

University of California, Irvine

# Classical Roles of the Nile

Religion and Politics during Ptolemaic Egypt (305-30 BCE)



Karla Milicich  
6-6-2019

## Abstract

The ancient Egyptians had an incredibly complex understanding of the Nile River. There are two inseparable associations that the Nile has been involved with: religion and politics. Evidence from ancient Pyramid Texts demonstrate how incredibly complex and inseparable these two roles are throughout Ptolemaic Egypt. The Nile's mythological and religious significance was spread through the teachings and popularity of Graeco-Egyptian religions. The Nile's political significance accompanied the great power that the Ptolemies had. The Nile empowered both religion and politics in a way that has not been seen before. This research project will investigate how the Nile's political symbolism and religious significance were so important during Pharaonic Egypt to the beginning of the Roman Empire's control over Egypt.

**Keywords:** Classical Nile, Mythology, Pharaonic Egypt, Graeco-Egyptian Religions, Politics

## Introduction

*"I saw that old father Nile without any doubt rises in the Victoria N'yanza, and as I had foretold, that lake is the great source of the holy river which cradled the first expounder of our religious belief."<sup>1</sup>* – John Hanning Speke, *Journey of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*

The Nile has always produced a sense of wonder and awe. John Hanning Speke, the man who discovered the link between Lake Victoria and the Nile in 1858, was certainly in awe of this river. His use of “holy river” and “the first expounder of our religious belief” resembles how ancient Egyptians perceived the Nile as a holy being of mystical origins. The association that Speke presents is a perfect example of the mystical attributes of the Nile, which contrasts with the perspective other scholars share about the Nile being a political entity.

For most of ancient Egyptian history, the Nile River was associated with mythology; however, once a theocracy was established in the 3100 BCE, this perspective changed. With the association of the pharaoh as divine, the Nile became a political symbol. Thus, this paper will focus on the emergence of the Nile’s political connotation, how this change affected Egyptians, how these two perspectives (both political and mythological) rivaled and supported one another, and finally, how these perspectives shaped the ancient and later understandings of the Nile River. I will answer the following questions: What effect did the Nile have on the creation of mythology in Egypt and later in the Roman Empire? How was the Nile perceived from the predynastic era to the conquering of Alexander the Great and afterward? What role did politics play in the perception of the Nile as both materialistic and sacred? How was the local

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<sup>1</sup> John Hanning Speke, *Journey of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1863) 467.

understanding of the Nile's importance reinterpreted in the later Graeco-Egyptian deities that would flourish outside of Egypt? How and why did these religious cults become so popular?

This project will be researching material from or in reference to Pharaonic Egypt, which stretched from the 32nd century BCE to the end of the Ptolemaic Dynasty and the conquest of the Roman Empire, 30 BCE. For the purposes of being concise, this research project will be focused primarily on how these two perspectives interacted within the Ptolemaic Dynasty (323 - 30 BC). I will also be examining material that persists after the conquest of the Roman Empire, which will introduce the legacy of these two perspectives within the rise in popularity of Egyptian religious cults.

## Literature Review

From antiquity to present, scholars have treated the Nile with an overwhelming importance. Most scholars have concluded that the Nile's importance was both religious and economic due to its importance in trade and its inclusion in cultic ceremonies that spread to Greece, and later, the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have investigated the importance of having political control over the Nile.<sup>3</sup> As a result, there has been a neglect of investigation as to how these two topics of politics and religiosity overlap. Having control over the Nile led to a change in its perception in religious ideologies. The Nile began as a being of uncontrollable force, but over time it lost its power to those who could tame it, beginning with the gods and later the pharaohs.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert A Wild, *Water and the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis*, (Leiden: Brill, 1981); Alexandre Moret, *The Nile and the Egyptian Civilization*, (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1972); Etim E. Okon, "Archaeological Reflections on Ancient Egyptian Religion and Society," *European Scientific Journal* 8, no. 26 (November 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Kostas Buraselis, Mary Stefanou, and Dorothy J. Thompson, *The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile: Studies in Waterborne Power*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Many scholars who have investigated the historical dimensions of the Nile have adopted a political perspective. Alexandre Moret, a French Egyptologist, introduces a strong correlation between power and ownership the portion of the Nile that ran through Lower and Upper Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Etim Okon suggests that with the establishment of a religiously dependent government in Egypt, the Nile was not solely a divine privilege but a terrestrial one as well.<sup>5</sup> People in positions of power used this river for their own political agendas; therefore, owning the Nile was significant and politically charged. Kostas Buraselis, Mary Stefanou, and Dorothy J. Thompson introduce the concept of maritime and waterborne power that was established by the Ptolemies. For these scholars, the Nile was politically significant.

