The purpose of this study is to examine the data for nuclear family incest and endogamy among the populations who lived in ancient Egypt, as well as among the Persian Zoroastrians, especially during the Sasanian Period. The discussion does not deal with consanguineous relationships among divinities and their sacerdotal representatives or among royalty. There is an abundance of evidence from many differing cultures for the exceptional sexual and marital privileges granted to members of these categories. Essentially following rules of their own, the practices of these groups highlight the different set of norms in the surrounding society. The discussion of these categories is therefore excluded from this study.

The evidence presented here will show that, contrary to popular belief, brother-sister marriages were exceedingly rare among the Egyptians. They were, however, in contrast, common among ordinary members of the Greek population of post-Pharaonic Egypt. The documentation from the Persian milieu furnishes substantial evidence of father-daughter, mother-son and brother-sister marriages. The Persian practice has a clear context as an integral part of Zoroastrianism, at least during the Sasanian Period (224-651 AD). The study also takes up some of the predominate explanations of the prohibitions against incest (or of its lack). No new theory is presented here however.

This study initially grew out of a comprehensive investigation of the concept of ‘taboo’ (bwt) in ancient Egypt. Bwt (pronounced as in ‘boot’) is a fundamental notion which bears some resemblance to certain definitions of the term taboo. When a taboo is applied to something, it serves to draw a line between the phenomenon or person on
whom it is imposed and the surroundings of that which is placed under taboo. Thus taboo is a differentiating mechanism that is also used descriptively with reference to the phenomenon under taboo: it is something tabooed. Analogous with Genesis 3:1-7 which describes all Creation as being divided into two categories, good and evil, the Egyptians looked upon their universe in terms of a similar dichotomy. **bwt** was the mechanism through which the two categories were differentiated. In theory, therefore, a range of phenomena were categorized as **bwt** at the very creation of the Egyptian universe and the inclusion in this category of phenomena (things, persons, notions) to be avoided was neither temporary nor casual.

The category **bwt** comprised phenomena that are prohibited in the most diverse societies and at the most diverse times, according them a different ontological status. The mechanism whereby taboos were used as a means of establishing and maintaining social strata, prominent among the features known from the Polynesian material, is unknown in Egypt. The appropriation of property and the arrogation of power by declaring something taboo is not part of the function of the Egyptian concept. Personal political power was not determined by the imposition of taboos and taboos could therefore not be rendered invalid by being overruled by the taboos of a superior. Only gods and the king, who was also a god, could make something **bwt**. The king could not, however, exercise this power indiscriminately or at will, but only in order to re-establish the original – primaeval – order of the world.

The phenomena and persons that were branded as **bwt** thus belonged to the forces of evil defined as a world of reversals and chaos. Egypt consisted of many small cosmos – more exactly 42. In theory each of them had been created by its own creator god, and for each of them extensive cult-monographs had been compiled. All of these descriptions had the same basic organization. They included the names of the gods of the cosmos; the hill on which creation took place; the name of the temple; the names of the priests; of the priestesses; the holy barque (boat); the holy lakes; the holy trees; the festivals; the holy snake, etc. More importantly, each cosmos also had an element of evil, a **bwt** – the term designating both the ‘evil’ itself and the interdiction against it. No descrip-
of the fundamental components of any cosmos would be possible if it only included ‘good’ phenomena.¹

The relationship between this study of the ancient Egyptian equivalent to the concept of ‘taboo’ and incest is not what might be expected. An examination of the relevant data shows, that there is no connection between the fundamental distinctions designated (i.e. created by) bwt and any regulation of sexual practice and marriage among the members of the nuclear family. Simply put, in ancient Egypt, incest is not subsumed into the category of things bwt – evil, chaos, things ‘taboo’ – and thus must be assumed to have had a different ontological status in this ancient culture.

The understanding that incest, in ancient Egypt, was not included among things ‘taboo’ led me to examine the scholarly work that continued to see it as the archetypal universal prohibition. A growing surprise at the reluctance or even resistance among scholars from several disciplines to seriously re-evaluate the issue of incest has been the primary motivation for this study, particularly since there is a convincing body of data that would help bring about that process of ‘debunking’ which, according to the late Edmund Leach, is highly desirable in the study of kinship.²

