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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The power of statues: constructing imperial narratives under the Ptolemies

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Abstract

This article examines how and why the Ptolemies, soon after they succeeded Alexander in Egypt, orchestrated the return of Egyptian statues supposedly stolen by the Persians, drawing on the cultural memory of different population groups: Egyptians and Graeco-Macedonians. First, it argues that the Ptolemies invested energy in searching for Egyptian objects and gods' statues in the Levant, which they distributed among the temples, though some may have been newly fabricated statues. Second, the study aims to reconstruct what the Ptolemies knew about earlier Greek and Near Eastern traditions of seizing and returning statues, which mixed elements of truth with topoi. This reconstruction serves to explain how meaningful it was to Egyptians and Graeco-Macedonians to bring back statues after each campaign. Finally, comparing the tale of Bentresh, the account of Sarapis' origin by Tacitus and the Ptolemaic stelae, the article suggests that these narratives highlighted Egypt as the centre of the world with the most powerful ruler, a claim appealing to all its inhabitants.

Keywords: Ptolemies; Egyptian statues; imperialism; Persians; Sarapis

I. Introduction

Contemporary events regularly remind us of the power of statues, more precisely of the political claims expressed in the display or removal of statues. Returning, or not returning, culturally loaded artefacts to their place of origin is enmeshed in complex political discourses and unequal power relations.[1] It still evokes imperialist claims and enhances rulers' social capital and political power.[2] Even more, the movement of statues can point to new imperial centres. The return of gods' statues to Egypt by the Ptolemies is particularly remarkable since it turned Egypt, and not simply Alexandria, into the new imperial centre of the *oikoumenē*. Their claims about the capture and return of statues have been mainly examined as a topos from the perspective of Egyptian cultural memory and Achaemenid

[1] Obvious examples are the bust of Nefertiti at the Neues Museum in Berlin, on which see, for example, Breger (2006) and the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum, see, for example, Ruprecht Jr. (2018) especially 173–74, 177–78; even the restitution of smaller objects plays a part in diplomatic relations today, notably in the region under scrutiny in this article: for instance, two black granite Egyptian statues, one of a god and an *ushabti* figurine, found in the Gaza strip, were returned by a Palestinian delegation to Egypt's minister of state for antiquities in 2011, but were proved to be inauthentic. See El-Aref (2011).

[2] On the restitution of works of art in antiquity, with a focus on the Greek and Roman world, see Lapatin (2010); on social capital, see Lin (1999) 39.

history. Yet this article aims to offer a holistic analysis by incorporating the Ptolemaic standpoint and by proposing how and why indeed they returned gods' statues to Egypt.

It is necessary to contextualize such actions within a long tradition of carrying off and returning statues among Near Eastern rulers. The stealing of religious statues from a defeated enemy was common among ancient Near Eastern empires as a means to display political superiority.[3] Accordingly, the return of such statues was the action of just rulers able to defeat their opponents and to expand their empires. Gods' statues were not the only sort of trophy objects. For example, the stela bearing the so-called Code of Hammurabi was seized in Babylon by the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte and taken as plunder to Susa in the 12th century BC.[4] A well-known passage of the Cyrus Cylinder (*ca.* 539–530 BC) encapsulates the point: Cyrus states that he returned the gods of Babylon to their place but also carried back safely to their homes the gods of Sumer and Akkad who were forced to dwell in Babylon, as well as peoples previously taken into exile in Babylon.[5] Such claims were undoubtedly embellished and reflected how a just king should behave in the eyes of the Babylonian priests.[6] Yet they at least confirm the shared practice of displacing and relocating the gods' enemies. For instance, the *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicle* for the year 707 BC records that the Assyrian king Sargon II repatriated the gods of the 'Sealand' to their shrines, which was a way to secure the support of the conquered populations.[7] In all these cases, the restoration of the statues enabled rulers to glorify themselves as just and generous and to consolidate their empires. However, there is little evidence of Egyptian gods' statues carried off during an invasion. Only two cuneiform sources mention that the Assyrian king Esarhaddon stole Egyptian gods' statues in 671 BC. In contrast, the surviving list of booty following Ashurbanipal's invasion of 663 BC records spoils but no statues.[8] Yet a bronze-and-gold statuette of the Egyptian goddess Anukhet was found in Nineveh, and if the scarcity of Egyptian objects may at first seem surprising, it can be explained by the sack of Nineveh in 612 BC, when objects of bronze and gold were probably looted and melted down.[9]

Historians have questioned whether the Persians seized Egyptian gods' statues when they occupied Egypt, as first stated by Ptolemy III, and the lack of Persian evidence usually led them to consider Ptolemaic claims as invented and propagandist.[10] In 1994, somewhat provocatively, J.K. Winnicki posited that the Ptolemies did indeed return the gods' statues, collecting all the possible allusions to Persian plundering of Egyptian temples.[11] A decade later, Pierre Briant rejected Winnicki's thesis, mainly stressing that there was no Persian document regarding the stealing of Egyptian gods' statues.[12] He also suggested that Winnicki undermined his thesis by considering that the Ptolemies found the statues in temples in Syria and that the Persians had not necessarily stolen them. Soon after, Christophe Thiers, the author of a new edition of the Pithom Stela, one of the central

[3] On the Near Eastern tradition of stealing statues, see Winnicki (1994) 151–55 and Gozzoli (2006) 135–36.

[4] van de Mieroop (2004) 176–77.

[5] Kuhrt (2007) 70–72, especially 72, ll. 30–34 and commentary on pp. 73–74 n.21, where she interprets these lines as a possible 'conventional act of "reversal"' and stresses that they do not resolve the question of the role of Cyrus in the restoration of the exiles to Jerusalem; see Finn (2014) 397–99 with text, translation and earlier bibliography.

[6] Waerzeggers (2015) 187, 190–91 points out that the content of the Cyrus Cylinder was not a 'satisfactory arrangement' between the priestly elite and the king but rather a way for the Babylonian priests to convey to Cyrus how a just king was to act.

[7] Grayson (2000) 76, 'Chronicle 1'; for van der Spek (1977–1978) 65–66, the Sealand included the cities of Ur, Uruk, Eridu, Larsa, Kisik and Nimid-Laguda; see also Finn (2014) 398–99.

[8] Winnicki (1994) 157–58; Grayson (2000) 85–86.

[9] Thomason (2004) 158–59.

[10] See already Bouché-Leclercq (1903) especially 11 and 191 n.1.

[11] Winnicki (1994) especially 159–69; see already Bernand (1970) 1009–10.

[12] Winnicki (1994) 155–69 and 186–90; Briant (2003) especially 177–78; Gozzoli 2006: 135–36 is neutral.

sources reporting the return of statues, proposed a status quo: there was no systematic deportation of statues by the Persians, but their seizure and return were more than just propagandist claims.[13] Most recently, focusing on the narrative of carrying off statues, Damien Agut-Labordère has convincingly demonstrated how the Ptolemies conflated the cultural memories of the Egyptians and the Graeco-Macedonians.[14] Combining the traumatic Egyptian memory of the Assyrian invasions with the shocking memory of Xerxes' plundering of Greece during the Second Persian War, the kings gradually distorted these narratives to construct a political consensus against the Seleucids.