Other scholars, however, have analyzed the mythology of the Nile. Arthur Nock suggests that the Nile's divinity was incredibly enticing to cults dedicated to Egyptian deities outside of Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Robert Wild supports this claim with his investigation of an Iseum in Pompeii, or a temple dedicated to Isis. The temple contains a specific architectural feature that can only be linked to the Nile.<sup>7</sup> The Iseum is not the only example of the Nile's mythological significance. Pyramid texts translated by R.O. Faulkner discuss the importance of the Nile in burial practices.<sup>8</sup> The use of water in burial rites demonstrates the Nile's role within the afterlife, an important aspect of ancient Egyptian culture. The Nile's mythological role was just as powerful within Egyptian society as its political significance.

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<sup>4</sup> Moret, *The Nile*, 30, 82, 83.

<sup>5</sup> Okon, "Archaeological Reflections," 108 - 110.

<sup>6</sup> Nock, *Conversions*.

<sup>7</sup> Wild, *Water*.

<sup>8</sup> R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, (London: Clarendon Press, 1969).

My project will be bridging the Nile's political and mythological significance to create a more comprehensive understanding of the impact they had on the people living alongside it. Political leaders who had asserted dominance over the Nile used its mythology to control the ancient Egyptians. Religious leaders inserted the mythological aspects of the Nile into the reigning political system to spread Egyptian religion. Therefore, I will argue that the Nile is used in both politics and religion inseparably.

## The Mythological Nile

The Nile was recognized by ancient Egyptians as a force to be reckoned with, especially since its annual floodings had the ability to wipe out entire cities. Its mighty floodings also provided fertile soil that was used for agriculture, which was important for the survival of those who settled along the Nile. Thus, the ability to give and take away life associated the Nile with divine power. The story of the Nile began before humans first walked the Earth. The ancient Egyptian creation stories described the Nile as chaotic and destructive primordial waters. These stories also described the existence of a mound that rose from these primordial waters and became the origin of humankind.<sup>9</sup> Despite the creation of mankind, these primordial waters persisted as untamable and destructive. Due to the Nile's destructive nature, it was bestowed onto different gods who could tame it.

The Nile hymns translated by Gaston Maspero, a French Egyptologist, exemplify the transformation of the Nile from an autonomous being to an object of the divine. These hymns were created during the first two centuries of the Old Kingdom (2575-2150 BCE). During this

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony P. Sakovich, "Explaining the Shafts in Khufu's Pyramids at Giza," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 42, (2005/2006), 3.

period, the divine triad consisted of Re, Horus, and Hathor.<sup>10</sup> Because the members of the divine triad often changed throughout Egyptian history, the Nile's owner changed as well. In this case, the triad of Re, Horus, and Hathor introduced the first god to own the Nile: Hapi.<sup>11</sup>

In Egyptian mythology, Hapi represented the Nile's annual floodings. These floodings were natural occurrences that the ancient Egyptians could not explain or predict; therefore, they were associated as belonging to and created by the divine. The floodings of the Nile were ritualistic in nature, as was described by a Nile hymn:

Hail, Hapi, thou who dost rise on to this earth, and comest to give life to Egypt; who hidest thy coming in the darkness on this very day when we sing the coming, a wave spreading over the orchards which Ra made, to give life to all who thirst, and refusing to water the desert with the over flowing of the waters of heaven! When thou dost descend, Geb (the earth) is in love with bread, Negri (the corn-god) presents his offering, Phtah makes every workshop to prosper. Do his fingers ail, are they idle? Then all the millions of beings are wretched. Does he grow less in the sky? Then the gods themselves perish, and men; the beasts go mad; and all on earth, great and small, are in torment. But if the prayers of men are granted when he rises, and if he makes himself to be called Khnum (Creator) for them, when he goes up, then the earth shouts for joy, every belly makes glad, every back is shaken by laughter, every tooth munches.<sup>12</sup>

The Nile's floodings were both a blessing and a curse. They could produce an abundance of crops or destroy everything; therefore, predicting the Nile's floods was extremely important to

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony P. Sakovich. "Explaining the Shafts." 1.

