CHAPTER THREE

THE EGYPTIAN CULTS

The evidence of devotion to the deities of Alexandria in Roman Britain is both sparse and problematic, and, apart from the undoubted Serapeum at York, the dedication from Kirkby Thore, and the reference to a temple of Isis at London 1), there is little on which to base any general conclusions. The recent discovery in the Walbrook Mithraeum of the outstanding marble head of Serapis (Frontispiece), a sculpture comparable in quality with any known representation of the god 2), is in itself an indication that even the most unequivocal pieces may in fact have no direct bearing upon the dissemination of the Egyptian cults, and the ready assimilation of Serapis with Jupiter, of Isis with Fortuna, and of Harpocrates with Cupid must dictate caution in the interpretation of statuettes, gems, and other small finds 3), which may in any event be of little religious import 4). In the case of Serapis there is, moreover, the additional consideration that in Britain an isolated find may possibly imply a compliment to the Emperor Severus rather than a real attachment to the deity with whom he chose to be associated 5).

1) See below pp. 75-7, 79-80.
2) See above p. 10.
3) The identity of such small finds is sometimes overlooked, and it is not suggested that those noted in the succeeding pages are all that may exist in museum or private collections.
4) The occasional discovery of coins with figures of the Egyptian deities on the reverse (cf. PSA, IV (1856-9), p. 303; Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. & Antiq. Field Club, XXI (1900), p. 166) is irrelevant, and there is no evidence that such types were ever issued by the London mint (cf. Mattingly and Sydenham, V (ii), pp. 426 f.; Maurice, Numismatique constantinienne, II, pp. 1 f.). We are grateful to Dr C. H. V. Sutherland for this information.
5) For the identification of Severus with Serapis cf. L’Orange, Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture, pp. 76 f., and Richmond in Fritz Saxl, 1890-1948, ed. Gordon, p. 51, where it is suggested that the well known metrical dedication to Caelestis from Carvoran (below pp. 105-6), a compliment to Julia Domna, may have been paired with another in honour of Severus as Serapis.
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Taken as a whole, however, the various indications are perhaps not without some significance, particularly when considered in conjunction with the apparent presence in Roman contexts of Egyptian antiquities, a few at least of which may reasonably be accepted as more than mere curiosities 1).

The Serapeum at York (EBVRACVM) was situated in the area of the civil settlement outside the legionary fortress, to the south-west and across the river. Its existence was first noted in 1770, when the semi-circular foundations of what was evidently an apsidal building were discovered at a depth of about 2 feet, in digging the cellar of a house in Friars’ Gardens, Toft Green, opposite, and north-west of, Barker Lane 2). The foundations, which continued under the adjoining house, were of brick set in mortar “so hard as not to be penetrable by the sharpest tools”, and within the arc of the apse, but at a slightly lower level, was found a large slab of coarse gritstone recording the dedication of the temple by one Claudius Hieronymianus, a legate of the Sixth Legion 3) (Pl. XVI). The stone, which passed into the possession of a local antiquary, was subsequently lost, only to be unexpectedly rediscovered in 1833 during the demolition of a house in the Mint Yard near Bootham Bar 4). The inscription is “surrounded by a cable moulding in an ansate panel. Each *ansa* is of *pelta* form, decorated with a medial star in a circle, while the spandrels are occupied by a pair of cult standards above and a leaf and rosette below” 5). The lettering is “deeply cut but ill arranged”, and the stone can be dated stylistically to the late second or early third century, a date confirmed by the identification of the dedicator with the *praeses* of Cappadocia who persecuted Christians at the turn of the century, following his

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1) See below pp. 84-93.