The aim of this article is threefold. First, the analysis and contextualization of the Ptolemaic evidence identify some elements of truth in the accounts of the return of statues. As Hellenistic warfare provided ample opportunities for plunder, the Ptolemies invested time and energy in seeking Egyptian objects in Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine, which were brought back for distribution among the Egyptian temples, and ceremonies occurred for reinstalling some statues.[15] The statues of the gods were essential to the daily cult rituals, which were the prerogative of the king but were in practice performed by the priests.[16] Since there is no evidence that cults were interrupted, one can posit that the local priests, the population and the kings found it plausible that new statues had long ago replaced the allegedly stolen ones and that the stolen statues were now returned.[17] Second, the article reconstructs what the Ptolemies knew about the traditions of seizing and bringing back statues in the Greek and Egyptian cultural spheres, which once again mixed elements of truth with topoi. This reconstruction serves as a basis to explain why they established a new tradition of bringing back Egyptian sacred objects every time they campaigned to the east. The Ptolemies saw that such a practice would resonate meaningfully among different population groups in Egypt: the Graeco-Macedonian elites, the Egyptian priests and the Egyptian population. Third, the spreading and even shaping by the Ptolemies of stories of statues detained in the wrong place and returning to Egypt, such as the Bentresh Stela and the Sarapis story, acquire new meaning when analysed in relation to the Ptolemaic stelae. All these narratives point to Egypt's power and centrality, a claim that could also appeal to every inhabitant. This finding allows me to conclude that the orchestration of the return of the stolen statues was one very concrete way for the Ptolemies to construct Egypt as the new imperial centre of the *oikoumenē*.

II. The Ptolemaic sources

The following comparison of the six Ptolemaic texts recording the deportation and restitution of Egyptian gods' statues serves to illuminate how elements of truth could be embedded in a broader narrative that was meaningful to different audiences. Variations present in each text carefully reflect the historical context of their finding and of their restitution. The two earliest documents are hieroglyphic stelae dated to the reigns of the first two Ptolemies, in which the Egyptian priests praised each king for returning to Egypt

[13] Thiers (2007) 100–06, especially 102.

[14] Agut-Labordère (2017).

[15] The term 'statue' includes here statuettes and figurines, see below n.30; on war booty, see Préaux (1978) 366–80; Austin (1986) especially 454–55, 465; and Fischer-Bovet (2014) 66–70; statues and other war booty are closely tied together in the Satrap Stela and the Adulis inscription discussed below.

[16] On daily cult rituals associated with divine statues, see Coppens (2009) and Price (2020) 445–46.

[17] The rituals associated with the three different activities necessary for the making of new statues are described in the inscriptions and reliefs of a goldsmiths' workshop in the temple of Dendera, see Derchain (1990) with Chassinat (1978) 127–48 and plates DCCCII–DCCCXIV: first, their fabrication by specialized craftsmen out of wood (often gilded), stone or metal; second, their adornment by the priests with amulets, once the workshop had been purified and offerings made; and finally, their exposure to the sun and the ceremony of the 'opening of the mouth' for their consecration.

the gods' statues they found in Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine. Though none of the stelae mentions that the Persians stole these statues, it is notable that they come from two temples located in the region of Egypt most at risk of being invaded or suffering raids, the temple of Buto in the western Delta and Pithom (Tell el-Maskuta) in the easternmost part of the Delta.

In the Satrap Stela (311/10 BC), Ptolemy confirms land donations to the priest of Buto, following Egyptian royal traditions, despite being only a satrap of the young Macedonian king Alexander IV.[18] After traditional praise of the warlike qualities of the king, the text immediately turns to his action regarding the return of the statues of Egyptian gods and other sacred objects, including scrolls:

> As he (i.e. Ptolemy Satrap) brought back the sacred images of the gods which were found within Asia (i.e. Syria), together with all the ritual implements and all the scrolls of the temples of Upper and Lower Egypt, so he restored them in their proper places … He then went with his armies to the land of the Syrians, with the result that they fought with him and he entered among them with his heart strong like a raptor in pursuit of small birds, seizing them in a single instant. To Egypt he brought away their princes, their horses, their ships, and all their wonders.[19]

The priests erected the Satrap Stela after the victory of Ptolemy I against Demetrius, the son of Antigonus Monophthalmus, in Gaza in 312. This military campaign had provided an opportunity for seizing Egyptian objects in Palestine and Phoenicia, where Ptolemy installed garrisons. Because the priests decided to emphasize what concerned them first, they only mentioned the making of Alexandria as the new capital and the war against Demetrius afterwards. In a sense, the Satrap Stela shares some similarities with the Cyrus Cylinder, but here the Egyptian priests themselves describe the king's finding and returning of the gods' statues as the fulfilment of a just king's duty. This text is also the only one to record the return of sacred scrolls ('the souls of Ra'), which Winnicki interpreted as an allusion to the sacred books (*hierai anagraphai*) that Artaxerxes III looted from Egyptian temples, according to Diodorus (16.51), though according to the same author they were returned by Bagoas in exchange for a sum of money.[20] Whether or not this is the case, the priests referred to objects that could have been stolen or at least were thought to have been stolen in Egyptian collective memory.[21] In the central section of the stela, they also stressed that Xerxes would have confiscated the land that has now been confirmed as theirs by Ptolemy; that the native pharaoh Khababash returned the land to them during the Second Persian occupation, when he examined the region 'to repel the ships of Asia from Egypt'.[22] The priests' reference to Xerxes is not to be understood in a historical sense but symbolically, as argued by Gilles Gorre, since the Egyptian priests were aware that Xerxes personified the impious Persian king to the Graeco-Macedonian audience.[23]

Half a century later, the Pithom Stela (*ca.* 264 BC) gives an account, by the priests of Atum of Tjekou, of Ptolemy II returning the statues of Egyptian gods found in Palestine during the First Syrian War, in the 270s:

[18] *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire* = *CCG* 22183.

[19] Tr. Ritner (2003b) 393, ll. 3–5; Ockinga (2018) locates the document in its earlier Egyptian context.

[20] Winnicki (1994) 161, 172.

[21] On collective memory and the plundering of Egyptian temple, see Agut-Labordère (2017) 150, 156–58, 160–62.

[22] *CCG* 22183 (see n.18), tr. Ritner (2003b) 393, l. 8. On Khababash, see Burstein (2000).

[23] Gorre (2017) 59–62; on the stela, see previously Klinkott (2007); Colburn (2015) contrasts the straightforward anti-Persian view developed by the Greeks to the more complex Egyptian memory of the Second Persian occupation and on pp. 172–79 stresses the propagandist nature of the stela.

> The king went to the province of Syria. When he reached Palestine, he found all the gods of Egypt and he brought them back in Egypt. They went with the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, lord <of the Two Lands> Ptolemy in Khenet-tatji (?). His Majesty sent them to Egypt and they were received by the guardians of Egypt, full of joy because of the trip of these gods. After that, His Majesty did what was helpful for the return of the gods of Egypt in Egypt. They (= the priests?) went in front of His Majesty to distinguish him from the (other) kings and to glorify his rule for ever. He was on the bank (when) they stopped from the mouth of the East land to Memphis. The entire Lower Egypt was in joy, glorifying (his) might; so the king … to these gods. Nothing of the sort was done in this country. They (= the Gods) went to the throne of Ptah and they remained (here) during nine months <in> the House-of-the-Morning.[24]

The text continues with the convocation of the priests of Lower and Upper Egypt to Memphis by the king, through an order of the royal scribe, so that they identify the (statues of the) gods. The priests of the temple of Pithom-Tjekou came and found the statue of their god, for whom Ptolemy II organized a festive return by boat.[25] The mention that the statues were held for nine months in Memphis for their purification by the priests indicates that the Ptolemies brought back some actual objects. Such a period echoes, according to Thiers, human gestation and perhaps also the nine states of mutation of Osiris into Ra.[26] These nine months would also provide time for rituals of reactivation of the statues through the opening of the mouth and exposure to the sun on the temple roof, similar to processional activities taking place within the temples on New Year's Day.[27] One cannot wholly exclude that in consultation with the Ptolemies, the priests of Ptah in Memphis also fabricated sacred statues during these nine months, but if it happened, this must have been limited. Indeed, there were plenty of Egyptian objects, votives and even statues they could find in Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine.[28] Local production and trade or exchange since at least the New Kingdom can explain their presence, as Egypt had

[24] *CCG* 22183 (see n.18), ll. 10–12, tr. Agut-Labordère (2017) 151 based on the new edition by Thiers (2007) with commentary 39–44.

