In this splendid monograph, Pfeiffer tells us everything we need to know about one of the most famous inscriptions from Antiquity: the trilingual decree issued by Egyptian priests in Canopus on March 7, 238 BC (according to the Egyptian date; there must be something wrong with the Macedonian date: 71), in which they innovate in the cult of Ptolemy III and his wife Berenice II and establish a new cult for their daughter Berenice, who died just recently.

The decree survives in multiple copies (listed on pp. 25–26), which derive from various temples in Egypt where the text was put up in a prominent place, as the decree itself stipulates. (Most recently, a copy turned up in Bubastis. It was published just after P.’s book came out: Chr. Tietze, E. R. Lange and K. Halloff, Ein neues Exemplar des Kanopus-Dekrets aus Bubastis, APF 51, 2005, 1–30. It was found right at the entrance of the temple complex.) The hieroglyphic, Egyptian demotic and Greek texts have been published severally, but P. helpfully provides up-to-date texts in all three languages, the Egyptian demotic in the two most complete and somewhat divergent versions available to him. He also provides a select apparatus for variants in other copies and competently discusses philological points where they affect the historical interpretation. He has occasionally checked readings on the originals and even provides a concordance to detailed philological discussions elsewhere (308–314). In the commentary, P. goes through the text bit by bit and reproduces the Greek, Egyptian demotic and hieroglyphic versions for each bit with German translations for each version (the complete Greek text and its German translation also appear on pp. 57–65).

P. offers a ‘ganzheitliche’ interpretation, and this goes beyond (even if it originates in) the fact that he takes all three languages into account: historians of Ptolemaic Egypt or Egyptian religion will find much of interest to them, both in the detailed commentary in chapter 3 that makes up the bulk of the volume and in the more general discussions that follow in chapters 4–5.

P.’s work issues from a Trier dissertation, and it shows: P. is equally at home in Egyptian and Greek, and in the course of his work, the text he discusses becomes an icon for what the Forschungszentrum Griechisch-Römisches Ägypten stands for: the integration of things Egyptian and Greek through the openness of the actors involved in the business, be they Egyptian priests innovating in a cult for which they are responsible or scholars trying to understand the past on its own terms.1

On p. VIII, P. dutifully puts his research in the context of the Sonderforschungsbereich ‘Fremdheit und Armut. Wandel von Inklusions- und Exklusionsformen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart’. Since the Ptolemies were far from poor, he has to treat them as ‘fremd’ and the Canopus decree as exemplifying the various ways in which Egyptian priests included or excluded the Macedonian ruling elite. I suspect that the Sonderforschungsbereich is really concerned with ‘the people without history’, to which the Ptolemies hardly ‘belong’. But this is the only place where P. panders to the whims of university administrators – the rest of the book is thoroughly enjoyable.
The decree issued by the priests is itself a Greek thing, but the subject matter is by and large Egyptian. A few details of the cult can be regarded as inspired by Greek traditions (P. highlights the *stephanephoria*), but by 238 BC this should no longer come as a surprise. Egyptian religion was so massive that it could easily adopt Greek things without losing its essentially Egyptian character. P. shows that there is no reason to suggest that the initiative for the innovations did not come from the Egyptian priests who issued it. This will challenge us to read this and other such decrees exclusively as statements emanating from one of the more vocal groups in Egyptian society of the Hellenistic period – statements in which the Egyptian priests comment on, and sometimes rearrange, the world around them in terms familiar to them and their ‘flock’, the Egyptian population at large. There is no need to have other voices, such as that of the Macedonian ruling elite, interfere in our reading. This does not mean that the text has become one-sided: as P. never fails to bring out, its actors are actively engaging in the world in which they find themselves.

‘Gattungsgeschichtlich’, the text is a thoroughly Greek *psephisma* (50–52 with the synopsis of the text on p. 52). It reads like a decree from a Greek ‘collective’ – it does not resemble a royal decree (*prostagma*) at all. The text appears in most copies not just in the original Greek, but also in hieroglyphs and in Egyptian demotic. The hieroglyphs always come first, followed by the Egyptian demotic or the Greek, sometimes by the Egyptian demotic and the Greek. Both the Greek and hieroglyphic versions are almost the same from copy to copy, but the Egyptian demotic appears to have been less stable. P. does not really provide an explanation for this. Egyptian demotic was perhaps not the same everywhere. The Greek is pretty good, but in describing a typically Egyptian thing, e.g. the new crown for the deified Berenice, the hieroglyphic and Egyptian demotic versions are clearer (180; see the illustration on p. 179 of an actual example of this crown in bronze).

