THE SARAPIS ORACLE IN MACROBIUS

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In Macrobius’ famous exposition of solar monotheism the Egyptian Sarapis is mentioned among the many gods who are identified with Sol.¹ As proof of this identification Macrobius adduces an oracle of Sarapis himself, which is said to have been given to Nicocreon, a king of Cyprus who had died in 311 B.C. The passage runs as follows: “Accipe nunc quid de Sole vel Sarapi pronuntietur oraculo. Nam Sarapis, quem Aegyptii deum maximum prodiderunt, oratus a Nicocreonte Cypriorum rege quis deorum haberetur, his versibus sollicitam religionem regis instruxit:

Εἰμὶ θεὸς τοιόσοδε μαθείν, οἶδὼν κ’ ἐγώ ἐιπὼ·
οὐράνιος κόσμος κεφαλῆ, γαστήρ δὲ θάλασσα,
γαῖα δὲ μοι τόδες εἰσί, τὰ δ’ οἷατ’ ἐν αἰθέρι κεῖται,
δύμα τε τηλαυγῆς λαμπρόν φάος ἥλιος.

Ex his appare Sarapis et Solis unam et individuam esse naturam.” ²

It will be noticed that this conclusion is not as obvious as seems to be assumed by Macrobius, since the oracle only says that the sun is the eye of Sarapis, who himself is conceived as a huge cosmic man, a makranthropos who embodies the whole cosmos. Whatever the origin of this oracle may be, we may be sure that it was not promulgated in order to support the solar monotheism of late Antiquity. This oracle of Sarapis has always played a part in discussions of the early history of the god’s cult. Nicocreon was forced to suicide by Ptolemy I Soter in 311 B.C.; therefore, his consultation of Sarapis, if historical, must have happened before that date.³

scholars read into Macrobius' report that the cult of Sarapis had already been established on the island of Cyprus before 311 B.C., though there is nothing to suggest that Nicocreon consulted Sarapis on Cyprus and not in Alexandria or Memphis, or that this oracle, if received in Egypt, had led him to introduce the cult of Sarapis in Cyprus. Others denied the historicity and authenticity of the oracle, primarily because its contents were held to represent opinions of a much later period than the last decades of the fourth century B.C. Finally, there were scholars who did accept the historicity of Nicocreon's consultation of Sarapis, because they could not otherwise see why a much later generation should have associated an oracle of Sarapis with a rather obscure Cypriot king, but thought on the other hand that the wording of the oracle given by Macrobius could not be authentic but must have been substituted for the original, with the motive of adapting Sarapis to the monotheistic ideas of the later Roman Empire.

Stähelin, p. 358, and Hill, p. 162, treated the oracle as historical and so did the scholars mentioned in the following note, as also J. E. Stambaugh, *Sarapis under the early Ptolemies* (= EPRO 25; Leiden, 1972), p. 10. W. Otto, *Priester und Tempel im hellenistischen Ägypten*, II (Leipzig-Berlin, 1908; reprinted Rome, 1971), p. 269, n. 3, was the first to point out that the oracle was most probably to be dated 312 B.C., since it was only after 313 B.C. that Nicocreon could rightly be called *Cypriorum rex*.