<sup>11</sup> Moret, *The Nile*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Moret, 82.

Egypt's agriculture. If the Nile's banks were overflooded, the crops would be submerged and destroyed. If the Nile's banks did not receive enough water, then the crops would dry up and die. The Nile's destructive nature needed to be mediated and thus the Ancient Egyptian gods had to step in to control it.

The following deity to assume the role of the Nile's owner was Osiris. The Nile hymns first introduced Osiris as the "water of life which is in the sky."<sup>13</sup> The sky and the Nile were two of the major sources of power from ancient Egypt as well as the two forces that preceded mankind. The sky was also associated with the divine and existed in a permanent binary with the Nile as its equivalent force on earth. Osiris, although being the god of the Underworld, was described in these texts as taking over the Nile's floodings and bounty. Osiris's control over the Nile was important as discussed in this Nile hymn:

The water of life which is in the sky, it comes. The water of life which is in the earth, it comes. The sky burns (with lightning) for thee, the earth trembles for thee, before the birth of the God. Two mountains are opened, and the God manifests himself, the God takes possession of his body (the land of Egypt).<sup>14</sup>

The author bestowed the Nile's ownership upon Osiris, whose rule would unify the Underworld to the living. The Nile was Egypt's natural unifier. It unified the black lands, or the fertile soil, with the red lands, the desert, as well as Upper and Lower Egypt. According to ancient Egyptian lore, Osiris was the god of the black lands prior to his position as god of the Underworld, while his brother Set was god of the Red Lands.<sup>15</sup> So, it is no surprise that Osiris not only was the god

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Moret, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Twigger, *Red Nile: A Biography of the World's Largest River*, (London: Weinfeld & Nicholson, 2013) 70.

of the fertile soil from the black lands but also the Nile that produced it. In the story of the Osiris myth, Osiris was killed and dismembered by Set. After his murder, Osiris traveled to the Underworld where he became king of the dead. One can infer that Osiris's transformation as god of the Underworld led to the strong connection established between the Nile and the afterlife.

The Nile became a symbol of power under the ownership of the gods. With the establishment of Pharaonic Egypt, its possession would be transferred to the pharaohs. This transfer of power created a new type of ruler that was seen as being on par with the gods.

## The Rise of the Pharaohs

Evidence for the transfer of power from the gods to mortals became apparent during the creation of the pyramids. The infamous Pyramids at Giza were created during the Old Kingdom and not much was known about how they were constructed. It was not until recently that shafts found within Khufu's pyramid at Giza revealed evidence of the Nile's presence during their construction. Indentations located near the Pyramids at Giza revealed evidence of a canal that was used to transport the building materials for the pyramids.<sup>16</sup> The pharaoh was able to prove his divinity by manipulating the flow of the Nile. Additionally, the creation of the Pyramids was an important demonstration of power relations because this event provided some insight on the social engineering that existed in ancient Egypt.<sup>17</sup> The three pharaohs involved in this construction project obligated peasant laborers to aid with the construction of their pyramids in

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Straughn, "Pyramid and Pyramidiots," Class Lecture, Egyptomania, (Irvine: University of California, Irvine, February 27, 2019)

<sup>17</sup> Straughn, "Pyramid and Pyramidiots."

exchange for sustenance.<sup>18</sup> The construction of the Great Pyramids was the perfect opportunity for exhibiting the pharaoh's great power and authority.

By creating pyramid-style tombs, the pharaohs revolutionized ancient Egyptian burial practices that would prepare them for the afterlife. These extravagant tombs were showcased to the gods to ensure a good afterlife for the deceased because they demonstrated the deceased's importance on Earth and the great deeds they performed. Therefore, the pyramids were identified as cosmological symbols of authority. Additionally, the pyramids' pointed shape, known as a "ben-ben" style, was reminiscent of the mound that emerged from the primordial waters from the ancient Egyptian creation stories.<sup>19</sup> The creation of pyramid-style tombs articulated the pharaoh's newfound authority into the afterlife.

