CHAPTER THREE

THE SYMBOLS OF SABAZIUS; THE PRACTICES OF THE CULT

If one went exclusively by the literary sources, the only animal which would be known to be associated with Sabazius is the snake. Yet even a cursory glance at the monuments is enough to convince the reader that there are four other important animals: the frog or toad, the lizard, the turtle, and the ram. Of these, three, like the snake, are reptiles. On the snake in ancient religion, of course, much has been written. But the other animals’ significance remains unexplained, so it might be well to see what the ancients thought of these creatures, generally, and rather uninformatively, lumped as “apotropaic” by scholars in their discussion of the hands, insofar as they are explained at all.

Aelian, for instance, reports of lizards that they have remarkable regenerative capacity, the parts living on separately after the animal is cut in two, and frequently joining up again to make a full lizard. Likewise he reports—from eyewitness!—that a lizard which had been captured and blinded was then kept inside an earthenware jar with air-holes for nine days, together with moist earth, a certain herb, and an iron ring with a lizard engraved on its stone. At the end of this time the lizard was released and had regained its sight.

Certainly these highly exaggerated reports of the lizard’s regenerative capacity give us some idea of the way that both educated and uneducated people in antiquity must have viewed this animal. Easily, then, we can envision the lizard being used as a symbol of renewed life in a cult which obviously must have laid great emphasis on eschatological matters, if we can judge by the Vincentius-catacomb paintings.

Aelian does not say anything of interest about turtles, but he has a good deal to say about frogs and toads. These animals, with their easily observed metamorphosis from egg to tadpole to adult, would also seem to be ideally suited as metaphors for a life which advances through stages of increasing perfection. (Later we shall speak of evidence for various grades of initiation in Sabazius-cult.) Yet toads, particularly, are viewed by Aelian with some repugnance, something which may warrant the “apotropaic” label given to them. For instance, quoting earlier authorities, he asserts that toads have two livers, one of them deadly, the other health-bringing. In another place we hear

1 See, e.g., Erich Kütter, Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion, RGVV 13, 2, 1913, who mentions Sabazius on pp. 177-179.
2 Historia Animalium II, 23 and V, 47.
of a species of toad whose blood is highly poisonous, and which it is dangerous even to look at intently in the face. For the toad stares back and breathes on the viewer, causing a pallor which lasts for several days. And in yet another place we learn that the toad need only belch at the man who touches it to kill him.

As for frogs, Aelian seems most interested in showers of them. In one place we are informed that the author himself once encountered such a phenomenon near Naples, and in another that such a violent rain of frogs once occurred that the Antariates, a Mysian tribe, were forced to emigrate! In both cases, the frogs seem to have been only half-formed. If the accounts are to be taken at all seriously, we may imagine a tornado picking up the waters of a pond full of tadpoles and depositing them elsewhere. At all events, given what the ancients seem to have been able to believe about the toad/frog, it seems to have been a beast both miraculous and formidable.

Apart from Aelian, there is evidence in funerary sculpture that the lizard could be viewed as a symbol of death and resurrection, since it is an animal which hibernates all winter. As for the turtle, it perhaps is present on Sabazius-hands at least in part because of Sabazius' connection with Hermes, which we have already discussed. Hermes is of course quite closely associated with turtles, as is well known to all readers of the Homeric Hymn, and the connection carries over into art of the Roman period. Otherwise turtles enjoyed a bad press, especially among the Christians, perhaps in part because of their associations with Hermes and Sabazius. (As we shall see, there are many similarities between Christianity and Sabazius-worship, and the Christians may have particularly eschewed an animal which they associated with a cult which tried to copy them.)

Particularly by the Egyptians, frogs were associated well into Roman times with birth, something which again may go back to the fact that their metamorphosis is so well known to people in general. The Egyptian birth-goddess Heket is traditionally shown in frog-form or frog-headed, and this connection persists into a category of lamps of the third and early fourth centuries A.D. which show a frog on them. Together with other similar lamps with representations of Bes, of two embryos, etc., they seem to have been used to dispel evil spirits on occasions of childbirth. They also seem, with their connotation of rebirth, to have been appropriate for funerary contexts, or for the celebration of the new year, when many of the Egyptian gods were held to have been

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1 Aelian, Historia Animalium XVII, 12; XVII, 15; IX, 11.
2 Aelian, Historia Animalium II, 56 and XVII, 41.
4 Toynbee, op. cit., p. 221.
5 Toynbee, op. cit., pp. 222-3.