The persistence of the view that incest is a universal prohibition can be exemplified by a recent book in which the authors state that the ‘incest taboo applies worldwide to the nuclear family’. Reports by the writers of Antiquity are considered to be nothing but ‘a convenient way to debase outsiders and enemies’.³ While no one would contest that rumours and accusations of incest have served as a ‘device for vilifying’ religious minorities, ethnic groups, enemies in ancient as well as more recent times, this should not rule out the possibility that there is, or was, a solid foundation for such attributions. The disregard of the ancient evidence is the more remarkable as the authors do refer to Plutarch’s and Tacitus’s sagacious and perceptive observations that the incest taboo was a means to avoid conflict within the family and a measure for creating alliances, because it forces the individuals ‘to marry out into other kin groups and communities (thus anticipating many anthropological arguments).⁴ In discussions of incest, scholars sometimes make passing reference to an-
cient Egypt, occasionally even to Persia. In a single case, to be discussed below, the author claims to have sufficient insight into the material from these two civilizations to deem it unsuitable for further scholarly consideration.

For the purpose of this study of incestuous marriage, incest is defined as sexual intercourse between two persons who are too closely related for the marriage to be allowed according to the rules of the community in which they live. This has the appearance of being an eminently practical definition, because it would seem to cover all the cases. Such a definition, however, entails a contradiction in the description of those societies where sexual intercourse and marriage within the nuclear family do not constitute a breach of norms or even may, as in Persia, be prescribed. The term incest is therefore used both as a descriptive and an analytical term. Descriptive from the point of view of the writers in Antiquity as well as for modern scholarship, as the introductory remarks below will show. The norms of those authors as well as modern society have formulated the problem as one of incest and our approach cannot therefore be wholly detached from the traditional terminology and classification of the phenomenon. As an analytical category it identifies cases of what we would regard as inappropriate sexual relations between members of the nuclear family. The present work consequently describes the endogamous practice in Egypt and Persia in terms of close-kin or next-of-kin marriages.

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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Nature vs. Culture

Since antiquity the discussions on the problem of incest have been located at the point where nature and culture intersect. Thus in his great work On the Characteristics of Animals, the Stoic philosopher and priest Aelian (c. 170-235 AD) claims that animals abhor incest, but that the members of the royal Persian family do not:

But Cyrus and Parysatis, you men of Persia, thought it a fine and legitimate action. And Cyrus conceived a vile passion for his mother, a passion which his mother reciprocated. <While animals are moderate in their desires?> men desire everything and stop at nothing (De nat. anim. VI,39).5

A century earlier, however, the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom (c. 40-after 112 AD), expressed a rather more equivocal view on the matter. In his cynical, provocative and almost spiteful discourse on the usefulness of relying on servants and oracles, he uses none other than Diogenes himself (fl. 5th century BC) as his mouthpiece. This Cynic philosopher maintained that ‘nature’ physis should be given priority over ‘convention’ or ‘culture’ nomos. According to this view, ritual, law and other man-made institutions are embedded in the natural order because man is a creature of the same order. Proponents of the opposite view, on the other hand, argued that these institutions were ‘of culture’ because man had transcended nature owing to his superior intelligence. ‘Diogenes’ argued that the intelligent person had no need of oracles, and that all that mattered is to know oneself. Oedipus, for instance, had two options. He could have kept silent about having had sexual intercourse with his mother or he could have legalized what hitherto had been considered an offence against nature thus making it an accepted phenomenon of culture – and proving himself to be the possessor of superior intelligence. Oedipus’ flaw, however, was, first, that he lacked self-knowledge and therefore fell into the trap of resorting to divination and oracles; secondly, that he was generally foolish.
For he knew that he had consorted with his own mother and that he had children by her; and subsequently, when perhaps he should have concealed this or made it legal in Thebes, in the first place he let everybody know the fact and then became greatly wrought up, lifted up his voice and complained that he was father and brother at once of the same children, and husband and son of the same woman. But domestic fowls do not object to such relationships, nor dogs, nor any ass, nor do the Persians, although they pass for the aristocracy of Asia. And in addition to all this, Oedipus blinded himself and then wandered about blind, as though he could not wander while still keeping his sight (Dio Chrysostom X,29-30).6

The passage contains more polemics than precise reasoning, but the speaker seems, nonetheless, to hold the view that although the incestuous act happened to be wrong by (current) cultural standards, it was in keeping with nature. If Dio Chrysostom’s view is really taken *prima facie*, he must be seen as an advocate of incest.7 Aelian and Dio both mention the Persians as a people who practise incest, but they disagree as to the position of this practice with regard to the nature / culture dichotomy.

