region deeply hellenized. In this inscription, designed to show his loyalty to the Graeco-Egyptian king, Thraseas stresses the fact that he is a citizen of a deme in Alexandria. We can presume that he was a high officer, member of an international political and military elite, having grown up in Egypt, at the royal court, and involved in the promotion of an early and persistent royal cult in Tyre. The visibility given to Ptolemy’s cult, through an equestrian statue recording his military achievement, in a strategic moment, becomes a hallmark of the new political and cultural deal. The qualification of “father-loving” and “benefactors” applied to the divine rulers contribute in building an encompassing royal ideology, which makes the conquest attracting and promising especially for the elites, but also for the people, which is supposed to take advantage from that care, under the protection of both gods and kings. Despite this idealized message, nothing suggests in Thrasea’s inscription an effort to connect his action with local traditions: the language is Greek, the names are Greek, the dedicant and the beneficiaries are all Greek. The top down process does not seem to leave any space for negotiation.

A third inscription, dated to the end of the third century BCE (probably after the battle of Raphia in 217 BCE), will enable us to observe a more complex and intricate background and religious agency. An inscribed marble block, probably coming from Tyre, or from the Beqaa area, bears a dedication to Sarapis and Isis in favor of king Ptolemy IV Philopator, and the queen, his sister and wife, Arsinoe III:

> For the king
> Ptolemy and for
> the queen Arsinoe,
> gods *Philopatores* (“father-loving”)
> to Sarapis (and?) Isis *Soteres* (“saviors”)

> Marsyas, son of Demetrios,
> from Alexandria,
> chief secretary. (*SEG* 38, 1988, 1571; *RICIS* 402/0601)

Marsyas was another high-ranking official from Alexandria who worked in the Lagid chancellery. In his dedication, he connected two couples: the divine Ptolemy and Arsionoe, who benefit from an offering made to another divine couple, namely Sarapis and Isis. Both divine pairs were given an epiclesis to stress their power: while *philopatores,* applied to Ptolemy and Arsinoe, conveys the concept of a long-lasting and ideal lineage and dynasty, *soteres* refers to the superhuman agency of Sarapis and Isis, designed to enhance the rulers' legitimacy and performativity. Thanks to the gods' proximity, the Lagid dynasty is not only protected and meant to last, but it is also able to protect the whole population, to act efficiently in favor of any single subject. The offerings placed in the sanctuaries make visible the kings' performative power granted by the gods. The triangle shaped by the interaction between the dedicant, the recipients, and the gods displays both the imperial imaginary based on the collaboration between gods and kings, and the mediation undertaken by an international elite (like Marsyas who was born in Alexandria but was chief secretary in Phoenicia), which followed the Ptolemies from Alexandria to their Levantine possessions, and made their hegemony visible and presumably beneficial for their own career and for those who joined the new political agenda.

The process of "double dedications" attested in Marsyas' inscription has been recently studied by Eleni Fassa (Fassa 2015; see also Caneva 2016a and 2016b). She notes that in Ptolemaic Egypt two types of private dedications evolved, relating gods, rulers, and subjects. Most frequently, the gods are Sarapis and Isis, whose dedications are extremely numerous, over time and space. According to the first type of dedication, the offering was made either to Sarapis and Isis (in the dative) *for* the Ptolemaic kings (ὑπέρ+genitive); hereafter, these texts will be called the *hyper*-formula dedications. In the second type of dedications, the offering is attributed to Sarapis, Isis *and* the Ptolemaic kings (all in the dative); these are the so-called "double dedications." It would be an error to consider them as equivalent expressions or mere linguistic variants. Indeed each type reflects slightly different conceptions of the relation between the divine and the royal couple; moreover, they correspond to specific stages in the development of the Ptolemaic dynastic ideology. Nonetheless, both forms express and display a close and significant affinity between gods and kings in the eyes of both the dedicant and the audience.

