

ALEXANDREA
AD AEGYPTVM
THE LEGACY OF
MULTICULTURALISM
IN ANTIQUITY

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WAS SARAPIS OF ALEXANDRIA A MULTICULTURAL GOD?

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Abstract: *This chapter is devoted to the multicultural nature of Sarapis. We used to think that he was a «unifier» of the Greeks and the Egyptians. The deity did have mixed traits, but it doesn't prove that the Egyptians also worshipped him. These ethnic groups were too separate in other spheres to be joined in the field of religion. Sarapis was a patron of Alexandria as a Greek polis and was worshipped by its citizens. Moreover, there were many other descendants of Greek immigrants and of mixed marriages, who thought themselves to be the Hellenes, and Hellenized Egyptian officials. It was them, for whom the cult was intended. In this context the god was truly multicultural.*

Many scholars supposed that the cult of Sarapis was «created» by Ptolemy I to join the Greeks and the Egyptians¹.

Sarapis became a divine patron of the country's new capital – Alexandria. In the Armenian version of the *Romance of Alexander* the god assures Alexander the Great that the city will flourish under protection of the deity². It is known from written sources of the Roman period that Sarapis was called Polieus, i.e. patron of Alexandria as a Greek polis. On the other hand Alexandrian Serapeum was situated in Rhakotis, the most ancient part of the city, where the majority of local Egyptians lived. This quarter was situated far from the

¹ See for example HÖLBL, 2001: 99; BEVAN, 1968: 44.

² Hist. Alex. Magni. 92.

administrative center of the city with its royal palaces, *agora* and other buildings related to Greek culture³. Moreover, numerous Egyptian objects were discovered at the site, including artifacts that were made in the Pharaonic era in other cities and towns of Egypt (massive stone stelae, statues of sphinxes and kings, etc.)⁴.

Could the deity be a unifier of two ethnic groups? Was he really a multicultural god?

We could make an appeal to data connected with a question of architectural look of the Alexandrian Serapeum. This subject was much discussed in works of recent years⁵, and it has a close connection with the question of architectural look of Serapeum in the Greco-Roman period, which is also a polemic and a quite difficult one, because the temple was destroyed in the end of the 4th century A.D. by the Christians.

S. A. Ashton supposed that Egyptian elements prevailed in the temple. In her opinion it was a tribute of Ptolemies to Egyptian roots of Sarapis. Only in the reign of Ptolemy III a tendency towards hellenization appeared in decoration of the temple⁶.

J. Yoyotte noted that remains of Hellenistic Serapeum were similar to that of Egyptian temples built in the same period. On the base of this fact he supposed that Egyptian elements had prevailed in the temple and ritual services were carried out in Egyptian way⁷. In his opinion, a sphinx, which was found on the slope of the southern hill, was one of many others set on the both sides of a ceremonial way that led to the temple. The same view is taken by M. Bergmann, who also used the presence of Egyptian elements (namely subterranean galleries and a nilometer) as a proof of her theory that in spite of numerous Hellenistic traits the cult of Sarapis was mostly Egyptian⁸.

On the contrary, P. M. Fraser noted that despite presence of Egyptian elements the Greek ones prevailed in architecture of the Serapeum⁹. J. McKenzie, who made an axonometric reconstruction of Ptolemy's III temple, proceeded from an assumption that it had a Hellenic architecture¹⁰. The same opinion is held by a Polish scholar B. Tkaczow. She supposed that the temple was built in a «classic» style with a few Egyptian elements. The question of how they looked – like freestanding monuments, buildings in Egyptian style or decorations of separate interiors – is still opened¹¹. Both scholars agree that installation of foundation tablets is an Egyptian tradition¹², but it must not be forgotten that the tablets found under Alexandrian Serapeum contained two inscriptions – a Greek and a hieroglyphic.

³ ASHTON, 2006: 24.

⁴ YOYOTTE, 1998: 199.

⁵ See for example YOYOTTE, 1998: 199-220; FRASER, 1972: 265-267; ASHTON 2006: 24.

⁶ ASHTON, 2006: 31.

⁷ YOYOTTE, 1998: 212.

⁸ BERGMANN, 2010: 113.

⁹ FRASER, 1972: 266.

¹⁰ MACKENZIE, GIBSON, REYES, 2004: 87.

¹¹ TKACZOW, 2010: 41.

¹² MACKENZIE, GIBSON, REYES, 2004: 82; TKACZOW, 2010: 41.

