

ANCIENT IRANIAN STUDIES

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Source: Ancient Iranian Studies, January 2024, VOL. 3, NO. 8: 89-93.

Published by: Tissaphernes Archaeological Research Group

Stable URL:

<https://doi.org/10.22034/AIS.2023.424263.1063>



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A Review of Incestuous and Close-Kin Marriage in Ancient Egypt and Persia

Morteza Arabzadeh Sarbanani¹ 

Abstract

The subject of incestuous marriage has been one of the most controversial issues and debates in Iranian history. Not many historians have paid attention to this matter and it seems that even studying this topic is taboo, especially among Iranian scholars. On the other hand, the problem has gotten more complicated since the Islamic revolution, as some zealous islamists use this to humiliate the pre-Islamic history of Iran. Subsequently, Iranian nationalists and patriots have denied the existence of any incest in ancient Persia. In such a political environment, very few Iranian scholars have come up with valuable historical research, free of any prejudices. Yet their research is still scant compared to their Western colleagues. That is why Paul John Frandsen's *Incestuous and Close-Kin Marriage in Ancient Egypt and Persia* should be taken seriously, as it evaluates many previous opinions about incest in ancient Iran with a critical approach, highlights their flaws, adopts a new method, and proposes new hypotheses. As the name of the book suggests, this work is about ancient Persia (Iran) and Egypt and explains that no direct link can be seen between incestuous marriage in these two ancient civilizations. This review concerns the part of the book dealing with Persia.

Keywords: Persia; Incest; Close-kin Marriage; Zoroastrianism.

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Article info: Received: 10 September 2023 | Accepted: 8 November 2023 | Published: 1 January 2024

Citation: Arabzadeh Sarbanani, Morteza. (2024). "A Review of Incestuous and Close-Kin Marriage in Ancient Egypt and Persia", *Ancient Iranian Studies*, Vol. 3 (8): 89-93.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/AIS.2023.424263.1063>

Introduction

The most significant part of this book and perhaps the most important difference from the previous works is its emphasis on incestuous marriage among ordinary people, excluding historical evidence among the elites or in prevailing myths. However, singling out ordinary people has sometimes damaged the book and led the author to jump to the conclusions and make generalizations. After all, we should not forget that the social elites could act as a sample to downtrodden people, individuals were influenced by their religion and myths. Therefore, although investigating incest among common people can be of great help, one cannot understand the real reason and the origin of this kind of relation in ancient societies without taking into account their myths and religion as well as elites. Of course, Frandsen is not wholly unaware of this fact and, therefore, occasionally shifts his priority to cases beyond regular people. It should be also noted that Zoroastrian religious texts which Frandsen refers to do not necessarily express the views of common Zoroastrians. These are the texts written by Zoroastrian clergies who were, after all, elites of their society. Thus, Frandsen's focus on ordinary people somehow fails when it comes to the Zoroastrian religious sources.

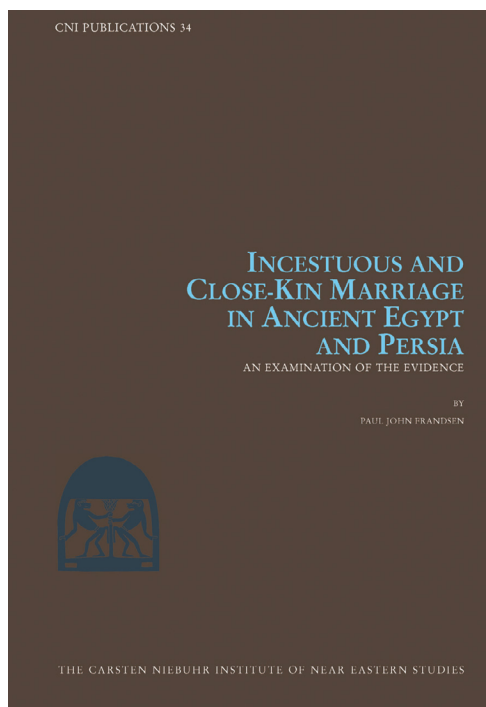
Although sometimes the contents of the book seem irrelevant and scattered, it is due to the dispersion of the evidence and documents, not the author's faults. In general, the book is in good order and follows a logical pattern. Its content can be divided into three main parts. The first deals with introduction, methodology, and the aim of the work. The second part is about incestuous marriage in Egypt, and the last part is about Persia. In the first part, Frandsen raises an interesting debate about the conflict between nature and culture regarding incest. He uses this issue to reject the idea of universal taboo of incest. Hence, he explains how ancient Egypt and Persia, the two renowned and developed civilizations, maintained their social order without having an incest taboo and legalized these types of relations.

