

Brother–sister marriage

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The avoidance of sexual relationships between full siblings is considered by sociobiologists a universal cultural norm across societies. The aversion against these unions is often explained by the “Westermarck effect,” according to which children who are brought up together as siblings are desensitized to forming sexual attraction later in life, a mechanism favored by evolution because of negative genetic consequences of inbreeding (Wolf & Durham 2004). Whereas societies in the Eastern Mediterranean were in general inclined toward endogamy and close-kin marriages, such as first cousin or uncle–niece marriages (in classical Athens even half-siblings on the father’s side), the Western Mediterranean being rather hostile to endogamy (*see* EXOGAMY), both Greeks and Romans clearly prohibited marriages between full siblings.

“Royal incest” between full siblings in which political considerations offset the incest taboo, thereby associating the royal couple with mythological traditions of divine incest (e.g., Isis and Osiris) and avoiding the intrusion of outsiders, is usually regarded as the exception to this rule. Royal or dynastic incest was practiced in Egypt by the Pharaohs and the Ptolemies, and in the ancient Near East in Elam, in Phoenicia, by the Achaemenid rulers of Persia and the Hekatomnids in Caria. Religious tracts of Zoroastrian Iran expressly encourage incestuous unions between parents and children and between siblings for their supernatural benefits. This custom seems to have been limited to polygamous and upper-class families, though (Scheidel 1996: 333). Outside of the Mediterranean world we find incest in the royal families of Siam and Burma, in precolonial Hawaii, practiced by the Inca rulers in Peru, and the Mixtec aristocracy of Mexico. These marriages, however, seem to have remained a prerogative of the rulers who by transgressing the limits of human conduct achieved godlike status. We have no evidence that full brother–sister marriages were practiced also among the common people of these societies.

All the more astonishing is the fact that from the first century CE full brother–sister marriages start appearing in our papyri from Roman Egypt as a marriage form openly practiced on a regular basis among the common population, and apparently socially and legally condoned. In fact, according to official Roman census returns (first–third centuries CE), about one-sixth of all documented marriages in which the degree of kinship between spouses is ascertainable were celebrated between full brothers and sisters (Bagnall & Frier 2006: 126–7). This would make Roman Egypt a unique phenomenon in world history, challenging existing theories about incest avoidance. The papyrological evidence is heavily concentrated in the second century CE, and mainly originates from one region, the Fayum in Middle Egypt. Women in these documents are presented as “wife and sister from the same father and the same mother,” a formula which according to Hopkins “leaves little room for ambiguity” (1980: 321). These marriages were not merely a legal formality but real marriages, producing a great number of offspring. The fact that brother–sister

marriages cease to be documented in Egypt from the middle of the third century on is explained by the grant of Roman citizenship to the free provincial population of the Empire in 212 (*see CONSTITUTIO ANTONINIANA*), which likely meant the end of tolerance toward native customs that ran counter to Roman law.

A number of explanations have been advanced as to what could have led the common people in Roman Egypt to overcome the incest taboo on such a broad scale. The most obvious explanation seems to be an indigenous Egyptian custom. Although Ptolemy II's court historians eagerly cited an Egyptian tradition when their king married his full sister Arsinoe II (ca. 276 BCE), the Demotic documents from the pre-Greek period do not provide us with evidence for full brother–sister couples among the common people. Another explanation brought forward was brother–sister marriage as a strategy to avoid the provision of a dowry and splitting up of property: a motive that must have been existent all over the ancient Mediterranean, but which nowhere else led to nuclear family incest (Scheidel 1996: 333). Shaw (1992) has explained brother–sister marriage as a custom explicable by the racism of Greek settlers and the desire to maintain the privileged ethnic-political class of Greeks in Egypt. Brother–sister marriages are, however, recorded for Greeks and Egyptians alike. Most recently, Huebner (2007) has argued from a cross-cultural perspective that such “brother–sister” marriages in Roman Egypt were not incestuous at all, but rather marriages between an adopted child and a natural child, a widespread family strategy in the absence of a natural male heir, documented all over the Eastern Mediterranean and in many other premodern patriarchal societies.

SEE ALSO: Adoption; Census; Close-kin marriages; Egypt; Endogamy; Incest; Marriage; Ptolemy II Philadelphus; Zoroastrianism

References and Suggested Readings

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