[25] Thiers (2007) 45–49.

[26] Thiers (2007) 104. Egyptian sources are not specific on the duration of pregnancy; see Robins (1993) 82. But in Graeco-Roman sources, ten months are well attested; see Ryholt (2009) 314.

[27] Thiers (2007) 104 also suggests rituals such as those of the union of the disc and of the opening of the mouth, which occurred when statues were left for some time in a crypt; amulets were fabricated for adorning the statues, as shown on the reliefs of the goldsmith's workshop in Dendera; see Derchain (1990) 225–27, 231, 238–39, and n.17 above. New Year's Day rituals are recorded on the temple walls of Dendera and Edfu; see Coppens (2009) and Wahby (2009) with bibliography.

[28] It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of Egyptian objects that have been found in these regions: figurines of Egyptian gods were produced, for instance, in Ascalon, where fourth-century statuettes of Isis nursing Horus, Osiris, Harpocrates, Bastet, the Apis bull and other sacred animals were found in a bronzemaker's workshop; see Iliffe (1936) with plates XXIX–XXXIV, already mentioned by Winnicki (1994) 188 n.159. On Egyptian objects in Syria and Palestine already in the Middle Kingdom, and especially the New Kingdom, notably statues of kings and individuals, either as gifts or, for the latter, as ex-votos dedicated in the temples by Egyptian officials in post in the region during the New Kingdom, see Matthiae (2000) and Ahrens (2015). For Egyptian objects dated to the first millennium, see the royal statues of the 22nd Dynasty (Sheshonq I, Osorkon I and Osorkon II) found in Byblos and above all Egyptian-produced amulets and figurines resulting from trade between Egypt and the Levant during the 25th Dynasty, while some Egyptian-style objects (for example, household ware and seals) were also locally produced, see Ben-Dor Evian (2017) 35–37. For evidence of trade between Egypt and Palestine in the first millennium, following Sheshonq I's incursion, see the statue with the inscription of Padiiset son of Apy, the commissioner of/for Canaan, found in the Egyptian Delta in Ehlrlich (1996) 65. For Egyptian-style amulets of Horus and Ptah, scarabs and figurines dated to 900–600 BC found in Transjordan, see Daviau (2015) 242–45, notably limestone statues and figurines with the *atef* crown (figs 2.1–6), Sekhmet figurines and Hathor heads (figs 3.1–7), and animal figurines such as the baboon of Thoth, some acquired by trade and others made locally.

remained a source of inspiration throughout the first millennium. Ptolemaic soldiers undoubtedly looted the area after the Battle of Gaza and during the Second Syrian War, whether or not the Ptolemies officially asked to recover Egyptian statues and sacred objects. The presence of soldiers of Egyptian origin who fought at the Battle of Gaza, as reported by Diodorus, also supports this reconstruction of events.[29]

There was no mention that anybody had seized the statues until that point: they were simply found. But starting with Ptolemy III, the Persians were considered stealers of the gods' statues, as made clear in the Adulis royal inscription, a text composed by the king, and in the synodal decrees, the product of a close collaboration between the king and the priests gathered in a synod. As noted by Agut-Labordère, the Ptolemies were reshaping memories hostile to successive Near Eastern empires and adapting them to a new context.[30] Egyptian cultural memory had constructed the Assyrians as the invaders, but the Ptolemies redirected this hostility against Persia as an evocation of the current enmity shared against the Seleucids by Graeco-Macedonians in Egypt and Egyptians. Ptolemy III's account of the beginning of the Third Syrian War (246–241 BC), preserved on a Greek inscription found in Adulis (245–243 BC), goes as follows:

> Having secured control of all the territories within (i.e. to the west of) the Euphrates and of Cilicia, Pamphylia, Ionia, the Hellespont, Thrace, and of all the forces in those places and of the Indian elephants, and having reduced to his obedience all the rulers in the provinces, he crossed the river Euphrates, and having subdued Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Susiana, Persis, Media and all the remaining territory as far as Bactria, and having sought out all the sacred objects (*hiera*) that were removed from Egypt by the Persians and having brought them back to Egypt together with the rest of the treasure from the provinces (*topoi*), he sent his forces across the dug out rivers (i.e. canals).[31]

A similar account of the war appears in the first synodal decree, voted by the Egyptian priests gathered in Alexandria (243 BC). The synodal decree of Canopus (238 BC) soon reiterated the return of the gods' statues, called *hiera agalmata* in both decrees. The Canopus decree did not enumerate any regions, undoubtedly because the king could not maintain all his conquests. Since synodal decrees addressed the priestly milieu, they tended to emphasize the plundering of temples, as is apparent in the Alexandria decree and the later Raphia decree (see below). The hieroglyphic version of the Alexandria decree is given here since the Greek text is poorly preserved:

> His Majesty himself took care for the statues of the gods which had been taken away from their places in the temples in Egypt to the two Retenu, Syria, Cherek [= Cilicia], Seger and Susa at the time when the vile Asiatics of Persia did harm to the temples. He went around all the foreign countries seeking them: His Majesty brought (them) to Egypt with great festivity.[32]

Even if Ptolemy III exaggerated some of his deeds, the Third Syrian War was a true military campaign against the Seleucid kingdom and not a simple raid.[33] He reached Babylon in

[29] Diod. Sic. 19.80.4; Winnicki (1994) 170–72, 188 argues that all the Egyptian gods' statues were carried off by the Ptolemies because all the Egyptian-made statues found by archaeologists in Syria-Palestine are those of kings or individuals. Yet this would seem a curious coincidence and is in fact inaccurate, since a growing number of figurines of gods have been found in recent and current excavations; see n.28 above.

[30] Agut-Labordère (2017) especially 150, 156–58.

[31] *Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* I 54, tr. Austin (2006) no. 268, ll. 13–24. The end of the inscription is lost.

[32] Hieroglyphic and Demotic texts with commentary in El-Masry et al. (2012) 100–02, 204–05; Greek text established by Kayser (2012); English translation of the Hieroglyphic version, ll. 8–9 in Agut-Labordère (2017) 152.

[33] Burstein (2016). On the Babylonian 'Chronicle of Ptolemy III', see Clancier (2012).

February 245 and created the province of Trans-Euphrates, though it was short-lived.[34] Ptolemaic troops possibly reached Susa between February and July 245. At that time, the army returned to Egypt because of a domestic sedition, but it is doubtful that they went as far as Persis, and it is impossible that they went to Bactria, despite the claims made in the Adulis inscription.[35] The further Ptolemy went, the more prestigious his achievements, but the claims were also calibrated, though almost imperceptibly, to different audiences. On the one hand, the Greek inscription of Adulis gives an inflated list of regions the Ptolemaic army would have reached but remains vague on the places where the king searched for objects and on what he brought back. They are simply called *hiera*, which does not necessarily refer to cult images but means more broadly 'sacred objects', versus *hiera agalmata,* 'sacred statues', in the synodal decrees. On the other hand, the Alexandria decree lists regions where the army found the statues of the gods, ending with Susiana, which troops possibly reached. Moreover, this passage adapts the reasons for the war to the primary audience of this stela, the Egyptian priests and population, since war booty is presented as the search for Egyptian sacred objects. In this case, looting occurred once again mainly in Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine, where they could still encounter Egyptian objects and votive statues.[36] In contrast, there is no evidence for Egyptian gods' statues in Babylon and Susa.[37] Yet centuries later, Saint Jerome still reported in his *Commentary on Daniel* that Ptolemy III plundered the Seleucid kingdom, seizing 40,000 talents and bringing back 2,500 precious vessels and gods' statues.[38] As often, numbers tend to be exaggerated and/or rounded and cannot be taken at face value. If anything, this mention at least confirms the memory of the significant war booty brought back by Ptolemy III.