In his study on ancient Persia, Frandsen explores both the Zoroastrian evidence and testimonies of Classical, Christian, and Muslim scholars. This is not novel though; as other scholars have done the same before. Yet, Frandsen's conclusions are significant. After briefly introducing the reliable Zoroastrian sources about incest he attempts to present an accurate definition of the term "xvētōdah" and the problems associated with it. Frandsen rightly emphasizes that translating this term to incest due to its negative connotation, and not being in line with the ancient Zoroastrian understanding of the family structure, is a mistake. Instead, he suggests labeling it as close-kin marriage. After that, the book continues with the evidence of close-kin marriages mentioned in Zoroastrian texts.

Based on certain Pahlavi texts, Frandsen makes the assertion that the primary aim of *xvētōdah* was not breeding, and the sexual intercourse itself considered a religious rite. This is one of the most significant findings of the book, as many previous scholars were merely preoccupied with the secular consequences of close-kin marriages that in their words neglected the spiritual merits. This means that *xvētōdah* was firstly a religious act, in which, Zoroastrians could benefit from its merits both in life and after

death. Then, the author investigates the origin of *xvētōdah* and concludes that Zoroastrians were influenced in this regard by their prevailing myths about the creation of the universe. He also underlines that although it is not possible to determine the commonness of such marriages, the view that they were rare is dubious. However, it should be noted that there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that consanguineous relations were not too common in the Persian society. To prove this assertion, the most important sources are some Zoroastrian accounts that try to justify incestuous marriages. Frandsen himself refers to one of them (on page 73), but for better understanding, readers may also see Denkard III, 82, where the longest account of the merits of *xvētōdah* is presented (West, 1882: 399-410). There, it is also emphasized that some people consider this act to be evil and against the law! The objections to this type of marriage in some Zoroastrian accounts imply that even when Zoroastrian clergies strongly sought to promote these kinds of relations, there was a great resistance against them. This reluctance is even attested in non-Iranian sources which Frandsen has discussed briefly (on page 85).

Frandsen also rejects the hypothesis that Zoroastrians' severing incestuous behavior was because of their difficulties being a religious minority after the arrival of Islam in Iran. His main argument is that since this type of relationship existed among Zoroastrians even prior to Islam, the camp mentality hypothesis does not fully explain the reason behind close-kin marriages among them. Of course, there is no doubt that close-kin marriage existed before Islam given that even before the fall of the Sasanian Empire, Zoroastrians were in danger of extinction in some parts of the Persian empire. At that time, they were threatened by Christianity and Manichaeism (Shahbazi, 2001: 21). However, the Zoroastrian clerics' emphasis on such relationships increased sharply after the arrival of Islam was not a coincidence (see Daryaei, 2013: 91-100). In short, the camp mentality theory still justifies the situation well.