Marsyas' Tyrian dedication belongs to the *hyper*-formula since Sarapis and Isis are the recipients of the lost offering—maybe a statue—while the king and the queen are mentioned as beneficiaries. It is worth mentioning that the *hyper*-

style and double dedications were almost exclusively made within the Ptolemaic Empire—only rarely did the inhabitants of the Seleucid or the Attalid kingdoms combine their personal dedications to the rulers with those to the prominent deities of their respective kingdoms. From a total of 124 double dedications from the late fourth century BCE to 30 BCE, 116 refer to the Lagids, four to the Seleucids, and four to the Attalids.

Moving from the aforementioned Burbank and Cooper (2010) proposals on the framework of empires, it is clear that the dedications which associate gods and kings belong to a language of power initiated by the kings themselves and shared by different imperial intermediaries in order to shape a new map of correlated divine and human agency. This language is meant to suggest, or impose, the idea that kings and gods work together for the sake of the Empire and of the people. The religious background of pharaonic Egypt undoubtedly favored the idea of the ruler's divine nature, which was soon reflected and amplified by the Ptolemaic monarchs in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Caneva 2018). Dedications *for* or *to* the Ptolemies may consequently be viewed as concrete signs of a cross-cultural process, similar to the Greek epigraphic habitus of giving a Greek name to a foreign deity. The pharaonic ideology of a divine king protected by the gods is relayed by the new leaders of Egypt and exported in their territories outside Egypt, where it is subtly connected to local traditions in order to be more easily received. It definitely contributes to unify the Empire through a common cultic model.

The extensive use, in space and time, of private dedications linking Sarapis, Isis, and the Ptolemies is testimony to their wide acceptance and popularity, especially during the third century BCE, although they first appeared in Alexandria in the early years of the Ptolemaic kingdom. The *hyper*-formula and the double dedication largely spread both inside and outside the Ptolemaic kingdom. The use of the same dedicatory formula everywhere, especially during the reign of Ptolemy II and his successors, demonstrates its use as a token of dynastic continuity. The same ideological discourse, the same religious practices throughout various centuries and in different places reflects the stability of the Empire through the correlations between the royal household and the prominent "Alexandrian" and global gods, Sarapis and Isis (on the notion of "globalization" applied to ancient contexts, see Pitts and Versluys 2014).

The use of the epithet *Soter* (Savior)[4] applied to Sarapis and Isis in Marsyas' inscription, but also frequently ascribed to the royal Ptolemaic couple, is highly engaging. It sheds light on the perception and representation of the organic link between the tutelary gods and the Ptolemaic rulers. In other words, both are sup-

4 For this epithet see Jim 2015 and most recently Jim 2022.

posed to pay attention to human destiny and to aim at helping people in their everyday lives. *Soter*, in fact, covers a wide semantic spectrum, dealing with health, war, death, dangers in travel, justice, etc. While there is almost any archaeological evidence on the ritual environment of the offerings made in Phoenicia, at Alexandria private dedications in favor of the Ptolemaic kings were associated with cultic activities for the king within the temples of Sarapis and/or Isis. The association between the divine and the royal partners was not only an ideological claim, but a concrete cultic procedure. Hence, we can imagine that the dedications with the *hyper*-formula implicitly allude to sacrifices and libations for the gods and the monarchs, within rituals shared by both recipients.

During the reign of Ptolemy Philopator (221–203 BCE), *hyper*-dedications to Sarapis, Isis and the royal couple consistently multiplied in Egypt and beyond. Many of the dedicants were members of the upper class and had various kinds of ties to the royal household. Yet it was during the reign of Philopator that a new temple was built in Alexandria, at a central location, in honor of Sarapis and Isis, the Savior Gods, and of Ptolemy and his wife Arsinoe, the Father-Loving Gods (*I.Alex. Ptol.* 18). This was the very first temple dedicated to both the divine couple and the living Ptolemaic royal pair, considered as equal to the gods event before their death. The cult is not addressed to deceased ancestors, but to deified royal figures. In other words, Ptolemy and Arsinoe were elevated to the same status as that of Sarapis and Isis; they were actually considered as their counterpart on earth.