At the present moment it is only possible to suppose that in the Roman period, after it was a few times rebuilt and enlarged, the Serapeum (its main temple) was a typically Greco-Roman public building. Like this it is represented on a coin minted in Alexandria in the period of Hadrian's reign, on which a statue of Sarapis is standing under a portico with a freeze that is decorated with Corinthian columns¹³. Thus the scholars don't have any opportunity to make conclusion based on fundamental facts – they can only make suppositions. But I am inclined to believe that the Serapeum was mainly a Greco-Roman building with some Egyptian elements.

It is necessary to study other aspects of the cult of Sarapis in Alexandria to make the question of its multicultural nature clearer. First of all, it is known that the god had a fully Hellenic iconography regardless to an iconographic type (Memphite or Alexandrian). It is well known that he was represented as a young man with curly hair, a beard and a *kalathos* on his head wearing a Greek *chiton* and a *himation*. This kind of iconography is typical for Greek gods, such as Zeus or Hades, with whom Sarapis was identified during the Greco-Roman period.

Further, there was a special festival, devoted to Sarapis. It is known from written sources that a solemn procession was the main event of it (at least in the Roman times). For example, Aelius Aristides mentions it in one of his orations¹⁴. It is said in Achilles Tatius' *The Adventures of Leucippe and Cleitophon* that nocturnal torch-light processions were devoted to Sarapis¹⁵. This fact is supported by architecture of the Serapeum. Two ways out were made in its wall in the Hellenistic period¹⁶. Probably they were made to facilitate movement of a festive procession and its exit to the streets of the city. Moreover, there was a hippodrome, which was connected by a road with the *temenos*¹⁷. E. Rice after examination of different sources concluded that the procession of devotees of Sarapis had started its movement somewhere near el-Silsilah (ancient Lochias), had gone by the hippodrome and had ended its way in the Serapeum. The scholar supposed that it was one of Greek religious processions¹⁸. There are no descriptions of this procession at disposal of modern scholars, but, judging by a well-known fragment of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, where a procession of Isis is depicted¹⁹, it may be supposed that the one devoted to Sarapis also was Greek in some aspects and Egyptian in the others.

Mysteries of Sarapis may be partially reconstructed by analogy with the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries. The cult of this deity inherited a lot of their traits. It is no coinci-

¹³ EMPEREUR, 1998: 90.

¹⁴ Ael. Aris. Orat. III. 48.

¹⁵ Ach. Tat. Leucippe and Clitophon. V. 2.

¹⁶ MACKENZIE, GIBSON, REYES, 2004: 87.

¹⁷ MACKENZIE, GIBSON, REYES, 2004: 101-102.

¹⁸ RICE, 1983: 182.

¹⁹ Apul. Metamorph. XI. 8-11.

dence that Plutarch²⁰ and Tacitus²¹ connected its «creation» with the name of an Eleusinian priest Timopheus. Initiates (alone or in company of a priest) were wandering in a big hall in search for the deity. This ritual had to remind ramblings of souls in the Underworld.

Thus, many aspects of the cult in question were mixed – Greek and Egyptian at the same time. But it doesn't prove that the Egyptians worshipped Sarapis along with the Greeks. More probably it was a way of accentuation on Egyptian roots of the god, manifestation of respect for them. Sarapis was worshipped in Egypt, so his cult had to have some Egyptian traits regardless to descent of his devotees.

Unfortunately we know too little about ethnicity of devotees of Sarapis. Authors of Alexandrian dedicatory inscriptions, like Nikanoros and Nikandros from the Deme of Polydeukes²², bear Greek names and titles. Obviously, these people belonged to the upper economic brackets – they were able to afford to dedicate a statue, an altar or even a whole *temenos* to the god (like Archagathus, son of Agathocles, epistates of Libya and a relative of Ptolemy II²³).

It seems that there was a huge division between the Greeks and the Egyptians in Hellenistic Egypt, especially in Alexandria. The representatives of the former ethnic group were greatly superior to the Egyptians in development of technical equipment, army and administrative institutions²⁴. Unlike local inhabitants they also had some privileges. For example, they paid only a so called salt tax (Alexandrians and citizens of other *poleis* situated in Egypt conferred immunity from it), and the Egyptians had to pay one more obol to the State²⁵. There were two different administrative systems – a Greco-Macedonian, on which central authorities and governance of Hellenistic cities-states were based, and an Egyptian that remained in villages and towns of a so-called *chora* – and two legal systems in Ptolemaic Egypt (but there was no separate law for the Greeks and the Egyptians – everything depending on the case)²⁶. Moreover, the Egyptians held a lower position in the social structure of Alexandria than the Greeks, who didn't have citizenship there²⁷. But in many cases this division existed more in paper than in real life.