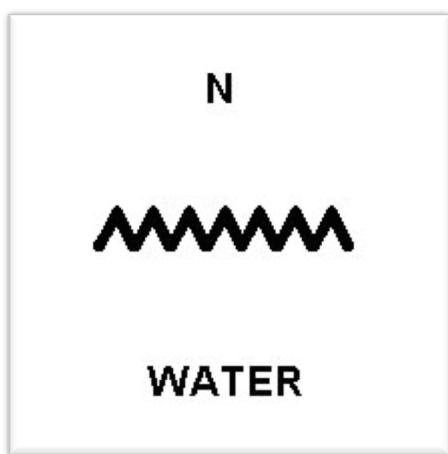


Figure 1. Melinda Kolk, *nwater.jpg*, Feb 1, 2019, Pics4Learning. From: Pics4Learning.com, <http://pics.tech4learning.com/details.php?img=nwater.jpg> (accessed May 8, 2019)

The Pyramid Texts, translated by an English Egyptologist named R.O. Faulkner, depicts the new perspective on the afterlife that was transformed by the creation of the pyramids. These texts contain utterances that refer to burial practices that involved not only the use of water but also the connection of the pharaoh as divine. The Pyramid Texts were translated from the pyramid of "King X" who was buried around the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (2456-2323 BCE) or the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (2345-2181 BCE), during the Old

<sup>18</sup> The pyramids were constructed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (2575–2465 BCE) under the reign of the three pharaohs who are buried at each one: Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure.

<sup>19</sup> Straughn, "Pyramid and Pyramidiots."

Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> The utterances that referred to the use of water were labeled as either libation spells or as rituals that included the restoration of the corpse and the presentation of food.<sup>21</sup> The inclusion of water, specifically the use of cold water, was in reference to the Nile. Utterance 35 discussed the purification of the corpse by the insertion of cold water into its mouth.<sup>22</sup> Priests used cold water as a form of sustenance and to purify the corpse in an effort to prepare the body for when the deceased returned to it. The hieroglyph that signifies water is a zig-zag line.<sup>23</sup> In the utterances that referenced the presentation of food, the hieroglyph for water was translated into “providing” or “giving”, which signified water itself as providing or giving life. The inclusion of water in the preservation of King X’s corpse represents the ancient mound that emerged from the primordial waters.

The second focus of the Pyramid Texts involved identifying King X with the divine, specifically Osiris and Horus, two of the most revered gods from the Egyptian pantheon. These associations were done to ensure that King X would have a good afterlife because if he was divine, then he would be able to share in the afterlife of the divine. In Utterance 7, the author of the Pyramid Texts discusses the king as being able to “preside over it [the Netherworld] as Horus.”<sup>24</sup> Similar utterances were directed to Osiris to persuade him to think of King X as Horus. During the Old Kingdom, Horus was known as the king of Egypt; therefore, it was easy for ancient Egyptians to accept the concept of the pharaoh as divine. This divine association explains why the pharaoh was able to take control of the Nile because having power over Egypt also meant having power over the Nile.

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<sup>20</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 3 and 6.

<sup>22</sup> Faulkner, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Barry Kemp. "Chapter 8: Water," *100 Hieroglyphs: Think Like an Egyptian*, (New York: Plume, 2005). 18.

<sup>24</sup> Faulkner, 2.

The transfer of the Nile's ownership occurred within the first centuries of Pharaonic Egypt. During this time, the pharaoh's power had extended from terrestrial matters and transcended into the afterlife. Almost two and a half centuries later, the Ptolemaic Dynasty used the Nile's political and religious significance to promote their authority across the Mediterranean.

## Establishing Alexandria

The establishment of the port city of Alexandria in the Egyptian Delta was a turning point for ancient Egypt because it brought about a cosmopolitan and outward perspective that could only occur with foreign rule. Alexandria provided a competitive perspective of the Nile's political symbolism. The Nile and the power it granted was becoming more apparent.

Alexandria was established in 331 BCE by Alexander III of Macedon (356 – 323 BCE), also known as Alexander the Great. Alexander was a Macedonian king that accomplished an incredible feat: the unification and the establishment of the largest empire in the history of the world. This unification changed the course of history forever because it established global relations and trade networks on a global scale. The spread of culture was just as important as material trade. Alexander's empire spread Greek Hellenistic culture as far East as the Indus Valley and as far South as Egypt. The establishment of Alexandria in Egypt was symbolic of this global unification. As a result, Egypt was no longer focused on the Nile and its people. The focus of Egypt was now on the newcomers from the North, the East, and the Mediterranean Sea.