At the same time, however, because of their specific phrasing, the ὑπὲρ-dedications did imply a mediator eager to advertise his (more rarely her) relationship with the rulers and the gods. This new epigraphic standard was the most effective way for a third person to be integrated into the privileged connection between the gods and the ruling dynasty. The relationship between the dedicants and the Lagid court might have been professional, economic, military or friendly, but most importantly it was hierarchical. By including the king in a private act of devotion, the dedicant wanted to honor the royal household and to provide a statement of praise and loyalty. Moreover, since the majority of the dedicants who used this formula were originally citizens of Alexandria, even if they were in charge of imperial provinces, such as Phoenicia or Cyprus, it is probable that dedications with the *hyper*-formula became a proper medium to stress a political, social, and cultural familiarity with the ruler. It worked as a mark of distinction for the elites and a politically-correct expression for Greek-speaking, upper class-citizens, who made up the network for imperial political strategy.

Finally, the emphasis on interconnected divine and human couples also contributed to the emergence of a shared imperial imaginary, which ingenuously interwove the public and private spheres. To what extent was this discourse spread

and shared in all the social classes is extremely difficult to say. The available sources do not mention explicitly who were the recipients of the message. The sanctuaries were mainly public spaces, open to anybody, but could everyone read a Greek inscription displayed in Tyre or Kition? However, this legitimate question does not find any answer in the current body of evidence. Not a single text expresses a divergence or opposition with the official trend.

As Stefano Caneva noted (Caneva 2014a), through different kind of discourse (inscriptions, poetry, epic, prose), a gentle, reciprocal love within the bonds of marriage is presented as a crucial and strategic value of the Ptolemaic household, ensuring wealth and social order within the kingdom as well as the continuity of the dynasty itself. This is a significant aspect of the "imperial imaginary"—a model that was also reflected in the court elite's emulation of the royal couple. Since the Ptolemaic royal couple officially claimed to be sibling union, this created political advantages in terms of legitimacy, cohesion, and stability, but also needed some mythic and cultic foundations or precedents. Isis and Sarapis obviously played this role, but Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite and some other gods participated in the construction of a new kind of sovereign and cross-cultural power.

Despite the active role of the queens in personal diplomatic commitment and mediation between the king and his subjects (Macurdy 1932; Pomeroy 1984; Caneva 2014a), in poetry even so in inscriptions, they were mainly portrayed as the king's perfect partner, as a proper source of legitimation and continuity for the royal household. Thus, the rhetoric of reciprocal love is associated with a model of an "ideal" royal couple and family where competencies are distinguished on a gender basis, where the *thalamos* (the royal bedroom) is the very core of the kingdom. This ideological motif is developed during the third century BCE and expressed through the surnames of the Ptolemies: *Soter* (Savior), *Philadelphos* (Brother/Sister-Loving), *Euergetes* (Benefactor), *Philopator* (Who Loves his Father). The message is quite redundant and aims at imposing the image of a perfect family, taking care of the subjects as if they were relatives. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the period of the *climax* for *hyper*-style dedications corresponds to the *climax* of the struggles between the *Diadochi*, especially the Lagids and the Seleucids, for the territorial heritage of Alexander.

We can now turn to the last inscription from Phoenicia, before analyzing more briefly the Cypriote case. It is a Greek inscription found in a cave, at Wasta, between Tyre and Sidon, and again dating from the third century BCE. This text sheds a fascinating light onto the cross-cultural cultic strategies encouraged by the Ptolemies and their imperial intermediaries, and probably relayed locally by the people. The inscription, which contains a double dedication, illustrates a middle-ground logic, which facilitates a creative compromise between ancestral "indigenous" traditions and new templates:

> To the king Ptolemy
> and to Aphrodite *epekoos* (“listening”)
> Himilkas, son of Samôs
> (this) prayer. (*CIS* I, 6 for the *editio princeps*; Aliquot 2009, 132)

The Wasta cave seems to have housed, even before the Hellenistic period, a cult centered on the promotion of sexuality addressed to a divine couple initially formed by Melqart and Ashtart (Astarte), the very core of the Tyrian pantheon, two powerful, royal and protective gods (Bonnet 2004; 2008; 2015, 279–286). The walls of the cave show many signs connected with sexuality—Ernest Renan, as a leading figure of Orientalism, alludes to cultic prostitution! (Renan, commentary to *CIS* I, 6)—but very few inscriptions inform on the performed rituals.