A third classical writer, the Greek physician and Sceptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus (*fl. 200 AD*), questioned another crucial aspect of the debate on incest, viz., the universal character of the prohibition. He was not biased against any ethnic group, and the following passage is therefore free of the kind of polemics found in the two quotations cited above. It is found in the third book of his great work *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, which poses the question ‘What is the so-called “Art of Living”?’ In order to answer this question Sextus produces a catalogue of social practices and shows that what one culture brands as shameful may be ‘a token of nobility’ in another (III.203). His examples include a variety of phenomena such as dress codes, tattooing, and — incest.

And with us it is sinful [*athesmos*] to marry one’s mother or one’s own sister; but the Persians, and especially those of them who are reputed to practice wisdom – namely, the Magi, – marry their mothers; and the Egyptians take their sisters in marriage. (205) ...For just as, if we had
been ignorant, say, of the custom amongst the Egyptians of marrying sisters, we should have asserted wrongly that it was universally agreed that men ought not to marry sisters, – even so, in regard to those practices wherein we notice no discrepancy, it is not proper for us to affirm that there is no disagreement about them, since, as I said, disagreement about them may possibly exist amongst some of the nations which are unknown to us. (Outlines of Pyrrhonism III, 205 and 234). 8

The focal point of the discussion about consanguineous marriages, as reflected in these passages, may serve as prototypical of the writings of a host of later authors, but while the emphasis on the nature : culture dichotomy has remained remarkably stable, the modern debate has taken the consequences of this dilemma to its logical extreme. As articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book on the elementary structures of kinship, the problem of the prohibition of incest presents itself ‘à la réflexion’ as a very ambiguous one:

This rule is at once social, in that it is a rule, and pre-social, in its universality and type of relationships upon which it imposes its norms. 9

However,

The prohibition of incest is in origin neither purely cultural nor purely natural, nor is it a composite mixture of elements from both nature and culture. It is the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished. (…) We have been led to pose the problem of incest in connection with the relationship between man’s biological existence and his social existence, and we have immediately established that the prohibition could not be ascribed accurately to either one or the other. In the present work we propose to find the solution to this anomaly by showing that the prohibition of incest is the link between them. (…) Before it, culture is still non-existent; with it, nature’s sovereignty over man is ended. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself. (…) It brings about and is in itself the advent of a new order. 10
For more than two thousand years, then, the view has prevailed in western thought that sexual intercourse between relatives by blood, such as parents and children or between siblings, constitutes a violation of nature or even natural law. Jewish Law, Roman Law and ecclesiastical – Canon – law provided the foundation for a gradual and comprehensive expansion of the range of sexual prohibitions, which in many western countries was to remain in effect until the beginning of the 20th century. The origin of the system is usually traced to the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) which dealt with the early controversy over the admission of gentiles to the Church. It had been suggested that gentiles could not ‘be saved’ unless they were ‘circumcised according to the custom of Moses.’ This demand was considered to be too harsh and inappropriate and the Council eventually settled the dispute by requiring the gentiles to ‘abstain from (…) fornication’ (Acts 15:20 and 29). Fornication denoted forms of both illicit sexual relationships and marriages within the degrees of kinship proscribed and defined in Jewish Law, esp. Lev. 18:6ff, which differed, in many ways, from the rules and practice in the surrounding world. Thus, for example, intercourse and marriage between a man and his stepmother was forbidden under both Jewish and Roman Law, but was nevertheless tolerated by the congregation at Corinth who was consequently rebuked by Paul (1 Cor. 5:1). While gentiles who wished to join the Christian / Jewish community were not required to be circumcised, they had to accept the restrictions for a valid Jewish marriage, that is, the rules prohibiting ‘fornication’. From then on the Church gradually developed a system of restrictions – or ‘impediments’, according to the terminology of Canon Law. Jewish and Roman Law formed the backbone of this development which was shaped by the discourse among the patristic scholars whose writings, in turn, the medieval Canonists transformed into a law. By the Middle Ages the system had developed into a monstrosity over which an overview was impossible.

Today the number of prohibited degrees in Canon and national laws has been reduced, e.g. intercourse / marriage between uncle and niece, second cousins, etc. – though not to the same extent in all countries. At the same time the intensive sociological and anthropological study of the phenomenon has left us with ‘incest’ as a catchword, which is ap-
plied to a plethora of forms of illicit sexual intercourse that in various combinations and degrees are found in a great variety of social groups.