The most significant aspect of the port city of Alexandria was its guiding lighthouse, Pharos.<sup>25</sup> During the Ptolemaic Dynasty, Pharos was created as a goddess that shared many similarities with the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis. Pharos in Alexandria is not only the symbol of the city of Alexandria but also the naval power that the Ptolemies possessed. In their introductory chapter for *The Ptolemies and the Sea and the Nile and Waterborne Power*, Dorothy Thompson and Kostas Buraselis discuss the importance of the Ptolemies' "maritime power."<sup>26</sup> The Ptolemies had control over a great stretch of land which included the islands in the Aegean Sea and territories off the coast of Syria. Thompson and Buraselis believe that the Ptolemies' sought control of regions outside of Egypt in order to defend and protect their kingdom. The Ptolemies' maritime power transformed the meaning of political power linked to the Nile, by expanding this power to the Mediterranean Sea and beyond.

A great example of Egypt's cosmopolitan port city of Alexandria is a floor mosaic in Thmuis, a city located in the Egyptian Delta. The floor mosaic "portrays Alexandria wearing a naval headdress, a ship's prow on her brow; either side of the portrait flow out long waving ribbons with black and white stripes, tied around her head as though from a



<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 4.

Figure 2. Sophilos, *Thmuis Mosaic*, Circa 250 BCE, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria. From: Cambridge University, [http://www.coinsfromanegypt.org/html/library/mosaics/port\\_mosaic.html](http://www.coinsfromanegypt.org/html/library/mosaics/port_mosaic.html) (accessed May 8, 2019)

diadem.<sup>27</sup> The woman in Figure 2 is an anthropomorphic, or human-like, depiction of Alexandria the city. The interpretation of Alexandria as a woman is much like Lady Liberty in present-day New York; they are both symbols of their cities. Alexandria, in this case, represents the Ptolemaic maritime power.

The diadem depicted around Alexandria's head is a perfect example of Alexandria's cosmopolitan nature. Diadems were crowns that were originally worn by Persian kings. These crowns have been an incredible symbol of cultural syncretism in artwork across ancient Near Eastern cultures including Persian, Indian, and even Chinese.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Alexandria was depicted wearing a diadem was incredibly powerful because it could be interpreted as Ptolemaic Egypt seeing themselves as equal to the other powerful empires at the time. The Ptolemies were engaging with the artistic conversation of power that existed at the time. In addition, Alexandria's diadem is paired with a naval headdress, which is a reference to the waterborne power that the Ptolemies possessed.

Alexandria served as a cosmopolitan center and a capital for Ptolemaic Dynasty. Its location was ideal for trading and became a center of wealth and a hub for knowledge. Alexandria stood as a symbol of the Ptolemies' maritime power and brought about a different understanding of the Nile's importance to Ptolemaic Egypt, especially regarding its major export: grain.

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<sup>27</sup> Thompson & Brussels, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Canepa, "Roman Empire and Iran," Class Lecture, Iran and Imperial Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity, (Irvine: University of California, Irvine, October 4, 2019).

## Ptolemies, Piracy, and Politics

After Alexander the Great's death, Egypt became an important asset in the Mediterranean Sea and the world of classical trade relations. Egypt became an incredibly important trading partner because of its production of grain, a major agricultural staple. Although Alexandria reoriented Egypt's focus outward, this did not completely stop Egypt's hold on the Nile. The Nile produced Egypt's inundations and agricultural achievements. Under the reign of the Ptolemies, these agricultural achievements were taken to new heights with the production and exportation of grain. The Ptolemies had control over a large stretch of land, both in and outside Egypt, and this resulted in a need for funds to maintain their power.<sup>29</sup> However, the production of grain was greatly dependent on the Nile's inundations, making grain Egypt's most precious cargo.

Grain and its safe exportation were so important that in many cases naval vessels would accompany the ships transporting grain. The naval vessels would protect the grain from the "ever-present problem of Hellenistic piracy" notorious in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>30</sup> As a result of this piracy, the Ptolemies were one of the first to establish an informal "sea police".<sup>31</sup> The Ptolemies wielded their maritime power with incredible force and would not hesitate to expose and take advantage of what we consider the world's first navy.