The identity of the dedicant, Himilkas son on Samôs, is unknown, but he clearly bears a Phoenician name and a Phoenician patronym (Aliquot 2009, 132). However, he sends his prayer in Greek to a Ptolemy—but which one?—and to Aphrodite, called *epekoos*, “listening.” Even if it is one of the most banal and self-evident epithets in ancient Greek dedications, Eftychia Stavrianopoulou has explored the reasons of its huge popularity and wide geographical distribution throughout the imperial period (Stavrianopoulou 2016, 81). She convincingly argued that “the epithet *epekoos* not only conveys an intimate relationship with the respective deity, but also represents transformations and adaptations in the religious mentalities of the Hellenistic and Roman eras.” More precisely, she showed that the success of *epekoos* originated “as a cultural adaptation of patterns of personal religious practice and iconography that go back to Egypt.” What was at stake is an increasing expectation in terms of the approachability of rulers and deities, in terms of gods’ and kings’ ability to listen to the requests of their subjects and to grant them.

In the Wasta cult, Ptolemy is mobilized together with Aphrodite to listen to Himilkas’ prayer. But who is precisely this Aphrodite venerated in a Phoenician place by a Phoenician worshipper? Is she the Greek counterpart of the Phoenician goddess, Ashtart/Astarte? How do the king and the goddess collaborate in the cult? As Eleni Fassa has stated (Fassa 2015), the double dedications to Sarapis-Isis *and* the divine couple in the dative case appear later than the *hyper*-formula, and it implies equal honors for the monarchs and the gods. The ontological distance between them is strongly reduced, if not altogether absent. In contrast to *hyper*-style dedications, double dedications were more limited both chronologically and geographically. Although the oldest surviving dedication of this type comes from Ephesus (*RICIS* 304/0601), the correlation between Isiac deities and the Ptolemies in “direct” dedications developed almost exclusively in Ptolemaic Egypt.

In the Wasta inscription, however, the dedicant sends his prayer to a puzzling hybrid couple made by a king and a goddess, who are supposed to jointly answer

the prayer. Their agency is not only parallel, or similar: it is common or shared. Moreover, the dedication is written in Greek by a Phoenician worshipper, who establishes a relationship with a Graeco-Egyptian king ruling over Phoenicia and an apparently Greek goddess, who might refer to a local deity. How could that work?

This evidence is very unusual in that it does not reveal any Egyptian background, especially in the dedicant's profile. My hypothesis is that, on the contrary, we are dealing here with an appropriation and re-configuration of local cults and rituals, realized by Phoenician agents (Bonnet 2004; 2008; 2015). As noted by Eleni Fassa, the cult of the Ptolemies both inside and outside Egypt was progressively normalized, with specific formulae, an Isiac background, the whole family involved, and an established protocol. "Now the attribution of divine or godlike honors is not the result of a specific benefaction of the ruler towards a city, but the cities themselves tend to believe that this is the appropriate way to honour the Ptolemaic kings" (Fassa 2015, 141). They intended to display their loyalty and hoped to receive divine protection from them.

In the context of the Wasta offering, Himilkas probably chose to honor Ptolemy as a powerful interlocutor, together with Aphrodite, who mediates his request as a "listening" goddess (*epekoos*), in order to solve his problem thanks to a joint intervention.

To a certain extent, in this inscription, king Ptolemy played a similar role to Melqart, the Baal of Tyre and mythical king (Bonnet 1988; 2015). Melqart was the tutelary god of the Tyrian territory, in charge of protecting the population, even in the diaspora (Carthage, Gades, etc.). Himilkas is precisely a theophoric name based on the divine element "milk," which means "king," and most probably refers to Milk-qart, the "King of the City." In other words, it is likely that Ptolemy was invoked by Himilkas as the new royal god who fulfilled Melqart's prerogatives, who embodied a new divine power. In other words, Ptolemy has appropriated Melqart's divine agency, or rather, Himilkas has appropriated Melqart's powers to reascribe them to Ptolemy. The traditional Phoenician religious pattern of a divine couple has been reframed by a global and imperial ideology, with Ptolemy in the role of the royal god associated with a royal goddess.