The last clear evidence for the return of the gods' statues to Egypt is the synodal decree of Raphia, in which Ptolemy IV celebrated his victory over Antiochus III at Raphia in 217, ending the Fourth Syrian War (219–217). As a century earlier, at the Battle of Gaza, the king had Egyptian soldiers in his ranks, but this time a very large number, 20,000 fighting in phalanx formation (Polyb. 5.65). The decree reported that Ptolemy repatriated the statues found in Syria and Phoenicia, where the fighting against Antiochus III, who had momentarily invaded the Ptolemaic province, actually took place. The priests praised Ptolemy for two related issues: first, he made new gods' statues to replace those damaged by Antiochus III in Syria and Phoenicia during the Fourth Syrian War (ll. 18–20) and, second, he returned to Egypt the statues of the gods carried there by the Persians (ll. 22–23):

> The statues of the gods which were in the temples, and had been damaged by Antiochus (III), Pharaoh (i.e. Ptolemy IV) commanded others to be made in their stead, and set in their places. He gave much gold and silver and precious stones for them, and also for the equipment of the temples which those men had carried off, and he concerned himself to have them replaced … As soon as he heard that much injury had been done to the images of the Egyptian gods, he issued a splendid order to the regions over which he ruled outside Egypt that no further injury should be done to them, as he wished all foreign peoples to understand the greatness of the care that was in his heart for the gods of Egypt. … He took good care for [*sic*] the images of the gods that had been carried out of Egypt to the territory of the Syrians and that of the Phoenicians, at the time when the Medes caused destruction to the temples of Egypt.

[34] On Xanthippus as governor of this province, see Hauben (1990) 136.

[35] Altenmüller (2010) and Burstein (2016) have proposed that Ptolemy III reached Susiana on the basis of the decree of Alexandria and of the detailed chronology of the expedition.

[36] Winnicki (1994) 177 n.144, with earlier bibliography, notes that in this case several scholars agree that statues were returned, for example, Will (1979) 253–54; on Egyptian objects found in these regions, see n.28 above.

[37] The only known Egyptian statue at Susa was that of Darius I; see Razmjou (2002) 92–96 with figs 1–7; and most recently Colburn (2019) 131–88.

[38] *FGrH* 260 F43: *vasa pretiosa simulacraque deorum*; Gozzoli (2006) 135 n.74.

> He commanded that careful search should be made for them. Those which were found, in addition to those which his father had brought back to Egypt, he restored to Egypt and celebrated a feast with burnt offerings before them. He had them returned to the temples from which they had been previously removed.[39]

The text evokes a historical event, the looting of temples in Syria and Phoenicia by Antiochus III. The extent of this plundering is unknown, but there is little doubt that it happened and that Ptolemy ordered to replace what had been damaged or stolen to consolidate his power in the areas he had recovered (ll. 17–18). Praise in such decrees tended to be hyperbolic, so the 'splendid order' sent to all his subjects outside Egypt to protect the statues of Egyptian gods from injuries is better understood as an exaggeration (l. 19). Then the text turns to the seizing of statues and the damage to temples in Egypt caused by the 'Medes', a term used for Persians in the Demotic version.[40] This part of the story was by now traditionally accepted by diverse audiences, though it was, as most scholars agree today, a topos.[41] Yet its juxtaposition with the contemporary events of Antiochus III's invasion of Syria and Phoenicia purposely shed a light of credibility on it. Whether or not there were missing or damaged gods' statues in Egypt, what mattered to the priests was the arrival of Egyptian objects with the troops, combined with the king's generous support of the temples and the renovation or restoration of gods' statues. Whether or not they were the exact same objects was probably of lesser importance. Elements of truth were integrated into a narrative of renewal and restoration.

The absence of such claims later on, when the Ptolemies did not launch expeditions in Syria and Phoenicia, also tends to support that the earlier mentions referred to actual events. There is no statement about the restitution of statues in the synodal decree of Memphis (Rosetta Stone, 196 BC), and there is only one possible papyrological allusion to the recovery from Syria of Egyptian statues by Ptolemy VI during the Seventh Syrian War (147–145 BC).[42]

III. Greek and Egyptian antecedents for the return of gods' statues

If the topos of the statues stolen by the Persians can be explained by the conflation of Greek and Egyptian cultural memories, as shown by Agut-Labordère, the idea of actually returning gods' statues also sprang up from Greek and Egyptian antecedents, some mythical but others historical. By reconstructing, at times tentatively, the extent of Ptolemaic knowledge about the capture and, above all, the return of gods' statues, one can explain the materialization of a new tradition or practice that appealed to both Graeco-Macedonian and Egyptian audiences.

The Persian sack of Athens in 480/79 remained one of the most traumatic episodes of Greek history. The plundering that took place included the seizing of the bronze statues of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the first statues of actual historical figures ever made in Greece, around 510 BC, which were replaced in 477 BC by a new statue group.

[39] *CCG* 31088 (see n.18), tr. Austin (2006) no. 276, ll. 17–18, 19–20, 22–23. The return of the statues is repeated at the end of the decree; one of the rare Greek fragments reports that the king 'made them anew' (ἀνενεώσατο), see *I.Prose* 14, ll. 11–17.

[40] The term 'Mede' (*mdy*, see Erichsen (1954) 185 and Johnson (2001) *Chicago Demotic Dictionary*, 'M', pp. 270–71) is used in the Demotic version of the Alexandria decree, see commentary in El-Masry et al. (2012) 102, and is commonly used in Demotic to designate the Persians, even if *prs* is also attested, see Erichsen (1954) 136 and Johnson (2001) *Chicago Demotic Dictionary*, 'P', pp. 132–33 with a reference to the Canopus decree.

[41] Quack (2011) has demonstrated that the term 'Mede' as well as anti-Persian sentiments in Demotic prophetic literature came from sources anterior to the Ptolemaic period.

[42] Bresciani (1975) 14B with Winnicki (1994) 181.

The tyrannicides were the object of a cult during the Panathenaea, most likely already before the replacement of the statues.[43] Several ancient authors, Arrian, Pliny the Elder, Valerius Maximus and Pausanias, record the return of these bronze statues, which Alexander found in Susa.[44] While they differ regarding who returned the statues and when, A.B. Bosworth suggested that the decision was Alexander's, but implemented by Seleucus, possibly when he was co-ruling with his son Antiochus (292–281 BC) since Pausanias mentions the latter.[45] Whether or not the statues' return occurred when Alexander was still alive, it is significant that the decision was his. It could easily be understood as a symbolic gesture to fulfil his promise of revenge against the Persians *vis-à-vis* his Greek allies.[46]

Arrian specifies that Xerxes seized images of men (*andriantas*), statues of gods (*agalmata*) and other votives (*anathema*) from Greece and adds that together with the sculptures of the tyrannicides, Alexander sent back to Athens the image of Celcean Artemis, otherwise unknown.[47] Pausanias notes that seizing gods' statues went back, among the Greeks, to the Trojan War and, when turning to the barbarians, he stresses the spoil carried off from Athens by Xerxes, including the image of Brauronian Artemis from Brauron (8.46.2–3). Whether or not the statue of Celcean Artemis was in fact the statue of Brauronian Artemis, and whether or not it happened, the evocation of the return of a statue of Artemis to Athens could remind its Graeco-Macedonian audience of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Apollo sent Orestes to retrieve the statue of Artemis in the far-away land of the Taurians (modern Crimea), which Orestes brought back with his sister, who became a priestess of Brauronian Artemis.[48]

One can thus locate Alexander's decision to send Greek statues back to Athens within a broad Greek mythical landscape which cannot have escaped Ptolemy Satrap, under whom the return of statues to Egypt is first stressed. The Graeco-Macedonian elite could interpret Ptolemy's gesture as reflecting Alexander's policies, and this antecedent possibly planted the seeds of such a practice in the minds of Ptolemy and his advisors. But they also found a fertile ground in Egyptian traditions.

