SARAPIS - AGATHOS DAIMON

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Plate CXCIX

At the beginning of the Roman period, the most important deity in the Alexandrian pantheon was undoubtedly Sarapis. He was worshipped in the biggest and most important temple—the Great Sarapieion. Although syncretic elements were present in his cult from the very beginning, they grew dominant only in the Roman period, when Sarapis became an universal god, incorporating functions and attributes of Greek and Egyptian deities.

Among the documents of that time is an interesting series of representations showing a snake with the head of Sarapis. This important iconographic type is unanimously interpreted by scholars as Sarapis - Agathos Daimon. The identification is completely confirmed by monuments such as figurines, reliefs, and terracotta lamps, and above all Alexandrian coins which give this identification a quasi official character.

Agathos Daimon was a sacred snake which, according to a popular Alexandrian legend, was killed during the work of founding the city. In expiation Alexander the Great is said to have founded a temple for Agathos Daimon (its existence is a historical fact) and established an annual festival, celebrated together with the anniversary of the foundation of Alexandria on the 25th day of the

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2 Ps.-Kallisthenes, I, p. 32, 5-7.
month of Tybi. On the other hand, we know from other sources that citizens of Alexandria kept in their houses sacred snakes called Agathoi Daimones. In this way, Agathos Daimon became a custodial deity of the city and, at the same time, a patron of individual houses.

The list of monuments representing a snake with the head of Sarapis is not very long. Among the most typical examples I mention:

1. A relief showing the head of Sarapis on the body of a tightly coiled snake, beside the figure of a standing woman identified as Tyche of Alexandria (formerly in the Villa Massimo Negroni).

2. A terracotta figurine representing a snake coiled in the lower part of its body, while the upper rears up vertically and ends in the god's head (formerly in the Collection Fouquet). The typical way of joining the two elements of the figurine is worth mentioning: the head is sideways on to the body and emerges directly from it, while in the relief No. 1 it is attached to the snake's body as if to a neck.

3. A limestone relief representing an Osiris-headed Canopic jar flanked by two snakes. One has a torso of Isis in place of the head and holds a torch in a coil of its body. The other has a head of Sarapis (attached in the manner of No. 2) and similarly holds an ear of corn (Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden).

4. A terracotta figurine found at Heracleopolis Magna (Ehnasya).

5. A terracotta figurine with a head of Sarapis set vertically on

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8 Ps.-Kallisthenes, I, p. 32, 10-13; Ammianus Marcellinus, XXII, 11, 7; cf. Fraser, op. cit., p. 356, n. 163.