P. points out that the innovations in the royal cult tend to make that cult more visible. Instead of rearranging what was going on inside the temples, the priests propose a new public festival to which the Egyptian population will also have access – an important consideration in a ‘medienarme Gesellschaft’ (302). Once a year there would be a public festival for the king and his wife, in the same way as there were annual festivals for the gods including the dead ancestors of the royal couple. This was an important ‘promotion’ for the king and his wife, whose divine status had not yet been underscored on the Egyptian side by a public ritual – the iconography of the stones on which the decree appears also brings out the divine status of the royal couple (26–44). Another relationship affected by this innovation was that between the priests who would annually perform or stage it and the Egyptian population: the priests would give them alcohol to ‘honor’ the rulers (243–245).

P. adopts much of the current wisdom on Egyptian priests. They were the only Egyptians who could take a common stand vis-à-vis the Macedonian ruling elite without resorting to violence. P. points out (288–289) that the immediate predecessors of the Ptolemies had not bothered to involve the Egyptian priesthood much. I would add that their successors did not either. Only in the Ptolemaic period did Egyptian priests meet on a regular basis in Alexandria as a body
of ‘consultants’ for the king. The initiative for this must have come from the Ptolemies, but among the consequences was the adoption by the Egyptian priests thus assembled of certain Greek modes of ‘collectively’ expressing oneself: through decrees such as the one passed in Canopus. P. rejects the idea that these priests would have formed some kind of opposition to the Macedonian ruling elite. Evidence for such opposition is found only in ‘against-the-grain’ readings of decrees such as the one from Canopus, and P. demonstrates at least for this one that such readings are unwarranted. Since the decree was passed by representatives from all Egyptian temples and copies were found all over Egypt, there is also no reason to think that the more ‘conservative’ south would have been less enamored of the Ptolemies – because of the distance to Alexandria they had a better chance at revolting, perhaps. Over time, the Egyptian priesthood may well have become better at getting its way, but always within the context of loyalty to the dynasty.

The priests assembled at Canopus represented all Egyptian temples. P. assumes throughout that they normally stayed in Alexandria ‘with the king’ (ἐνδημήσαντον παρὰ τῷ βασιλείῳ – perhaps it goes too far to conclude, as P. does on p. 297, that the priests assembled in the palace, even if they had to perform certain rituals there, and it certainly goes too far to suggest that the king would have been present at their meetings, as P. does on p. 150) and only passed this particular decree in Canopus because of the new cult for Berenice there. In this instance we know that they were in Alexandria for over a month at least (the chronological information in the text is set out conveniently on pp. 198–199). The decree, the earliest such decree we have (but not the earliest known: line 33 of the Greek text refers to a previous psephisma), already clearly states that this ‘synod’ (as it is usually called – line 6 of the Greek text suggests that synedrion was the technical term for it) met on an annual basis.

The innovations in the royal cult mentioned in the decree could also have been made by the rulers themselves in a decree of their own, if they had insisted on being effectively treated the same way as the traditional gods (not quite wesensheilich), as the ruling couple is still portrayed as receiving gifts from the ‘real’ gods – p. 233). Judging from the considerans of the first part relating to the cult of the ruling couple, P. instead assumes that the innovations originate in the initiative of the priests. The second part relating to the cult of their daughter Berenice who had just died also suggests a spontaneous (‘quasi ad hoc’ – p. 285) initiative on their part. The text says that they personally persuaded the parents to allow them to ‘set up’ (the cult of) the deified Berenice in the temple of Osiris in Canopus, and there seems to have been very little time between her death and the new cult (there would have been no time for proper mummification; P. therefore inclines to the view that Berenice was cremated in Macedonian style – p. 263). P. is undoubtedly right to read the text at face value here and to assume that the priests took the initiative throughout.

The priests spell out the considerans for the first initiative in great detail, and P. demonstrates the traditional Egyptian character of the reasons given by the priests for their innovations. The rulers have prevented a famine (extensively discussed by P. on pp. 205–229) by importing wheat from other parts of the Ptolemaic empire at great cost. The priests term this an ‘immortal benefaction’, and
here the text, although thoroughly Egyptian in character, is also compatible with traditional Greek ideas about benefactors. P. perhaps does not distinguish enough between the common Greek experience of euergetism in their poleis and the Macedonian experience, which would have been more 'royal' to begin with and therefore closer to what the Ptolemies did in Egypt. At any rate, the threat of famine mentioned in the decree must have been recent. P. is probably correct in rejecting the idea that this refers to the three-year drought of several years back, when Ptolemy was abroad and there was a revolt in Egypt (227–228).