**On the research history**

There is an enormous body of literature on taboos, bans, prohibitions and other restrictions on sexual relationships and marriage, and the following remarks are in no way intended as even an apercu of the many theories and studies. Such overviews can easily be found in the scholarly literature. The aim of the following is only to provide a background to the presentation of the empirical material. The study of incest has to some extent been obscured by the occasional lack of distinction between prohibitions against incest *per se* (the sexual act) and prohibitions against close-kin marriage. A common variant of this view has been to treat exogamy and the prohibition on incest as two sides of the same coin. Some scholars see the requirement to marry outside the close kinship group as derived from prohibitions on sexual relations, while others assume that the rules governing this choice of spouse (exogamy) account for the prohibitions on sexual intercourse. It goes without saying that if society has established a permanent prohibition against a sexual relationship between two individuals, no marriage between them will be possible. But a marriage prohibition does not necessarily imply a prohibition against a sexual relationship. Marriage, to mention the most important difference, is usually a public affair which establishes relationships between groups.

Lack of proper distinctions also applies to the problem of separating adultery from incest. A good deal of the earlier anthropological research took place among populations characterized by unilineal descent. In such societies sexual intercourse between for example a father and his daughter would prototypically be classified differently depending on whether the offence took place in a society where the two belonged to the same descent group or not. Even if they did not belong to the same group, intercourse would probably still be forbidden and the sanction imposed might well be the same as if they had been members of the same social group. In studying such societies, however, the researcher of-
ten uses the terminology of his or her society which is nearly always one with bilateral descent. This, then, has led to definitions that label sexual intercourse among close kin as incest, whereas intercourse outside that ‘group’ is characterized as adultery.17

A further complication arises from the fact that in the contemporary debate, incest is mainly seen as a form of abuse, as a criminal act, committed by a man and a woman linked by direct descent, rarely by two people in collateral lines, such as cousins, and hardly at all by affines, that is those related by marriage. This is bound up with the restrictive ‘definitions’ of incest as a biological phenomenon, i.e. as a sexual relationship between relatives by blood (consanguineal relatives).18 In other cultural frameworks forbidden ‘incestuous’ relationship can be extended to include intercourse between relatives by marriage (affineal relatives), by milk (milk kinship or fosterage, e.g. by having same nurse, see further below), by spiritual bonds (spiritual relatives, e.g. by godparenthood)19, by real or classificatory ancestors, between classificatory relatives (e.g. by adoption, stepchildren; ceremonial kinship), and so forth. In other words, it is cultural norms that determine the various ways by which social groups reckon descent (unilineal, cognatic), and which relationships are too close to allow marriage.

Writing on incest has also been marked by the predominantly Christian orientation of the authors. In the last analysis, our views on this subject rest on the premise that man and woman through intercourse become one flesh which subsequently becomes that of their children. The authority for the principle of ‘one flesh’ is found in the Scriptures, Gen. 2:24, whence it is transmitted into Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:8; and Eph. 5:31. The principle applies primarily to sexual intercourse, and thus only secondarily to marriage (see further below). In accordance with the deliberations at the so-called Council at Jerusalem, referred to above, Gentile Christians were required to comply with the rules defining ‘fornication’ in Lev. 18 and 20 and thus the principle of ‘one flesh’ was brought to bear on the Christian marriage and, by a later and gradual extension, to relations with the relatives of the spouse. In the history of the Church, classifying sexual intercourse or marriage with the sister or brother of one’s spouse as incest with a (classificatory) consanguine
is attributed to two sources; in the west to the Council at Elvira (c. 305) and in the east to Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (c. 330-379). Throughout the major part of the history of the Church, affinity has ‘begotten’ affinity. And even today there seems to be some divergence of opinion as to the range of the affinity created by marriage. Some authorities suggest that the relatives of both spouses are related to each other. This, however, is not the case, according to one of the most recent authoritative commentaries on Canon 109: ‘Only the party who marries becomes related to the relatives of the one whom he or she marries.’

Even though the formulation of the principle of ‘one flesh’ is unknown outside the Judeo-Christian context, the Hebrews were not the only ones to make the sisters of a married woman and other female affines unavailable to her husband. In the 14th century BC, a Hittite king entered into a dynastic arrangement with one of his vassals by giving him one of his sisters. In the treaty, cited below on p. 122, the king asks the vassal to bear in mind that among the Hittites, as opposed to the barbaric country that the vassal rules, ‘a sister of your wife, or the wife of a brother, or a female cousin’ are sexually unavailable to him.