The retrieval of gods' statues also has many Egyptian antecedents. Given the relationships of the early Ptolemies with some Egyptian priests, one can assume that they were informed about some of these stories. In a still-unpublished papyrus from the first or second century AD (*P.Carlsberg* 85) that preserves the *Life of Imhotep*, one episode concerns king Djoser and his architect Imhotep's journey to Assyria to find and bring back 'the forty-two divine limbs', that represent the body of Osiris.[49] Kim Ryholt hypothesizes that the limbs represent statues and books stolen during foreign invasions. After king Djoser defeats the Assyrians and settles with his army in Nineveh, he discovers the bones in a fortress, but he is told in a dream not to bring them back to Egypt immediately, though the

[43] Shear (2012). The symbolic value of these statues was certainly known to the Persians; see Lapatin (2010) 255–57.

[44] Arr. *Anab*. 3.16.7–8 and 7.19.2, Plin. *HN* 34.70, Val. Max. 2.10 ext. 1, Paus. 1.8.5, discussed in Finn (2014) 393–96; Arr. *Anab*. 7.19.2 refers to the year 325/4 BC, when Alexander returned to Susa and sent back statues to cities in Greece through envoys but in the earlier passage *Anab*. 3.16.7–8, Arrian suggests that Alexander sent the statues of the tyrannicides to Athens upon his first arrival to Susa in 331 BC.

[45] Bosworth (1980) 317; Azoulay (2017) 117–18 still considers Alexander the most probable benefactor.

[46] Finn (2014) 401–02 notes that if it happened in 325/4, as suggested in Arrian's second passage (*Anab*. 7.19.2), it may have fittingly happened at the time of the exiles' return; it seems unlikely, though, that Alexander aimed primarily at following Mesopotamian practices by returning the statues to Athens and that only the consequence of his decision fit well the Greek context, as suggested by Finn (2014) 396, 401–02, unless he also returned statues to Near Eastern cities.

[47] Arr. *Anab*. 3.16.7–8 and 7.19.2; Kuhrt (2007) 287.

[48] I thank Deborah Roberts for mentioning this parallel to me; on Eur. *IT* 1449–67a, where Orestes is asked to establish the cult of Artemis Tauropolos in Halae, see Kyriakou (2006) 455–60.

[49] Ryholt (2009) 312–13 suggests that the Alexandrian interest in biographical information may have inspired the composition of the text, though parts of the story could derive from older sources.

reasons are left unclear. Ryholt locates this story within a series of Egyptian narratives preserved in Demotic literature that have at their origin the Assyrian invasions, which Egyptians remembered as one of the most traumatic moments of Egyptian history. Still, he also points out that such stories were adapted over the centuries and sometimes conflated the Assyrian and later Persian invasions.[50] Another poorly preserved Demotic fragment (*P.Carlsberg* 555) alludes to the Persian presence in Egypt and may imply Persian looting of temples.[51] If the reading of the only toponym preserved is indeed Balamun in the northern Delta, where the temple of Amun was destroyed during the first Persian occupation and then rebuilt by Nectanebo I, the text could allude to destructions that are archaeologically documented. Another story reported in Manetho's *Aegyptiaca* and set in the New Kingdom points to the risk encountered by the statues of the gods in case of an invasion. The Egyptian high priest of Heliopolis, who was at the court of Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II, recounts that the Egyptian king Amenophis (Amenhotep) summoned the priests to hide the statues of the gods before an invasion.[52]

Another type of story, the so-called apocalyptic genre, alludes a few times to the displacement of statues. The *Prophecy of the Lamb* (or *Lamb of Bocchoris*), recorded on a Demotic papyrus of the Roman period, also mentions Egyptian gods whose *naoi* (shrines) will be found at Nineveh by Egyptians when they go to Syria, and it seems that this action would bring good fortune to Egypt.[53] Another prophecy, the *Demotic Chronicle*, does not mention statues but assesses pharaohs' reigns as good or bad, notably through their generosity towards the temples, and predicts foreign invasions due to bad rulership.[54] The text has been interpreted as propaganda to legitimate Ptolemy I's rule in Egypt, possibly composed by favourable priests, such as members of the Memphite priesthood.[55] Similarly, *Nectanebo's Dream* and its sequel imply that Nectanebo II's failure to please the gods triggered a foreign invasion, while a native saviour king would restore order, possibly his son, allegedly Alexander, with whom the Ptolemies keenly associated themselves.[56] Statues are mentioned again in the *Potter Oracle*, a prophecy from the Ptolemaic period preserved only in its Greek translation. However, a potter announces to king Amenophis that the 'Typhonians', understood as the Macedonians and Greeks, will bring calamities to Egypt. Among other things, their city (i.e. Alexandria) will be deserted and 'the statues which had been transported there will return to Egypt'.[57] The presence of ancient Egyptian statues in

[50] Ryholt (2004) especially 500–02, 506–07.

[51] *P. Carlsberg* 555; see Ryholt (2012) 143–55 and Agut-Labordère (2017) 157.

[52] Manetho, *fr.* 54, §244, see Gozzoli (2006) 136. Manetho's work is usually dated to the first half of the third century, but Moyer (2013) 213–15 argues that the *Aegyptiaca* was composed after 256 BC and Hornung et al. (2006) 34 suggest that it may have been compiled later than Diodorus' work, in the first century BC or in the first century CE.

[53] *P. Wien* D 10,000, especially cols ii.23–iii.1. This difficult passage has been translated differently, yet all translations accept the main theme of Egyptians finding the shrines of Egyptian gods: for example, col. ii.23, 'The shrine of the Egyptian gods will be recognized for them in Nineveh in the district of Syria' in Ritner (2003c) 448; 'man wird den Wert vergelten (= Rache nehmen) fur die Gotterkapellen Ägyptens gegen sie, (d. h.) gegen Ninive, im Gau des Amoriters' in Thissen (2002) 118–19; 'man wird Kenntnis über die Kapellen der Götter Ägyptens im Hinblick auf sie in Ninive, dem Bezirk von Assyrien, gewinnen' in Hoffman and Quack (2018) 243; and 'On apprendra l'existence des naos des dieux de l'Égypte qui auront été faits (?) vers Ninive dans la contrée' in Chauveau (2017) 49–51, who interprets this fragment as cols iii.23–iv.1. Winnicki (1994) 182–86 suggests that the shrines contained sacred books and connects this mention to that of the sacred books in the Satrap Stela and in Diodorus. See further Thissen (2002); Quack (2011); Hoffmann and Quack (2018) 241–43, 407–10 with earlier bibliography.

[54] Hoffman and Quack (2018) 244–51, 410–11 with earlier bibliography.

[55] Felber (2002) 107–10.

[56] Ryholt (2002) 234–39 shows convincingly that the story of Alexander as the son of Nectanebo reported in the *Alexander Romance* could be based on *Nectanebo's Dream* and its sequel.

[57] Translation in Austin (2006) no. 326, col. ii.34–35. See Koenen (2002); Quack (2011); Hoffman and Quack (2018) 252–53, 412 with earlier bibliography.