Yet in the Phoenician cults, Melqart was almost systematically associated with Ashtart (Bonnet 1988; 1996; 2015). Together they represented a divine pair and shared many features, such as legitimating the monarchy and protecting the territory and its population against any kind of danger. Together they guaranteed prosperity, fertility (also through sexuality) and peace on the whole Tyrian territory. Ashtart, who is called "Name of Baal" in a royal funerary inscription from Sidon (KAI 14, carved on Eshmunazor's sarcophagus), worked as an interface between the god and his worshippers (Bonnet 2009). This is why in the Wasta inscription she is called *epekoos*, "the one who listens." Himilkas' prayer was supposedly

transmitted to the divine Ptolemy through the Greek equivalent of Ashtart, Aphrodite. Moreover, Aphrodite emphasized the "erotic" background of the Lagid courtly love, carefully analyzed by Stefano Caneva. Since the time of Arsinoe II, Ptolemy I's daughter and Ptolemy II's wife, Alexandrian court poetry depicted the deified queen as a new Aphrodite (Caneva 2014b; Caneva 2015). The Aproditean queens expressed the power of female charm over dynasts as a central feature of the royal ideology, based on continuity, harmony, and charism. By choosing Aphrodite *epekoos* as Ptolemy's cultic partner, Himilkas made visible the effect of a new political and religious agenda. Ptolemy has subtly infiltrated local, ancestral traditions, while Aphrodite, his divine spouse, contributes to the divine king's performative prestige, by giving voice to human expectations. Melqart and Ashtart have been updated and put at the service of imperial ambitions.

3.5 The Cypriote Case-Study

Coming now to the Cypriote case-study, we will provide further evidence for the local audience to the "triangles," trying to identify more precisely the sociological profile of the actors. We will also focus on how individuals or groups appropriated locally, in a global context, the new religious "products" constructed by the Lagid imperial discourse. It is worth mentioning that the island of Cyprus has provided the largest body of evidence concerning the royal cult of the Ptolemies outside Egypt (Michel 2020).[5] In Cyprus, like in Phoenicia, there were both double dedications and *hyper*-formulae, involving the Ptolemies and the Isiac gods. The civic connotation of these offerings was particularly stressed, like in Salamis, where a citizen of Samos, who is a member of the *philoi* group (the "friends" of the king), made a double dedication to Ptolemy Philometor (176–145 BCE) and to the city of Salamis, probably represented as a crowned Tyche (*I.Salamine*, n°67; Michel 2020, n°109). This singular divine pair symbolized the entanglement between the local and the global or imperial scale.

An honorific inscription from Amathous dating from the beginning of the second century BCE used approximately the same language:

> The City of Amathous (honored)
> Timonax son of Aristagoras
> because of his devotion *(eunoia*) to the king
> Ptolemy (Hellmann and Hermary 1980, 259–275; Michel, 2020, n°67)

5 I am very grateful to Anaïs Michel who gave me the permission to use and quote her excellent dissertation, even before its publication in 2020.

This public inscription intended to pay homage to a citizen from Amathous, member of the local elite, who took care of Ptolemy's cult, most probably in a local shrine.

The high-ranking dignitaries of the imperial networks established in Cyprus displayed a slightly different strategy than Graeco-Egyptian dignitaries attested in Phoenicia. For instance, Isidoros from Antioch, who was "great intendant" (*archedeatros*) and member of the "royal court," offered a statue of Ptolemy, called *theos alexandros*, "divine Alexander," in the most prestigious sanctuary of the island, Aphrodite's sanctuary in Palaipaphos (Mitford 1961, 34, n°93; Michel 2020, n°99). Many *strategoi*, generals of the imperial army, did the same; making the presence of the king in Aphrodite's cult-place particularly visible. Again, the choice of Aphrodite's cult place is highly significant because the Paphian sanctuary is the symbol of the Cypriote heritage and a place where traditionally the royal power of the local kings was legitimated by the goddess' patronage (Pirenne-Delforge 1994). The Paphian kings were also the goddess' high priests.