The ethnocentric, western bias with regard to definitions comes out, for instance, in the wording of E. J. Gwynn who, in an early, yet ground-breaking, article on fosterage suggested a correlation between political instability and the relationship, ‘where the individual, not being able to rely on a central authority or on corporate social instinct, is led to seek security by laying great stress on family ties, and by giving to artificial relationships the same sanctity as to the natural obligations of blood-kinship’ (my italics). However, the (increasing number of) ethnographic records and studies of fosterage clearly show that milk can be as thick, at least, as blood. Thus, among the tribes of Hindu Kush

[The custom of foster relations is maintained among all the ruling families, and its ties seem more stringent than those of blood kinship. On the occasion of a son or daughter being born, the child is assigned to a foster-mother, in whose house it is brought up, so that frequently the father does not see his children till they are six or seven years old, and]
the whole family of the nurse place themselves at the disposal of their foster child, with whom, for the rest of their lives, their fortunes are unalterably bound up.24

Among the noble families of Hindu Kush fosterage was a powerful instrument in the maintenance of political and social allegiances as well as social stratification.25 The bond established through fosterage also strengthened the patterns of exogamy, because fosterage was an obstacle to marriage. Biddulph states that ‘[t]he foster relationship is regarded as so close, that marriage between foster relations would be looked upon as incestuous, and, in spite of the precepts of the Koran, it would be impossible for a man to marry the widow of his foster-son.’26 The reference to the Koran is not easy to understand. In Islamic law kinship by milk, Arabic ridāʾa, establishes a category of non-marriageable relatives, but a glance at the list of forbidden marriage partners compiled by Soraya Al-torki, does not support the claim that a man could not marry the widow of his foster-son. Ridāʾa is, however, a serious obstacle and has been described as follows:

In establishing the range of forbidden marriages a child nursed by a woman is treated as if it were the child of her husband, so that two children nursed by the same woman are regarded as if their milk mother’s husband were their common milk-father even if both children have different parents. It follows that a boy and a girl each nursed by a different wife of the same man become his milk-children and milk-siblings to each other.27

While all these forms of relationships may exist as distinctive types in their own right in various cultures, they may, of course, also be included in a category of classificatory relationship, such as is the case, for instance, in the view taken by the Catholic Church. The Church invokes natural law in order to account for the prohibition against incest of the first degree in the direct line – e.g., between parents and children, but acknowledges that the ban against intercourse between those related by consanguinity in other degrees, as well as between relatives by affinity,
is rooted in Ecclesiastical law which, moreover, considers these forms of incest to be of the same moral kind. The Church thus regards several of the affines affected by these relationships as classificatory consanguines and the phenomenon as social consanguinity.28

For the purpose of the present study, an overall perspective of the debate on incest reveals four major positions.

- First, there is the view that the prohibition against incest is a universal phenomenon. In the context of evolutionism, the emergence of civilization is ascribed to this universal ban on sexual intercourse within the nuclear family / close-kin group. Since Freud, many who hold the universalist position also subscribe to the idea that human beings are born with an innate desire for incestuous love. Observance of the prohibition against incest is an acquired cultural habit; the taboo is learned, the outcome of which is not only ‘culture’, but the socialization of the individual into the family (Malinowski, Murdock, Parsons, Sahlins29, et al.) as well as the (generalized) exchange of wives, thus creating alliances (Lévi-Strauss, and followers).30

- Second, we have the argument that there is no innate tendency or instinct in human nature towards incestuous desires, nor any innate tendency to avoid consanguines, the ‘natural horror’ allegedly having been designed to prevent inbreeding. People who grow up together in the same household develop no erotic attraction for each other. On the contrary, intimate childhood association inhibits sexual attraction.

- Third, there is the position that the prohibition is not universal – regardless of any possible tendency in human nature. In contradistinction to the representatives of the first position, proponents of this view need not dismiss ‘the odd cases’ as exceptions to the rule. The prohibitions or lack of same are typically articulated within an evolutionist perspective.

- Finally, mention should be made of theories that see fear of inbreeding as a key factor in the development of incest taboos.