Alexandria has indeed been substantiated by underwater archaeology.[58] These *pharaonica* had been brought there from Heliopolis and other cities in the Delta, possibly to connect the new city to the long and outstanding Egyptian past. Still, this removal could have triggered discontent among some Egyptian priestly groups, perhaps echoed in the *Potter Oracle.* The Ptolemies' commitment to bringing back statues to Egypt, displayed in the Ptolemaic stelae and through ceremonies organized in the local temples, could also respond to this sort of resentment. The Macedonian rulers showed their care for the population through their piety towards the Egyptian gods, as expected of a good pharaoh. Even in Greek court poetry, Theocritus' encomium emphasizes that Ptolemy II cares about keeping the villages safe from invaders, an allusion to the Egyptian countryside (Theoc. *Id.* 17.98–99). The same poem depicts the king ruling over all the land and sea around him from the most fertile land, Egypt.

Though only manuscripts dated to the first centuries AD preserve these stories, they mostly derive from material hostile to foreigners that is older than Ptolemaic rule.[59] It seems reasonable that Ptolemy I and his successors were aware of some of these themes. Taking care of the statues of the gods and of the Egyptian temples was a means of negotiating with the local Egyptian elite. By visiting Egyptian temples in the Delta, the Ptolemies had also become familiar with stories of past invasions, which referred to times of turmoil and damage, or threat of damage, caused by 'foreigners'. The Egyptian naval commander Udjahorresnet, for instance, who joined the Persian side after Cambyses' successful invasion in 525 BC, recorded on his statue's autobiographical inscription how he found the temple of Neith in Sais in a poor state and expelled all the 'foreigners', probably Persian soldiers and other mercenaries, after the Persian king had ordered it.[60] Another autobiographical text on the statue of an anonymous general from Busiris in the Delta, dated to the reign of Nectanebo I (380–362 BC), records his renovation of the Great Seat of the god and donations of sacred objects (a barque and portable shrine) in Busiris and Abydos. He underlines 'the damages inflicted by the foreigners' in Abydos, possibly an allusion to some plundering at the time of Cambyses' conquest.[61] The restoration of temples that fell into ruin and the gods had abandoned had been a topos of earlier royal discourse. The pharaoh's function was to restore order from chaos, even when there were no specific troubles. In the restoration inscription of Tutankhamun, for instance, the king restored order and listed his gifts, including the gods' statues fabricated for the shrines.[62] Additionally, protecting the gods' statues when an actual invasion was imminent, as in the reign of Nectanebo I, was also the role of a good ruler. Artaxerxes II tried to invade Egypt in the 380s, and in 373 Artaxerxes III's troops were first victorious on the Mendesian mouth, yet then had to withdraw. Cities and temples in the Delta, especially the eastern Delta, were under constant threat, as reflected in the architecture and epigraphy of the temple of the god Sopdou, 'god of the Orient', at Saft el-Henneh. There, Nectanebo I built four black granite *naoi*, one for each of the four local gods. These four 'miniature fortresses' constituted a theological rampart

[58] See the many publications by Goddio and Empereur, for example, Goddio (1998) and Empereur (1998).

[59] This complex question cannot be discussed in detail here: for the *Prophecy of the Lamb*, a first layer of composition during the Saite period (664–525 BC) is usually accepted; see Gozzoli (2006) 293–97; Quack (2011) especially 110; Chauveau (2017) 61. For the *Demotic Chronicle* and the *Potter Oracle*, a composition in the Ptolemaic period, see Hoffmann and Quack (2018) 244, 252.

[60] *Statue Vatican* 22690 with Thiers (1995) 498–500, no. 3. On Udjahorresnet's inscription, see Posener (1936) and Lloyd (1982). Expelling foreigners or soldiers from Egyptian temples remained a deed worth highlighting in autobiographical inscriptions at the time of the Macedonian conquest and of later disruptions; see Thiers (1995); Fischer-Bovet (2014) 263–69.

[61] Statue MMA 1996.91. For this interpretation, see Klotz (2010) 150–51, 154.

[62] Bennett (1939). On the topos of the pharaoh restoring the sanctuaries, see Vernus (2016) especially 12 n.31 with bibliography.

against the Persian threat, relying on the victory of the solar god Sopdou, as stressed by Hélène Virenque.[63] The text on the first *naos*, probably devoted to Geb, also underlines the fear of rebels arriving from the east, which reflects a real Persian threat at that time, and states that the gods are protecting Egypt.[64] The decoration and the content of the *naos* of Sopdou are the most refined: the engraved figures are statues, with the indication of their size and material constituting an inventory of the sacred objects, a genre that was becoming particularly popular in this period but had enjoyed a long tradition since the Old Kingdom.[65] The inscription explains that the statues were 'hidden since the time of the ancestors, when turmoil had come to pass in Egypt' and that Nectanebo I restored them to their proper place 'after an extended period of time (in which) they had wandered off to foreign lands'.[66] Another distinctive feature of the *naos* of Sopdou is the three-line passage explaining that Nectanebo created it because the god appeared to him:

> He (Nectanebo I) was requesting (to see) his radiance,
> While this god was in a remote location,
> which was unknown even by those charged with secrets,
> as the entire Ennead of this district were hiding their bodies.
>
> The god put it in the mind of the Lord of the Two Lands,
> to make an effort to see the perfection of his majesty …
> [… after] many years when nobody knew what was happening.
>
> One (Nectanebo I) suddenly saw him in astonishment,
> Jubilantly proclaiming it in the streets, saying:
> 'The Ruler has returned from the east!
> He has illumined the earth with his radiance'.[67]

Scholars have interpreted the inscriptions of the *naos* in slightly different, yet not incompatible, ways. Agut-Labordère underlines that it is the first inscription recording that a god was lost in the east, thus creating a topos for offering a *naos* with a new cultic statue, but that Persia is not specified because the Assyrians were the plunderers within Egyptian cultural memory.[68] It remains that sacred objects, as stressed by Pascal Vernus, had either been taken by invaders or placed in hiding by the priests.[69] Nectanebo was also the discoverer of two supposedly forgotten 'cachettes', which in this case probably refers to crypts where sacred material could be stored or hidden.[70] For David Klotz, the text of the *naos* provides a piece of evidence that the gods were gone in times of Persian threat.[71] In any case, the king, together with the priests, did not aim to provide a historical account but a theological one, so it is unsurprising that the Persians were not mentioned. However, the historical context evoked by the purposely vague 'many years when nobody knew what was happening' is the Persian threat during the first decades of the fourth century. While the inscriptions on the *naos* of Sopdou praise the actions of Nectanebo I and his success, two *naoi* of the god Onuris in Sebennytos with incomplete inscriptions seem to have

[63] Virenque (2006) especially 27 with figs 1 and 6.
[64] Virenque (2006) 22, 27.
[65] Virenque (2006) 22; Vernus (2016) 13.
[66] Tr. Klotz (2010) 153.
[67] Tr. Klotz (2010) 154.
[68] Agut-Labordère (2017) 156–57.
[69] Vernus (2016) 12–13.
[70] Vernus (2016) 17–19 and nn.67–68 stresses that crypts were used for storage but also served as a special space where the pharaoh could communicate with the deity.
[71] Klotz (2010) 154.

inspired the reverse narrative about Nectanebo II, if one accepts Ryholt's contextualization of the sequel of *Nectanebo's Dream*.[72] In this story, which comes after the stonecutter chosen by Nectanebo II to finish the temple inscriptions has failed to do so, Petisis (the stonecutter) predicts a foreign invasion, clearly because Nectanebo's failure has displeased the gods. The story could also be interpreted as a negative presentation of Nectanebo in contrast to Alexander, thus showing the Ptolemies in a positive light.