Another reason for honoring the ruling couple with innovations in their cult is the fact that they returned the statues of Egyptian gods taken away by the Persians. For this topos see now (critically) P. Briant, Quand les rois écrivent l’histoire: la domination achéménide à travers les inscriptions officielles lagides, in N. Grimal and M. Baud (eds.), Événement, récit, histoire officielle. L’écriture de l’histoire dans les monarchies antiques, Paris 2003, 173–186.

The king paid tit for tat a year later, when the building of the great temple of Horus in Edfu started. P. thinks the dominant priests in the ‘synod’ may have been from the north of Egypt, especially Memphis (295–298), but one wonders whether the new Edfu temple does not suggest some powerful lobbying by southerners as well.

Associated in a lose way with the first initiative, the innovations in the cult of the ruling couple, is the expansion of the number of priestly phylai from four to five. The new phyle is to be filled with those who have become priest from the first year of Ptolemy III until the end of the current ninth year of his reign. There is an ambiguity here. Are the priests up to the first year to remain in their respective phylai or up to and including the first year (‘from the first year’ might also mean ‘after the first year’)? And are those who will become priest up to Mesore of the current ninth year to be enrolled in the new phyle or up to and including Mesore? I am asking, because one of the demotic versions adds ‘the first of’ to ‘up to Mesore’ and the other reads ‘from the second year’ of Ptolemy III (a reading not reported by P., but Spiegelberg has it in line 8 of the text from Kom el-Hisn). At any rate, one wonders what triggered the desire for an additional phyle. Perhaps there was an expansion of the number of suitable sons of priests – and not enough positions in just four phylai. The fifth phyle will have been more of the same, not the spearhead of an alternative, more ruler-friendly priesthood, as has sometimes been suggested.

Also associated in a lose way with the first initiative is a proposed innovation in the calendar: the addition of an intercalary day every four years. We know this did not happen until the Roman period. Why? If this was originally an idea of the king, he could have implemented it by a decree of his own, to make sure that not just the temples but also the administration would have used the new calendar. I assume that the priests also took the initiative here, not inspired by Greek ‘rationalism’, but as they say out of a desire to improve the working of the calendar. Why did it not gain wider acceptance before the Roman period? It was applied by the administration then, but not by the temples, which continued to use the ‘old’ Egyptian calendar. Maybe this was a matter of silent resistance on the part of the priests in the ebora, not to the king’s initiative, but to an initiative taken by the (privileged) priests who spent more than a month in Alexandria.
Also, adopting something new is fun, but merely changing a calendar, which already exists and has always ‘worked’, is not. As a parallel I may point to the silent resistance against the metric system in the U.S. (the ‘preferred’ system since the end of fiscal year 1992, but ignored by everyone including the government) – or the German Rechtschreibreform. Alternatively, the Ptolemaic government may have chosen to ignore the calendrical innovation.

On p. 251, P. refers to P. Tebt. III/2, 841, which he thinks dates from 114 BC, a year which should have had the extra day, but according to the text (read at face value) did not. Unfortunately, the text dates from 113 BC.

Misprints are few (18: Λεωθύνης πόλιμος should be Λεωθύνης πόλις). The ‘trilingual’ translation of the text is helpful, but sometimes too slavish (line 2 of the Greek: «als Kanephore der Arsinoe Philadelphos Menekrateia, Tochter des Philammon, war» means ‘als Menekrateia, Tochter des Philamnon, Kanephore der Arsinoe Philadelphos war’ as in the Egyptian demotic and hieroglyphic). In line 10 of the Greek, διὰ παντός means ‘zu jeder Zeit’ as in the Egyptian demotic and hieroglyphic. On p. 101 ἄγαθη τίμη is inadvertently left out.

An impressive bibliography (315–360) and the usual indices complete the book. P.’s extremely useful work shows that it pays off to go back to what would seem to be a predictable text. But there are no predictable texts: there are only predictable ways to go about texts – and P.’s way is not one of them.

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(AND the collaboration of G. Steinhauer and A. Makres): Roman Peloponnesse II. Roman personal names in their social context (Laconia and Messenia). Athens; Paris: de Boccard 2004. 685 S. 1 Kte. 4°. (Κέντρον ελληνικής και γενικής αρχαιολογίας εθνικών ιδρυμάτων Μελετήματα. 56).