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Ptolemies controlled a collection of islands in the Aegean Sea and kingdoms on the East Mediterranean Coast which were known as the League of

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<sup>29</sup> Kostas Buraselis, "Ptolemaic Grain, Seaways and Power," found in *The Ptolemies, the Sea, and the Nile: Studies in Waterborne Power*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 99.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the Islanders, or the Nesiotic League. During their control of the Nesiotic League, the Ptolemaic navy served as sea transportation police within the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea. In her chapter titled *Ptolemies and Piracy*, Lucia Criscuolo, a History professor from the University of Bologna, discusses several examples of Ptolemaic garrisons that intervened during pirate raids.<sup>32</sup> Ptolemaic garrisons were incredibly important because these were stationed troops planted across areas in the East Mediterranean Coast and on the islands of the Aegean Sea. These garrisons stood as extensions of the Ptolemies' power outside of Egypt. In addition, the Ptolemaic garrisons created powerful links with the cities they were stationed in. These garrisons provided a safe environment for the citizens of the cities that they were stationed in, which resulted in not only a political relationship but also a system of dependency.

The Ptolemies not only acted as the sea police of the Eastern Mediterranean against pirates but actively engaged and negotiated with these pirates for "slaves, cash, corn, and so on."<sup>33</sup> Criscuolo discussed one example of an attack by pirates that was intercepted by the Ptolemaic troops in Thera, a prominent ancient Greek city located on the island of Santorini.<sup>34</sup> Thera has ancient inscriptions that recorded the aid and safety the Ptolemaic navy had provided them. In the inscription presented by Criscuolo, *IG XII.3 1291*, the high officer that helped with stopping the attack was ethnically Cretan, which was interesting because that would mean that the Cretans, who were pirates, aided the Ptolemaic forces against other pirates.<sup>35</sup> There is another Theran inscription, *IG XII.3 328*, that recorded the correspondence, between a Ptolemaic garrison and his superior, that mentioned an exchange of prisoners with Allariotes, who were

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<sup>32</sup> Criscuolo, 163-165.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 163-164.

also pirates. The Allariotes had kidnapped Therans and had exchanged those kidnapped with approximately 16 to 20 prisoners from the Ptolemaic forces.<sup>36</sup> From these examples and many others presented in the Thera inscriptions, we can understand the strength and power that the Ptolemies had.

The Ptolemaic control over the Nesiotic League, however, lasted only half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Rhodes, a Greek island, came to power and established what was known as the Second Nesiotic League. The Ptolemies would continue to export trade to the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, but it was no longer their navies' duty to stand as protectorate of those exports. The Rhodians became the new sea police. Some scholars attest the loss of the Nesiotic League by the Ptolemies to the Chremonidean War (263-262 BCE), which was fought between Antigonid Macedonian forces and Greek city-states.<sup>37</sup> The Antigonids were victorious, and this may have resulted in their control over Greek islands. Some scholars believe that the Macedonian forces as well as the Rhodian forces took control of the islands associated with the Nesiotic League because of the threat that the Ptolemies posed.

Much like Alexandria, the Nesiotic League opened Egypt up to the rest of the Mediterranean World. The Ptolemies not only engaged in trading networks but they also engaged with power motifs shared by the most powerful empires at the time. Additionally, the Ptolemies engaged in the extension of religious cults and beliefs that would bring about a newfound importance to Egyptian culture as well as the Nile's mythological importance in political contexts.

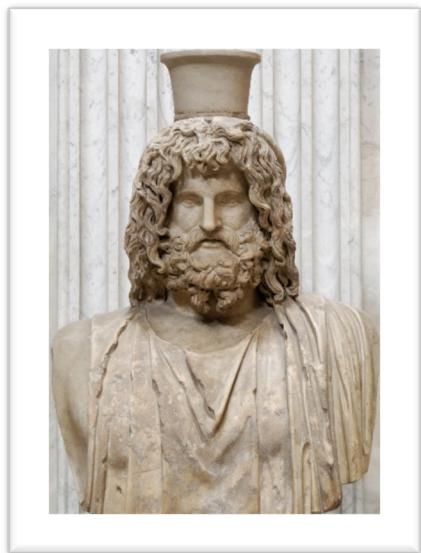
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<sup>36</sup> Criscuolo, 164.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Meadows, "The Ptolemaic League of Islanders," found in *The Ptolemies, the Sea, and the Nile: Studies in Waterborne Power*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 38.

## Cultic Worship and The Nile

Egyptian cults became incredibly popular in the ancient Mediterranean World. Some scholars believe that the proliferation of Egyptian cults to Greece and eventually the Roman Empire was mainly propagated by Ptolemy I and Manetho, a Hellenized Egyptian priest.<sup>38</sup> These two were attributed with the creation of one of the most important Graeco-Egyptian deities, Serapis, who was a blend of both the Egyptian god Osiris and the Greek god Zeus. The syncretization of religious symbols and deities was not rare during the 4<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE. Alexander the Great had unified an incredibly large expanse of land in which different territories had been forced into conversation with one another. Syncretization was one way of conveying one's culture and understanding other religions, which was incredibly important for those in power. In almost all cases, syncretization was done for political reasons.