Aspects of the first and third position will be discussed below.
The second position, which is traditionally associated with the name of the Finnish sociologist Edward Westermarck, is sometimes referred to as the indifference theory. It has been tested on evidence from Israeli kibbutzim where children of both sexes lived closely together until the age of fifteen. In the groups studied, there were no examples where a boy and a girl had paired off for a sexual relationship nor did any of them later marry each other. The hypothesis has also been reviewed in light of a very large body of material from China concerning the so-called sim-pua (‘little bride’) or minor marriages. Here a small girl is taken into the home of her future husband before she has reached the age of three. She grows up in the house of her in-laws as the adopted sister of her future husband and the couple usually remains unaware of their legal status until they reach puberty. Eventually they marry according to the original intentions. Comprehensive studies of a large number of sim-pua marriages show that the marriages are not very successful, with a fertility rate below, and a divorce rate above, average. The men had more extra-marital affairs and more frequent visits to brothels compared with men living in exogamous marriages. While the first position will automatically be seriously affected if the ‘exceptions’ that make up the substance of the present study – primary categories of kin incest – are accorded a different status, the factual occurrence of sibling incest (or incest within the family) can be taken as an argument against the indifference theory. But the argument actually cuts both ways, because it could also be said to invalidate the notion that the incest prohibition is necessary for the existence of the close-kin group.

The relevance of the 4th position, the ‘evil’ consequences of inbreeding, first introduced, in modern times, by the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), is subject to considerable disagreement. For Morgan, in the words of Lévi-Strauss, ‘the origin of the incest prohibition is really both natural and social, but in the sense that it results from a social reflection upon a natural phenomenon. The incest prohibition is taken to be a protective measure, shielding the species from the disastrous results of consanguineous marriages.’ While, as often argued, that kind of eugenic knowledge is not correlated with the spatial and chronological distribution of the prohibition against incest,
the argument is also not in keeping with what is known about the experience of early mankind.

[I]t must be remembered that since the end of the paleolithic era man has increasingly perfected cultivated or domesticated species through the use of endogamous reproductive methods. If it is supposed that man was conscious of the results of such methods, and also that he had judged the matter rationally, what explanation could be given as to how, in the field of human relationships, he reached conclusions running counter to those which his everyday experience in the animal and vegetable kingdoms continually served to prove, and upon which his very well-being depended.37

To some modern scholars the implications of close-kin procreation seem generally to be somewhat exaggerated; others hold that the detrimental consequences are cancelled out by the co-existence of incest together with polygyny, adoption, and other means of securing descent. Yet others see inbreeding to be the principal reason for taboos on incest.38 Since the widespread extension of the incest prohibition from consanguineal to affinal relatives makes it a phenomenon of culture and in that it is not the purpose of this limited study to present a comprehensive discussion of the entire range of issues traditionally addressed in discussions of incest, I have refrained from remarks on the possible consequences of systematic inbreeding.

**Aim**

This work aims to examine the evidence for marriage and sexual relations between siblings and between parent and child in ancient Egypt and pre-Islamic Iran. Wherever the material allows, the emphasis will be on incestuous behaviour rather than on terminology that designates that behaviour or statutes that regulate it. Given the nature of the evidence, we shall chiefly be dealing with sexual relations and marriage between members of what is usually called the nuclear family, that is, between parents and children and between siblings. The discussion does
not deal with incest among royalty or special classes of priests who, as representatives for the divine on earth, were often privileged to do what was forbidden to members of the ordinary family – and sometimes only on special occasions.\textsuperscript{39} For these categories there is an abundance of evidence from a great number of different cultures and periods. In Egypt incestuous marriages within the royal family reached its peak during the Ptolemaic Period. The Ptolemies probably used this practice consciously for the purpose of establishing ‘an innovative basis for the dynastic cult, around which both Egyptians and Greeks could come together’, and King Ptolemy II even ‘made it a major theme of propaganda, stressing the divine nature of the couple, which could not be bound by ordinary rules of humanity’.\textsuperscript{40} Since this material has almost always been treated as atypical and thus discarded by the proponents of the universalist position, it shall, if for no other reason, also be excluded from the ensuing discussion.\textsuperscript{41} It should be noted, however, that in a society where nuclear family incest is practiced there is no discrepancy between what is licit among royalty and in the populace. Conversely, if a special group is granted the right to an extraordinary behaviour, this testifies to the existence of a general norm proscribing that very same special behaviour. Another category of incestuous behaviour excluded from this study is found in the ethnographic literature. There are many reports about incest being committed under very special circumstances by commoners. The objective may be to acquire sufficient strength to go to war or on a difficult and dangerous hunting party, etc. by performing something that is even more terrifying and exceptional. Such cases constitute important and purposeful breaches of taboos against incest.\textsuperscript{42} In no instance, however, do these breaches entail an incestuous marriage, and such phenomena will therefore not be given any further consideration here.