

Gods and their Ships in Greece and Egypt: Seeing Double on the Thalamegos of Ptolemy IV

One of the wonders of Hellenistic Alexandria now known only from texts is the Thalamegos of Ptolemy IV Philopator. In a fragment of his *Peri Alexandreias* (FGrH 627 F 1, ap. Ath., *Deipn.* 5.204d-206d), Kallixeinos of Rhodes describes this luxurious Nile barge with its promenades, bed chambers, and exotically decorated dining rooms. Additionally, it housed a small temple to Aphrodite, complete with a statue of the goddess, and a room furnished with a Bacchic cave and royal portrait statues.

Unlike the grand procession (Rice 1983) and pavilion (Calandra 2011) of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, the Thalamegos has attracted little scholarly attention. Other than some early attempts at reconstruction (Caspari 1916, Köster 1934: 20-53), most discussions of Philopator's "floating palace" (Hillard 2002: 551) consist of brief descriptions in studies of ancient seafaring or Hellenistic royal luxury (Casson 1995, Thompson 2013). Like the pavilion and the procession, however, the Thalamegos can tell us much about Ptolemaic self-presentation and ideals of kingship – especially when we take it seriously as a ship, not simply a palace on water. I argue that the Thalamegos employed the image of a god traveling by ship, familiar in both Greek and Egyptian tradition, to present Philopator's rule as divinely sanctioned.

My approach is informed by Susan Stephens' *Seeing Double*, which located in Alexandrian poetry "a double symbolic matrix, in which the narrative is constructed to be legible within two different cultural codes – Greek and Egyptian" (2003: 254). Stephens showed that by drawing upon Greek and Egyptian myth, ritual, and tradition, Alexandrian poets helped forge a model of kingship suitable for a dynasty whose authority required acknowledgement by both cultures. We can see this double matrix at work in the image of the king sailing in a ship, which through a Greek lens resembled the voyage of Dionysos, a god favored by Philopator and his

predecessors. Yet Egypt also had a long tradition of gods traveling by ship, especially during festivals. The festivals of Opet and Khoiak are most relevant to an understanding of the Thalamegos.

A major festival in New Kingdom and first millennium Egypt, the Opet festival offered an occasion to celebrate the solar god Amun-Re and to affirm the pharaoh's divinity. The main event involved the transportation of the god's statue between the temples at Karnak and Luxor in a bark shrine in a lively procession that also included the pharaoh's boat and the bark shrines of the god's consort and son (Epigraphic Survey 1994). This festival has been recognized as a local precedent for the Ptolemaia, which were first celebrated under Philadelphos and which included a procession broadcasting the Ptolemies' links to Dionysos and other gods (Stephens 2003: 245-246). I argue that it likewise provided Philopator with a visual vocabulary for advertising his own divine authority: like the pharaoh during the Opet festival, the king in his Thalamegos manifested the god's presence on earth.

The image of Philopator/Dionysos traveling by ship also evoked the voyage of Osiris, Dionysos' closest counterpart in the Egyptian pantheon. Osiris' journey by ship seems to have featured in the Khoiak festival, which – although it had a more restricted audience than the Opet festival – celebrated the well-known myth of the god's death and resurrection (Leprohon 2007). Isis' prominent role in this narrative and her close connection with Aphrodite would make the latter's presence on the Thalamegos especially fitting from an Egyptian point of view, in addition to underscoring the divinity of the king.

For those operating within an Egyptian cultural framework, then, the solar and Osirian associations of the Thalamegos offered an image of Philopator as a pharaoh whose domain spanned the heavens and underworld and who embodied the gods of both realms.

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