The creation of blended deities was incredibly popular during the Ptolemaic Dynasty within Egypt and abroad. Arsinoe II Philadelphus, the wife and full sister of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, was deified as well as linked to the Greek goddess Aphrodite.<sup>39</sup> The cult of Arsinoe was popular during the Ptolemaic control of the Nesiotic League. Some scholars argue that the proliferation of the cult of Arsinoe was purely political. Ptolemy II funded his sister-wife's cult as well as

Figure 3. *Bust of Serapis*, Marble, 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Museo Pio-Clementino, Sala Rotonda. From: Vatican Museums [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Serapis\\_vatican.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Serapis_vatican.jpg) (accessed May 22, 2019)

his own. However, the cult of the Ptolemies paled in

<sup>38</sup> Nock, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Meadows, 36.

comparison to the strongholds that were later established within the cults of Serapis and Isis.

The creation of Serapis was devised by both Ptolemy I and Manetho to better control and appease the Greeks and Egyptians that were now living in Egypt together. Serapis was represented in two forms: a man and a bull. Some scholars have argued that the reason that Serapis was portrayed as both an anthropomorphic god and a zoomorphic god was because of the influence of both the Egyptian and Greek religious cultures. Egyptians were comfortable with zoomorphic deities who were portrayed as an animal or a blend of an animal head with a human body. The Greeks, on the other hand, have always worshipped anthropomorphic beings.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in order to appease both religious customs, Serapis is presented in two forms. In some artworks, Serapis was portrayed as an anthropomorph but was also depicted wearing a *modius*, which was an Egyptian headdress, in order to identify with ancient Egyptian culture.<sup>41</sup> The appeal of Serapis, however, was not solely based on his physical portrayal but of his patronage and the miracles he performed for sailors.<sup>42</sup> A papyrus document from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE written by Artistides, an ancient Athenian statesman, mentions one of Serapis's miracles:

For your sake I will grant the water to the men of Pharos: and having saluted him he smiled out and gave the water to the men of Pharos and received from them as a price one hundred drachmas of silver.<sup>43</sup>

The offering of money by Serapis was a common miracle, but what is interesting about this statement is that it includes Pharos, the anthropomorphic deity of the port city of Alexandria. The inclusion of Pharos is important because it relates to the significance Alexandria gave to Egypt

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<sup>40</sup> Ian Straughn, "Ancient Egyptomania: From Alexander to The Islamic Caliphates," Class Lecture, Egyptomania, (Irvine: University of California, Irvine, January 28, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Nock, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Nock, 84.

as a hub of trade as well as the religious significance it provided as an entrance to Egypt. As we can see, Serapis was not the only prominent Egyptian deity and definitely not the only prominent Egyptian cultic figure.

Isis was the most popular and significant example of Graeco-Egyptian cultic worship. Isis was an Egyptian fertility goddess and became incredibly popular with both Greeks and Romans. Her influence started in Egypt and spread as far as present-day Great Britain.<sup>44</sup> The main exporter of the cult of Isis were sailors, who were stationed at places for long periods of time. They aided the proliferation of the cult of Isis as well as the cult of Serapis.<sup>45</sup> Isis was also the patron goddess of sailors, which provides a solid link between her and water.<sup>46</sup> The link between Isis and water could be reminiscent of her role as Osiris's wife. The link between Isis and water is also very noticeable in one of her temples located in Pompeii.

There are approximately 27 temples found that have been dedicated to both Isis and Serapis and around 60% of all these temples contained water features.<sup>47</sup> Temples dedicated to Serapis were known as Serapeums while temples dedicated to Isis were known as Iseums. The Iseum in Pompeii contained a water feature that looked very similar to a nilometer, which was constructed to measure the flow of the



Figure 4. *The Iseum at Pompeii*, ground plan, Wild 1981, 45. Star marks location of Nilometer feature.

<sup>44</sup> Straughn, "Ancient Egyptomania."

<sup>45</sup> Glomb T., A. Mertl, Z. Pospisil, Z. Stachon, and A. Chalupa. *Ptolemaic military operations were a dominant factor in the spread of Egyptian cults across the early Hellenistic Aegean Sea*, (New York: State University of New York at Buffalo Press, 2018) 2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>47</sup> Wild, 9.