It is known that many people from *chora* came to Alexandria in Greco-Roman period on business or for religious purposes. They came from upper strata of provincial cities and towns, had Greek names and were literate in Greek (or just paid to scribes and dictated

²⁰ Plut. *De Isid. et Osir.* 28.

²¹ Tac. *Hist.* IV. 83-84.

²² See BERNAND, 2001: 17-18.

²³ See BERNAND, 2001: 151.

²⁴ GOUDRIAAN, 1988: 5-6.

²⁵ CLARYSSE, 1992: 52.

²⁶ DUCAT, 1995: 71.

²⁷ FRASER, 1972: 38.

them texts of their letters and other documents). Probably many of them were descendants of mixed marriages between local population and new inhabitants of the country²⁸.

Sometimes descendants of Greek soldiers signed and kept in their archives demotic documents. For example, there are Greek (will, petitions to high ranking officials, etc.) and demotic (marriage and divorce contracts) texts in an archive of a certain Dritones, a citizen of Ptolemais with Cretan roots, who served as an officer in Egyptian cavalry and lived in the Ptolemaic period not far from Thebes²⁹. Thus, choice of language depended on type of a document and traditions of a certain ethnic group. For example, succession according to Egyptian law was automatically passed to someone's children, and marriage contracts were an integral part of local legal practice. It must be noted here that Apollonias, a wife of this officer, positioned herself as a Greek woman, though there are demotic obligatory writings in her archive. M. Vierros supposed that the woman was illiterate in Greek and in a few cases she just couldn't reach an *agoranomos*, who helped her with translation³⁰. Many other descendants of Greek immigrants and of mixed marriages, like Dritones and Apollonias, thought themselves to be the Greeks. They tried to carry out a Greek way of life and to place their children to the gymnasium.

Moreover, so-called Greeks were not homogenous. There were Macedonians and Greeks from all over Hellenic world in Egypt. Many soldiers of armies of the Diadochi and Epigones, who were defeated in numerous battles of the Hellenistic period, moved to Egypt, where they received pieces of land and help with living arrangements at the new location³¹. There were even the Thracians among cleruchs³².

Egyptian scribes in the 3rd century B.C. started learning Greek³³, and there were officials of Egyptian origin in provincial administration³⁴, many of whom studied this language and tried to copy the way of life of new rulers of their country.

Of course, the majority of peasants and dwellers of villages were Egyptians, but they are almost absent from written sources of Greco-Roman period. It should be supposed that they worshipped their own gods, inherited by them from their ancestors, and were not interested in new religious trends. Sarapis was probably only a Greek analogue of Osiris for them. For example, a name «Sarapion» is translated in one of demotic texts as «the Son of Osiris». It is said in a Greek part of this bilingual dedicatory inscription: «To Sarapis, the great god, Paniscus, son of Sarapion». The Egyptian text is the following: «Osiris of Coptos, the chief of the house of gold, gives life to Pamin, son of Pa-she-Usir»³⁵.

²⁸ The question of mixed marriages is discussed in: LEWIS, 1986: 27; BAGNALL, 1996: 28, 233; BRADY, 1978: 16.

²⁹ VIERROS, 2005: 75-76.

³⁰ VIERROS, 2005: 79-80.

³¹ BEVAN, 1968: 40.

³² BINGEN, 2007: 83-93.

³³ CLARYSSE, 1995: 19.

³⁴ BERGMANN, 2010: 111.

³⁵ PFEIFFER, 2008: 391.

Thus, it is very difficult to make any ethnical divisions between the «middle class» Egyptians and the Greeks living in Egypt in the 2nd century B.C. and later. Onomastics doesn't help scholars to identify them³⁶. For example, a certain Paris, an Egyptian, asked the ruler to protect him from lawlessness of Greek officials³⁷.

Thus, a new population stratum was formed in Egypt towards the end of the Ptolemaic period. It contained descendants of the Greeks and Macedonians, representatives of some other ethnic groups that moved to Egypt and Hellenized Egyptian officials. They constituted the «middle class» of Egypt (and Alexandria in particular) and had to be unified in the religious field. It is these people together with Greek citizens of Alexandria that worshipped Sarapis, mentioned him in their letters, copied stories about miracles that he accomplished, dedicated statues, altars, etc. to him. In this context he was truly multicultural and helped the first Ptolemies to build a new elite and a middle stratum that became a base of their power in the country. Thus, the situation with the cult of the god probably was more complicated than we have been accustomed to think.

³⁶ CLARYSSE, 1992: 134; VIERROS, 2005: 75.

³⁷ GOUDRIAAN, 1988: 38