The *naos* of Sopdou and the *naoi* of Sebennytos were only visible to the priests, but they were the main interlocutors of the Ptolemies when the rulers visited the Delta, as in the cases recorded on the Satrap and Pithom stelae, thus they could inform the kings about such stories. Moreover, a stela of Ptolemy II found in Saft el-Henneh and dedicated to the god Sopdou and the other local gods makes clear that the king had visited the town.[73] He was aware of the role of the gods in protecting Egypt and of the strength of the theological message of returning gods' statues and other sacred objects from the east, whether the original statues had been hidden or seized. To sum up, the seizing of statues from temples by foreigners, or at least their momentary disappearance because of a threat, was a conceivable possibility to the Egyptian priests and population. The first two Ptolemies could act accordingly and appropriately presented the Egyptian objects and statues that their troops found in Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine. Only Ptolemy III, in the context of his victories early in the Third Syrian War, was to add the mention of the Persians. Through this allusion to a common enemy, whom Alexander had defeated, the statues' return was now clearly intended to appeal to the Graeco-Macedonian audience, too. This practice seems to have pleased both audiences since Ptolemy IV repeated the claim in the Raphia decree and orchestrated the return of statues.

IV. Converging traditions under the Ptolemies: princess Bentresh and Sarapis

Any stories about retrieving or returning Egyptian gods' statues to where they belonged could serve as an inspiration and an aspiration for the first Ptolemies and their councillors. The tale of princess Bentresh, who supposedly lived during the reign of Ramses II in the New Kingdom, remembered as a period of Egyptian imperialism when the reputation of the king reached far-away countries, did not escape their notice. The story of the princess is known to us from a pseudo-historical hieroglyphic text recorded on the so-called Bentresh Stela, now in the Louvre, whose date is disputed between the 25th dynasty and the Ptolemaic Period.[74] As already pointed out by Winnicki, the tale developed when Egyptians faced the threat of invasions from the east.[75] The text was also engraved on a monumental inscription found in the block yard at Luxor temple, only partially preserved and currently at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, possibly to be dated to the reign of Ptolemy I.[76] The story goes that Ramses had married the daughter of the prince of Bakhtan, an unknown place usually identified as Bactria by modern scholars. Yet princess Bentresh, the prince's other daughter, became sick. The prince asked Ramses to send him a wise man, who then requested that an Egyptian god, Khonsu of Thebes, be sent to him because a ghost possessed the princess. Ramses dispatched Khonsu (i.e. the god's statue) from

[72] Ryholt (2002) 240–41 and plate VIII stresses that in reality Artaxerxes III's invasion probably prevented the completion of the inscriptions on some actual *naoi* of the temple of Onuris-Shu.

[73] The stela has not been published because of its poor state of preservation. See the brief description in Naville (1885) 13 and plate 8, year 22 of Ptolemy II, also mentioned in Guermeur and Thiers (2001) 214.

[74] Louvre C 284, tr. Ritner (2003a).

[75] Winnicki (1994) 169.

[76] The inscription seems to belong to a building on which are engraved the images and cartouches of Ptolemy I as pharaoh. I thank Brett McClain for sharing this information with me and Jonathan Winnerman for mentioning this current research. The bibliography is extensive: see the most recent study by Witthuhn et al. (2015). Ryholt (2013) 66 hypothesizes that both inscriptions were engraved in the early Ptolemaic period.

Thebes, who expelled the ghost from the princess, yet the prince decided to keep Khonsu. After three years and nine months, he dreamed that the god was flying to Egypt and agreed to let him return home. R.K. Ritner has convincingly explained that the story served as 'cultic propaganda' for the healing shrine of the god Khonsu in Thebes.[77] He also points to some historical foundation to the tale since actual diplomatic exchanges of healing statues and physicians between Egypt and its neighbours are attested in the diplomatic correspondence of the New Kingdom. Additionally, Ryholt has shown that the reference to Bactria makes clear that one subplot of the story was an *imitatio Alexandri*, where Ramses matches or surpasses the later deeds of Alexander, while the superiority of the Egyptian king and the involuntary exiles of gods' statues formed other topoi.[78]

Several elements of the tale are worth stressing in relation to the content of the Ptolemaic stelae mentioning the return of statues. First, the (statue of the) god was detained in the east. If Bakhtan is to be understood as Bactria, the story takes a particular overtone in the Hellenistic period since it was one of the easternmost regions that Alexander reached. Second, the number of years and months during which the statue is detained is somewhat striking, since in the Pithom Stela the statues stay in Memphis for nine months for the purification rituals.[79] Third, the wise man/physician sent to Bactria is called the royal scribe, a term also found in the Pithom Stela, where Ptolemy II asks his royal scribe to summon the priests of Egypt to see the gods' statues.[80] Finally, the dating of the monumental inscription to the reign of Ptolemy I, if confirmed, sheds a clear light on the deep Ptolemaic interest in narratives of returning statues where they belonged, Egypt, conceived as the powerful centre of the world. All the themes of this story could resonate positively with both Egyptian and Graeco-Macedonian audiences: the ruler of Egypt was the supreme ruler of the known world, whether he was Ramses or an evocation of Alexander, with whom Ptolemy and his successors closely associated themselves. Moreover, like Alexander before them, the Ptolemies claimed descent from Heracles and Dionysus, notably in the Adulis inscription, which also connects far-away regions such as Bactria with the return of statues. Dionysiac themes were prominent in Ptolemaic ideology and could also speak to an Egyptian audience through Dionysus' association with Osiris.[81] Like Ramses before them, Alexander, often associated with Dionysus, and now the Ptolemies, dominated the world from Egypt.

There are also curious parallels between the tale of princess Bentresh and the story reported by Tacitus about the creation of the god Sarapis by Ptolemy I, which cannot be simple coincidences, as already noted by Stanley Burstein.[82] Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.83–84) claims that his account comes from Egyptian priests, who reported that Ptolemy I had several dreams in which a god from the Black Sea asked him to fetch his effigy back to Egypt.[83] The priests acknowledged their lack of knowledge about this region; thus, Ptolemy learned from the Athenian Timotheus, a member of the Eleusinian priestly family of the

[77] Ritner (2003a) 361–62.

[78] Ryholt (2013) 62–72. Ramses is also associated with Bactria in Diod. Sic. 1.47.6 and Tac. *Ann.* 2.60.3. A priest has informed the latter that Bactria paid a tribute to Ramses, which Ryholt interprets as an *imitatio Alexandri et Darii*.

[79] Ryholt (2013) 66 interprets the number three as symbolically representing 'many', then multiplied by three to make nine months.

[80] Thiers (2007) 46 n.88. The royal scribe is not to be confused with the Ptolemaic *basilikos grammateus* which was found in each nome. On the name and title of the scribe, see Ryholt (2013) 71.

[81] The importance of Dionysus has been abundantly discussed, see Caneva (2016) 81–127 with earlier bibliography; Felber (2002) 109–10.

[82] Burstein (2012).

[83] On Tacitus using priests as informants about Germanicus' visit to Thebes and a description of Egypt under Ramses, see Ryholt (2013) 63–64; on the relationships between the Black Sea, Sesostris and the Ptolemies, see the forthcoming work of Trnk-Amrhein presented at the Herodotus Helpline workshop (14 October 2020) at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OyZUBr7IC4.

