CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORY OF THE CULT BEFORE THE TIME OF AUGUSTUS

The origins of the cult of Sabazius lie shrouded in obscurity. For the earliest author to mention him, Aristophanes, he is undoubtedly Phrygian,1 although one of Aristophanes' characters, at the beginning of the Wasps, in his inability to distinguish between Phrygian and Median, seems to point to an origin even farther east. It is not the purpose of this study to engage in etymological speculations, which, anyhow, are probably irrelevant to our understanding of the cult.2 Nor is there any point in becoming involved in the Thraco-Phrygian controversy: the earliest documents point to an origin of Sabazius in Asia Minor, and it is only from the first century B.C. that he is documented from the Balkans. If there is any basis for seeing him as part of a commonly inherited religion of Thracians and Phrygians, that lies entirely in the realm of undocumented speculation.3

The question is rather what kind of a god we have before us in the four passages of Aristophanes which mention him. He is associated with flutes in a passage of the Horae, a point to which we shall return when we discuss the attributes on the hands, and, as far as other gods are concerned, he is associated in the Wasps with the Korybantes, typical gods of madness, in the Birds with the mother of gods and men, and in the Lysistrata with Adonis. The passage in the Lysistrata is probably the most revealing as to Aristophanes' low opinion of the god. It must, however, be remembered that ridicule must, on the one hand, contain some element of truth in order to be effective, but cannot be relied on for accuracy. At all events, Sabazius appears as a favorite of women—with all the derogatory overtones which that has for an ancient audience—and is part of their πυλός, perhaps best rendered as "loose living." Along with the beating of drums—another point to which we shall return when discussing the symbols on the hands—and the worship of Adonis on the rooftops—hardly the place for proper religion—there are πυλός

1 II, T. 1-4; in the footnotes which refer to the previous volumes of this set, references to the first volume will be indicated by 1 and the number of the item, references to the second volume will be indicated by 2 and the number of the item.
3 See most recently V. Kontorini, Rhodiaka I, Louvain and Providence, 1983, p. 79.
Sabazios, "thick Sabaziuses." All kinds of Sabazius-shouts? Numerous representations of Sabazius?¹

The first information on Sabazius from his Anatolian homeland is given to us by inscription II, 31, a reinscribed cult-decree from the reign of Artaxerxes II. This regulation, combined into one inscription with the dedication of a statue to Zeus Baradates (i.e., Ahura Mazda) by Droaphernes, son of Barakes, governor of Lydia, forbids the participation by functionaries of this officially sanctioned cult in the mysteries of Sabazius, Agdistis (= Cybele), or Ma (= Bellona) It is interesting to observe—a point to which I shall return later—that Apuleius, writing his Metamorphoses in the second century A.D., about the time that this inscription was reinscribed as a result of Antonine antiquarianism, lists the same deities—Mater Idaea (Cybele) and Bellona—in the same breath with Sabazius and the Syrian goddess.² One cannot help from wondering whether Apuleius, generally a faithful reflector of his own times, had some actual knowledge of this decree.³

What is most significant about this document, granted that one can take it as genuine, not an invention or antiquarian embellishment of the second century A.D., is that the cult of Sabazius, together with those of his Anatolian colleagues, is in disfavor and disrepute with the Persian authorities, who have introduced the cult of their Ahura Mazda under the guise of Zeus Baradates, or Lawgiver. (This fact would also militate against seeing Sabazius as Iranian on the basis of Aristophanes' Wasps.) Also noteworthy is the fact that there are mysteries of Sabazius, as of the other divinities mentioned. That is to say, the worship involved initiation into a select organization, probably with the imparting of some kind of special instruction.

As we proceed chronologically, we come to the famous passage in Demosthenes De Corona, given in CCIS II as TD. 1. This speech was delivered in 330 B.C., thirty-five years after the presumed date of the Sardis inscription. It is generally taken as a mainstay of our information on Sabazius, not only in most general works about Sabazius, but in every commentary on Demosthenes. But if one looks closely, one is amazed to find that the name of Sabazius is nowhere mentioned. Indeed, the only thing approaching it is the second element of the cry εῦωι σαβοί which is said to have been uttered as part of the disreputable religious activities in which Aeschines,

¹ The scholiast of T, T. 40 is not of much help, except to show that he too felt the need of elucidation. Indeed, if one trusts Cicero, II, T. 8, Aristophanes elsewhere condemns and expels from the state Sabazius and certain other foreign gods. But that may be merely a projection into a more distant past of what Cicero knew to have happened in Rome in 139 B.C.
² II, T. 15—Apuleius is also the only other author to follow Aristophanes in mentioning Adonis along with Sabazius.
³ The problematical εὐωπά of the inscription are probably censers for incense. For this and other peripheral problems, see the bibliography cited in CCIS II, ad loc., and J. and L. Robert, Bulletin Epigraphique, 1979, no. 431.