Incestuous and Close-Kin Marriage in Ancient Egypt and Persia, Paul John Frandsen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009, 230 Pp, ISBN: 9788763507783

After a detailed discussion about the origin of close-kin marriage in Persia, Frandsen studies the history of these relations in Iran. His assessment shows an evidential growth in incest relations from the Achaemenid to the Sasanian period; as if the Persians had learned this practice at some point, although the author is silent about when and where this tradition penetrated into Persia. Unfortunately, Frandsen's persistence of excluding close-kin marriage cases among the Persian elites has made his survey questionable in this part of the book and somehow defective. For instance, Herodotus' account regarding Cambyses' marriage with his full sisters (Herodorus, 3. 31) is missed here. At first glance, it seemed only about the royal Persian family, but Herodotus' words that such relations were not allowed in Persia are noteworthy. Frandsen also does not consider why some of the most popular classical authors who wrote extensively on Persians traditions and customs, namely Herodotus, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Ammianus Marcellinus, and Procopius, did not mention anything about close-kin marriage among them. Another fact that Frandsen only mentions briefly and fails to explain more precisely, is the problem of repetition and imitation in classical works. Ironically, not all of Greek and Roman authors who wrote about incestuous relations among Persians were familiar with the Persian culture or a witness to it. Some of them merely repeated earlier works, for instance, Strabo informs us that he was not aware of incestuous marriage among the Magi, and has read about this in earlier texts (Strabo, 15.3.15).

The last part of the book is mostly about Classical, Christian, and Islamic sources about close-kin marriages among the Persians. Although one cannot neglect the hostility of these texts towards Zoroastrians and Persians, Frandsen is right when he says he cannot wholly ignore them. He also doubts theories suggesting that the Persians could have imitated the incest practice from ancient Elam, Egypt, Anatolia, or Mesopotamia; and to prove this, he presents a brief comparison between the laws of matrimony in these civilizations to that of Persia and highlights their differences.

Conclusion

Now I would like to highlight Frandsen's most important conclusion about close-kin marriage in ancient Persia:

1. Incestuous marriage was not a taboo in ancient Persia.
2. The term *xvētōdah* is better to be labeled as close-kin marriage and not incest.
3. The main aim of *xvētōdah* was to benefit from its merits as a religious act, thus, regardless of whether such relations could lead to breeding, the sex itself and the intention of having a sexual relation were crucial.
4. Zoroastrians were greatly affected by their religious beliefs, especially those related to cosmology and eschatology to practicing *xvētōdah*.
5. There is no reason to think that close-kin marriages were rare in Persia.
6. It is not possible to find the exact origin of close-kin marriage in Persia, and it is not certain that the Persians may have gotten this custom from other ancient civilizations. In other words, the practice of consanguineous marriages may have

originally belonged to the Persians (Iranians) themselves.

7. The camp mentality hypothesis does not apply fully to the case of incest among Zoroastrians.

In his research, Frandsen has been able to correctly prove that close-kin marriage existed and was legal in ancient Iran and among the Zoroastrians. He has also correctly shown how valuable such relationships were from a religious point of view. However, all these facts do not necessarily prove that incest was not a taboo in ancient Iran. We can only be sure about this when we realize that such marriages were common in the ancient Iranian society. Further, it should be noted that the Zoroastrian religious and legal texts do not necessarily reflect the realities of that community. They only show how Zoroastrian clergies expounded about close-kin marriage i.e. legal and rewarding. It is not even possible to generalize this fact to all eras, since these texts belong to the late Sasanian period and thereafter. As stated earlier, it is clear that there was also strong opposition to such relationships. If many Zoroastrians did not approve of such relations, then it is logical to assume that the number of such marriages was low, and if so, then perhaps close-kin marriage was after all taboo in Persia. For a better understanding, I would like to quote an example related to modern Iran. Polygamy is legal in current Iran, and the government and the Shia Muslim clerics even strongly encourage people to practice it. Yet, a tiny percentage of Iranian men have more than one wife as the Iranian society has a very negative view about polygamy. Now if someone only studies the official legal books or religious texts may infer that polygamy is popular in Iran, but the truth is quite the opposite.

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