CHAPTER TWO

THE HELLENISTIC ICONOGRAPHY OF SARAPIS

A. THE "CANONICAL" IMAGE

The most familiar representation of Sarapis presents a seated god, wearing both a tunic-like chiton and a loose fitting himation, with a basket-shaped calathus on his head. The left hand is usually raised to hold a spear or scepter and the right rests on the three-headed Cerberus who sits beside the throne. The god's thick hair falls around the face and behind the neck in heavy strands, forming three, four, or five undulant arrowpoints on the forehead. The beard is equally luxuriant, full of curls, and divided into roughly symmetrical right and left halves; viewed in profile, two vertical planes are visible below the lip, a high forward one, and a low receding one; on most examples the moustache curls up at its left end and down at the right.

More statues and busts represent this type of Sarapis than any other extant type. As a result, authorities on Hellenistic art have generally identified it as the type of the cult statue in the great Serapeum at Alexandria. A passage of Athenodorus cited by Clement has prompted many to ascribe this type to Bryaxis, the fourth-century sculptor:

But Athenodorus the son of Sandon, though he intended to make Sarapis seem very ancient, tripped up somehow and proved that he was an artificially manufactured statue. He says that Sesostris, the Egyptian king, having subdued most of the nations around Greece, brought back on his return home

2 A detailed discussion of the arrangement of the beard of the canonical Sarapis is given by T. Kraus, Sarapiskopf aus Oxyrhynchos, in JDAI, LXXV (1960), pp. 88-99, esp. pp. 91-95.
to Egypt skilled artists. He gave them orders that his ancestor Osiris be lavishly fashioned, and the work was prepared by the master Bryaxis—not the Athenian, but another of the same name as that Bryaxis—who in fashioning it used an elaborate variety of materials ... and mixed them all together with the dye left over from the funeral of Osiris and Apis to produce Sarapis. Even his name hints at the connection with the funeral and the workmanship of the grave, since it is a compound of Osiris and Apis, Osirapis. (Protrepticus, IV, 48) 1

This passage really offers little support to any theory, since Athenodorus stated specifically that the Bryaxis he meant was not the famous one and that the statue he meant was not the Hellenic one. Even Clement seemed aware that something was wrong with Athenodorus’ account. Still, Bryaxis’ name would hardly have been connected with Sarapis unless he had actually had something to do with some famous statue of the god. Working on this assumption, many scholars have made fine observations of stylistic similarities to argue that the canonical type is based on an original by Bryaxis.2 On the other hand, other scholars have made equally fine observations, on stylistic grounds, to deny the

1 ἀλλ’ ὁ γε Ἀθηνάδωρος ὁ τοῦ Σάνδωνος ἀρχαῖος τὸν Ἐφεσιαν βουληθεὶς οὐκ οἶδ’ ἢτοι περιέπεσαν. ἔλεγξες αὐτοῖς ἄχαλμα εἶναι γενητόν. Σέσωστρίν φησὶ τὸν Ἀγνύπτεον βασιλέα, τὰ πλεῦστα τῶν παρ’ Ἐλληνικοῦ παραστηγαμένου ἑθῶν, ἔπαινεθοντα εἰς Ἀγνύπτον ἐπιμαχεῖσθαι τεχνών θάνατος· τὸν οὖν Ὀσιρίν τὸν προπότορο τὸν ἀντίκειται ἐκλείσας αὐτοῖς πολυτελέος, κατασκευάζει δὲ αὐτὸν Βρύαξις ὁ δημιουργός, οὐκ ἂθηναίος, ἄλλος δὲ τις δημαίνως ἐκείνῳ τῷ Ἰουλιανῷ· διὸ ὡς κατακάρχηται εἰς δημιουργίαν μικτῆ καὶ ποικίλῃ . . . καὶ τῷ ἐκ τῆς Ὀσιρίδος καὶ τοῦ Ἀπασαν οὐ κηδεῖας ὑπολειμμένος φαρμάκων φυθάσας τὰ πάντα διελάπαν τὸν Σάραπην· οὐ καὶ τοῦ μοίρα αἰνίττεται τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς κηδείας καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῆς ταφῆς δημιουργίαν, σύνθετον ἀπὸ τα Ὀσιρίδος καὶ Ἄπασαν οὐ γενόμενον Ὀσιρίδας.