In the Hellenistic period, when Cyprus was part of the Lagid Empire, even the local priests of the prestigious Paphian goddess made a dedication to Ptolemy IX Soter II, inscribed on the basis of his statue (*I.Paphos* 25; ca 105–81 BCE). The collusion between political and religious authorities was made very clear by the fact that the general (*strategos)* of the island bore the title of "high priest," at least since the end of the third century BCE (or the beginning of the second century). This important modification in the status of the highest Lagid official in Cyprus reflected the will to ground the royal cult more solidly and to institutionalize it, through the connection with the local rituals. In fact, the most important sanctuaries of the island—Aphrodite in Paphos, Zeus in Salamis, and Apollo in Kourion—hosted a gallery of royal portraits.

Another civic space used to promote the royal cult was the gymnasium, where many dedications to the Ptolemies have been found in different places. Statues of the kings were offered by local gymnasiarchs and probably set up near the traditional patrons of the agonistic activities, Hermes and Heracles. In the city of Chytroi, Ptolemy Philometor and the queen Cleopatra were honored together with Hermes, Herakles, and the Tyche of Chytroi (Mitford 1937, 33, n°8; Michel 2020, n°110). Gods and kings, traditional and new, shared the same space within the city, which benefited from new religious dynamics, bringing protection and prestige at the same time.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a bilingual inscription from Larnaka tis Lapithou, dating from the very beginning of the Lagid dominion on Cyprus, since it is probably connected to the decisive victory of Ptolemy I for the control over Cyprus in 295 BCE (Amadasi Guzzo 2015, 30–31; Bonnet-Bianco 2018):

> Greek: To Athena Savior Victory and (in favor of) king Ptolemy, Praxidemos son of Sesmas has dedicated this altar. Good Fortune!
> Phoenician: To Anat, Strength Life, and to Ptolemy, lord of the kings, Baalshillem son of Sesmay has dedicated this altar. Good Fortune! (*CIS* I, 95; *KAI* 42*)*

The dedicant Praxidemos/Baalshillem was most probably a member of the Cypro-Phoenician elite of the kingdom of Lapethos, who joined the new ruler of the island and decided to celebrate his recent victory by offering an altar. He dedicated it to the king and the goddess who made him successful in his military achievements. While in Phoenician, we have a double dedication, with Anat first and Ptolemy in the second position, in the Greek section of the inscription, which is carved on the top of the stone, before the Phoenician counterpart, we have the name of Athena first as well, with the dative case, and a *hyper* + genitive formula for Ptolemy. This hybrid solution, inspired by two Egyptian models analyzed above, was possibly adapted to the local religious landscape dominated by the prestigious Cypriote *Lady* or *wanassa,* considered through Greek eyes as Athena, and through Phoenician eyes as Anat, both characterized by their capacity to protect and attack. Like in the Wasta dedication, the initial model as propagated from the practices of the centre and by agents from the centre was reshaped by local customs and ended up in a creative compromise. By putting the emphasis on the crucial and efficient power of Athena and Anat, the bilingual inscription from Lapethos gives a prominent role to the local divine entity. It does so while paying homage to the new king and displaying the loyalty of the Cypriote elite, which rallied the Ptolemies.

3.6 Conclusion

The private and public dedications examined above attest to the diverse and complex relations between gods, kings and people during the Ptolemaic period in Egypt, Phoenicia and Cyprus. The subjects of the Ptolemies felt that they had to include the supreme political, military, and administrative authorities of the country in their acts of worship. The rulers, for their part, must have encouraged such initiatives, which granted them with legitimacy, prestige and stability. These strategies have clear parallels with what Rüpke (in the subsequent chapter) identifies as the "third authority" role played by religion in relation to the stability and legitimacy of the Roman Empire. The nuances of these new bonds were articulated in manifold ways and illuminate different aspects of the dedicants' perception of Ptolemaic imperial control.

Over the years, the cult forms addressing Ptolemaic kings became more complex and took part in a consolidation of the relations between rulers and subjects.

Dedications alluded to parallels between the royal and the divine couple, and even to intricate rituals, where human and divine powers collaborated in answering the dedicant's expectations and more broadly in shaping a new stable and fruitful order. The direct equation between gods and kings, the equal honors attributed to both, was also a social and cultural strategy aiming at promoting local cults in a global framework. Loyalty was a sort of Trojan horse that enabled the local elite to defend and even foster their own gods. Subtle agency, interweaving different levels of reality, produced middle grounds, where original reconfigurations took place. The divine nature of the royal pair was claimed, propagated and supported by multiple means and methods, not only on behalf of the Ptolemaic dynasty itself, but also thanks to prominent officials, members of the court, local elites, and military and religious authorities.