Eumolpids, that this was the god of the city of Sinope. Ptolemy sent envoys who received confirmation of their mission from Delphi on their way to Sinope and brought gifts to the king Scydrothemis. The first part of the story connects Ptolemy with the Greek world, but the second part strikingly parallels the tale of Bentresh. In Sinope, the king faces the opposition of his population; therefore (1) he refuses to return the god (i.e. its statue), then (2) three years pass during which the god is still detained. Finally, (3) Scydrothemis is frightened by disasters and pestilence in his city sent from heaven until a miraculous action occurs: (4) the (statue of the) god embarks by himself on a ship to Egypt (Tac. *Hist.* 4.84).[84] One can also add the healing quality of both Khonsu and Sarapis, though this aspect is only mentioned later in Tacitus' account, when he turns to Sarapis as the god of Memphis. Tacitus' source, certainly someone from the Ptolemaic entourage, obviously knew about the tale of Bentresh. In Plutarch's version of the creation of the cult (*De Is. et Os.* 28, 261F–362A), Manetho is acknowledged as the Egyptian priest who, together with Timotheus, recognized the statue of the god as Pluto, namely Sarapis.[85]

Tacitus also briefly mentions two other versions. The first explains that Sarapis was the god of Memphis, which has reached scholarly consensus. Sarapis was inspired by the god Osor-Apis in Memphis, that is 'Osiris-Apis', the Apis bull identified as Osiris. His popularity had been growing, notably among the Graeco-Egyptian community in Memphis, and he took on an increasing importance in royal ideology, reaching its acme under Ptolemy IV.[86] The second alternative version directly connects the story of Sarapis with the historical context of the wars between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids and the return of the statues. Indeed, Tacitus was 'not ignorant that some report that Sarapis was brought from Seleucia, a city of Syria, in the reign of Ptolemy III'.[87] It was well known that Ptolemy III had built the Serapeum in Alexandria, which probably replaced an earlier temple dated to the reign of Ptolemy I.[88] But above all, Ptolemy III had captured Seleucia in Pieria, the harbour of one of the Seleucid capitals, Antioch, at the beginning of the Third Syrian War. A brief mention of this version is also given by Clement of Alexandria, citing the first-century BC Stoic philosopher Athenodorus of Tarsus: 'Only Isidorus says that the statue was transferred from the inhabitants of Seleucia in Antioch (= Seleucia in Pieria) after they too suffered a famine and were helped by Ptolemy'.[89] Since Tarsus is not far from Seleucia, it is not surprising that Athenodorus preserved this local version. Interestingly, it implies that the return of the god allowed the inhabitants of Seleucia to be saved from a famine, as the inhabitants of Sinope were saved thanks to Ptolemy's shipment of grain according to Clement's account, in exchange for which they sent Sarapis' statue as a thank offering. This episode also mirrors the various disasters encountered by the inhabitants of Sinope in the version reported by Tacitus. Once again, elements of truth, such as a food shortage when Ptolemy III seized the city and his care for the citizens to win their loyalty, have been entwined with the narrative of returning statues.[90] Clement of Alexandria also adds in the same passage that the god's statue had been created in Egypt in the time of king Sesostris

[84] See Burstein (2012). It is also notable that the return of the statues of the gods of the 'Sealand' by the Assyrian king Sargon II was effected during an epidemic in Assyria; see section I.

[85] The envoys simply stole the statue of the god. Two other accounts locate the story under Ptolemy II, see Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.48 and Cyril. *Adv. Iul.* 1.12 (*PG* 76, col. 521 CD).

[86] Bricault (1999). On the Sarapis and Isis jugate bust coinage used to pay soldiers during the Fourth Syrian War, see Landvatter (2012). On the cult in general, see Pfeiffer (2008) with earlier bibliography.

[87] Tac. *Hist.* 4.84 *Nec sum ignarus esse quosdam qui Seleucia urbe Syriae accitum regnante Ptolemaeo, quem tertia aetas tulit.*

[88] Pfeiffer (2008) 395–96, 400–01.

[89] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.48 Ἰσίδωρος μόνος παρὰ Σελευκέων τῶν πρός Ἀντιοχείᾳ τό ἄγαλμα μεταχθῆναι λέγει, ἐν σιτοδείᾳ καί αὐτῶν γενομένων καί ὑπό Πτολεμαίου διατραφέντων.

[90] At the beginning of the passage, Clement of Alexandria reports that the Sinopeans suffered a famine and mentions Ptolemy II, but later in his account he does not specify which Ptolemy seized Seleucia. Yet it is historically attested that Ptolemy III seized Seleucia.

after he had supposedly conquered territories belonging to the Greeks during the Middle Kingdom and had brought some of their craftsmen to Egypt.

IV. Conclusion: Egypt as the new centre of the world

This article has aimed to show that the return of the Egyptian gods' statues was based on some elements of truth and was not an isolated propagandist statement serving only to legitimate Ptolemaic imperialism to their Egyptian subjects. It suggests that by really returning some statues to Egypt, the Ptolemies performed the task expected of the king even when there was no military threat, a theme illustrated in the tale of Bentresh and in the most extensive version of the origins of Sarapis' cult. By shedding light on striking parallels between these stories and on the thematic similarities with the Ptolemies' statements about returning the gods' statues, I propose to read this new tradition as part of a larger discourse that constructed Egypt as the new imperial centre of the *oikoumenē*, with the Egyptian king as supreme ruler. In the cases of the Ptolemaic stelae and of the story of Sarapis that mentions Seleucia, the Ptolemies' military deeds were emphasized to present them as victorious rulers able to protect Egypt from foreign threats. In addition, the tale of Bentresh connected them to Ramses and Alexander, both of whom were remembered as successful rulers in the Egyptian and Graeco-Macedonian traditions that were converging at the time.

By bringing back the statues to Egypt, the Ptolemies were locating Egypt within the *translatio imperii*, the succession of empires, a concept already present in Herodotus and probably borrowed from the Persians.[91] This *translatio* was also emphasized through the association of Alexander and Dionysus arriving victorious from the east, as in the Procession of Ptolemy II, where the king shared his *truphē* with his subjects and presented himself as universal ruler. Similarly, Stefano Caneva has interpreted the references to remote eastern regions and persons in a series of epigrams attributed to Posidipus of Pella about stones and gems journeying towards Alexandria as the construction of Alexandria as 'the center of a new universal empire replacing Achaemenid Persia'.[92] In fact, every opportunity was seized to mark Egypt as the centre of the world. From the priestly and synodal decrees to the story of Sarapis, all statues were moving unidirectionally towards the new centre, Egypt.

The evidence referring to the return of statues illuminates how the Ptolemies accelerated the growing entanglement of Near Eastern imperial and religious traditions in the Hellenistic period by engaging with, and adapting, the cultural memory of the Graeco-Macedonians, the Egyptian priests and the Egyptian population. Several Greek and Egyptian antecedents, it has been argued, contributed to the creation of the new practice of bringing back Egyptian gods' statues to Egypt. First, the looting of 'trophy statues' in Greece during the Persian Wars and Alexander's decision to return them; second, stories of temples that were plundered or gods detained in exile, which had developed in the context of a traumatic memory of the Assyrian invasion and were recorded in Egyptian Demotic literature; third, the so-called apocalyptic texts, which emphasized that a good ruler was expected to take care of the gods and their temples, some of which possibly presented Alexander and the Ptolemies in a positive light; fourth, the hiding of statues and sacred objects in Egypt because of the threat of Persian invasions in the fourth century, still presented in a theological manner in the inscriptions of the *naos* of the god Sopdou. This historico-theological landscape, if the reconstructions proposed here are accepted, allowed for interpreting the arrival of objects carried off from Syria, Phoenicia and

[91] See Mari (2018) for a borrowing from the Persians.

[92] Caneva (2016) 126 on *P.Mil.Vogl.* VIII 309. See also Bing (2005). On universal empire and the idea of imperium *sine fine*, see Strootman (2014).

Palestine by the Ptolemies as the return of the gods' statues. It can also explain why stories of gods' statues returning to Egypt, which emerged as the new imperial centre, could appeal to all its inhabitants, of Egyptian or Graeco-Macedonian descent.

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