Nile in order to make predictions for its annual floodings. Nilometers were normally constructed within a sanctuary or temple space.<sup>48</sup> However, as we know, the Nile was in Egypt and the Iseum in Pompeii was not connected to the Nile, or any river for that matter. This raises the question of why a temple dedicated to an Egyptian goddess located outside of Egypt would have a water feature reminiscent of the Nile? What purpose did it serve? In addition to measuring the Nile,



Figure 5. *Drawing of Perseus and Andromeda*, Plate VI.1 From: Iseum at Pompeii. Wild 1981. Based on the painting found on the Pompeian Nilometer.

nilometers also served as sources of water for sacred rites conducted in these sanctuaries because the Nile's water was sacred. The Nile's sacred water was a religious concept that was transported and spread along with the

cults of Isis and Serapis.

The Iseum in Pompeii had other important features that integrated the syncretization of Greek and Egyptian culture. There are symbols throughout the Iseum that allude to connections with the sea but there is one plate that depicts a scene of Andromeda and Perseus. In the story of Andromeda and Perseus, “when Perseus undertakes his fight against the monster, he is in actuality attacking the fundamental ruling forces of the sea.”<sup>49</sup> By portraying this scene, the Iseum was not only actively competing with the established Greek pantheon but it was also establishing its power as a force to be reckoned with. This only adds to the power that cultic worship gave individuals to step away from their cultural norms and engage with material that was associated with the emerging powerful culture of Egypt.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>49</sup> Wild, 81.

According to Robert Wild in his book *Water and the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis*, the nilometer served two purposes: an economic one and a religious one.<sup>50</sup> The Iseum in Pompeii demonstrates the importance of the religious purpose of the nilometer. The Serapeum in Alexandria, in Egypt, also had a nilometer that only served a religious purpose. The Serapeum in Alexandria had no need for measuring the Nile's floodings for agricultural and economic means because it was located in the Delta region of Egypt.<sup>51</sup> The fact that these two temples, located outside and within Egypt, contained nilometers demonstrated the significance of the Nile's effect on not only the people living along the Nile and how this was interpreted by outside cultures.

The Nile's importance was also interpreted by later Christian rituals. There are water features located in Christian churches that serve as sources of purification for baptism. These features are normally constructed to have flowing water, which is reminiscent of the flow of the Nile, because flowing water means that the water is alive and actively purifying. Speke's mention of the Nile as "holy water" was absolutely correct because the Nile enabled the spread of religious ideologies.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

The Nile played an important role in not only the expansion of the Ptolemaic Dynasty by political means but also the diffusion of its religious beliefs. The Nile's political and religious significance were immersed in a deep and long dialogue throughout history. The Nile's religious identity allowed for the development and spread of Egyptian religions and culture, while its political symbolism was the agent through which its religious identity was diffused. Although the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 26

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Speke, 467.

research I conducted was constrained by the limitations of translated material and the influence of other authors in their image analysis, the interplay between the mythological and political uses of the Nile can be found in all the sources used in this project. The Nile is still alive and flowing and I have only just scratched the surface for what its true narrative may be.

The relationship shared between religion and politics is not unique to the Nile. Mythology has been the foundation for the development of political power in many other historical and geographical contexts, especially when we compare it to other major river systems nearby, including the Tigris and Euphrates and the River Jordan. In Babylonian creation myths, the Tigris and Euphrates were also personified and later defeated by Marduk, the king of the gods and founder of Babylon.<sup>53</sup> The River Jordan has been the site of many miracles important in Judaism and Christianity. Today, the River Jordan plays an important political and symbolic border for the Palestinian and Israelis.<sup>54</sup>

The political power gained through religion has been a defining feature for the establishment of many other important religions that are still active today, such as Christianity during the time of Constantine or Islam under the prophet Muhammad. However, unlike Christianity and Islam, ancient Egyptian religion was adapted by the Ptolemies to control the Egyptian people by creating dynastic as well as religious cults. The same can be said about the way religion has used politics to gain a following and importance. Nonetheless, the longstanding centrality of the Nile along with its mythological and political importance has established it as an important example of the interplay between religion and politics in world history.

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<sup>53</sup> Spar Ira. "Mesopotamian Creation Myths." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Rachel Havelock. *River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line*. (University of Chicago Press, October 27, 2011).

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