The penetration of the ruler cult gradually encouraged cross-cultural discourses, made of assimilations, identifications, and equivalences. Sarapis, Melqart, Herakles and Hermes, on the one hand, Isis, Aphrodite, Ashtart on the other hand, but also Tyche, Athena and Anat were regularly involved. The cross-cultural dynamics were substantially complex, cumulative and integrative, supported by the intrinsic plurality of polytheisms. Identifications were skillfully implied or expressed; cultic epithets contributed to defining a new ritual landscape, embracing different languages and religious status. The categorization of human and divine tended to blur, but only as far as the kings were concerned.

In what part of society do we find the drivers of these subtle shifts? Who was changing the scenery, cutting down or hampering the resistance, creating systems of alliance, and fostering transfers? The sparse documentation shows that the elites – political, military, economic, religious, and intellectual – who had much to lose and everything to gain in this "New Deal," were definitely involved, despite the fact that local monarchies, in Phoenicia and Cyprus, were abolished soon after Alexander's conquest (Bonnet 2015). While the persistent ideological framework which connected human and divine sovereignty was renegotiated, the emerging political agenda offered new stages for the ritualization of a global power locally rooted. These new forms of agency conveyed prestige and influence, but did not imply to renounce local roots and attachment to ancestral gods. In this, it is legitimate to speak of "middle ground" to describe the culture of the Hellenistic Empires, since it was in no way a choice between two cultures. Rather, the cultures were combined in varying degrees depending on the balance of power in different contexts, by developing a capacity for cultural *mimesis* that promoted integration —the key to success. All in all, the new shared (more or less imposed) ritual practices centered on the celebration of the imperial power and its capacity to echo local traditions participated in making the empire more stable, more visible,

more lasting. It also played an important role in providing a strong religious foundation to the imperial dominion and to the commitment of local elites.

In short, Greek "imperialism" ended up giving voice to Greek traditions, but also to Egyptian, Phoenician, Cypriote, in other words local cultures integrated in the "imperial repertories". These solutions enabled the many regional upper classes to successfully combine Hellenism and "micro-identities". The trend was, on the one hand, to "de-barbarize" local deities, dis-embed them from local contexts, incorporate them into international networks, and read them through the multifocal lens of cross-cultural equivalences; on the other hand, to exalt their "traditional" power rooted in a specific territory. In other words, the local and the global were linked using the royal cult as a platform for cross-cultural practices. This process ended up reinforcing at the same time the natural *multiperspectivness* of polytheisms and the human *adaptiveness* to new cultural environments. People empirically produced a language—words and images—which I would not call "syncretic," because it was not a matter of mixing or shaking, but a matter of appropriating, intertwining, reformulating, and finding an acceptable cultural balance between different intentions. All in all, "Imperialism" and "middle ground" are two concepts helpful to grasp the dynamics that transformed the religious landscape of the Hellenistic Near East. These terms insist on manifold strategies and agencies, on practices and imaginaries, and on local and all-encompassing orders.

To conclude, imperial histories imply many different strategies to gain the gods' support. Cultic honors tributed to human recipients, notably to the Hellenistic rulers, involved ritual and political agencies displayed in public spaces by local elites. In Phoenicia and in Cyprus, we traced imperial intermediaries keen to fulfil different objectives through interactions with the gods: bring legitimacy to new rulers, foster personal ties between the imperial power and their family, improve new transaction spaces for local and global regulations, reinforce symbolic resources for the imperial ideological framework. By adopting both a top-down and a bottom-up perspectives, and by focusing on the Phoenician and Cypriote case studies, which are not the core areas of the Ptolemaic empire, this chapter illustrates the "politics of difference" promoted by the Lagids: diversity and unity intertwined in the interactions with the gods. If the imperial cult remained of limited political importance, it provided a useful resource to connect local and global ritual habits.

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