CHAPTER TWELVE


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I

In the year 360 A.D. or just before, a Levantine merchant arrived in the metropolis of Egypt, Alexandria. The well travelled man, who was most interested in exploring prospects for trade, noticed immediately which goods were in superabundant supply in the markets: specialities of every sort, countless varieties of fish, paper, special scents, and much more. Even more fascinating for him was quite another observation. He wrote: “The gods are honored here in an extraordinary manner; and here one also finds the temple of Serapis, one of the most unique and uncommon sights in the world. For nowhere else on earth can one find such a building, such a temple site, or such reverence for the gods.”

A short time later he spoke of Alexandria and Egypt together: “Here one finds sacred sites of all types and temples where nothing is lacking. In fact there are temple guardians, priests, sacrifice observers, worshipers, and the best diviners in abundance…. Thus you will always find the altars radiant with sacrificial flames and filled with frankincense.”

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* This article is based on a chapter (pp. 78ff.) of my monograph Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt (2004). I owe thanks to Stephen Emmel for his generous help with the English text.

1 Expositio totius mundi et gentium 34 (ed. Rougé): Et dii coluntur eminenter et templum Serapis ibi est, unum et solum spectaculum novum in omni mundo: nusquam enim terra aut aedificium tale aut dispositio templi talis aut religio talis invenitur.

2 Ibid. 36: Et sunt sacra omnia et templum omnibus ornata; aeditimi enim et sacerdotes et ministri et aruspices et adoratores et divini optimi abundant; et fit omnia ordine: aras itaque invenies semper igne splendentes et sacrificiorum et ture plenas, vittas simul et turibula plena aromatibus divinum odorem spirantia invenies.
The author’s assessment that in Alexandria the gods would be revered more than elsewhere should not be dismissed as irrelevant.\textsuperscript{3}

Our anonymous witness, author of a trading geography of the Mediterranean, is certainly not a completely objective observer. He spoke not a word about the Christianity that was flourishing in Alexandria in these years, nor about its churches. Naturally he ignored the contemporary conflict between the Arians and the Nicenes (or Orthodox) and he had as little to say about bishop Athanasius, who ruled over the churches of Alexandria and Egypt for almost half a century. Rather, our author, of course a pagan,\textsuperscript{4} confirmed two other things: first, the unbroken vitality of the pagan cults in Alexandria (and in Egypt); and second, the immense religious and architectural importance of the Serapeum in Alexandria, which was situated as a kind of Acropolis in the Rhakotis district in the southwestern section of the city.

Clearly, our author no longer considered the vitality of the pagan cults to be self-evident. In his homeland—perhaps Phoenicia or Syria—Christianity was actively supported by the emperors in Constantinople and already the dominant force. In fact, many pagan cults had long before lost their attractive power, and in many areas pagans had been forced onto the defensive. Alexandria, however, still was an exceptional location of pagan worship indeed. In this city there existed an unconstrained variety of pagan cults: gods of Greek, Egyptian, Oriental, and European origin were revered here, further cults were continually inaugurated, and syncretisms were taken up. At the same time, a strong Judaism also flourished here, as well as various Christian groups and other religious communities.

Our knowledge about pagan cults in the fourth century is actually shockingly incomplete, for the sources are desperately meager. But for Alexandria we possess an unusual piece of evidence: a register of buildings in the five city districts, which is found in a Syriac chronicle only, but which stems from about the middle of the fourth century A.D.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. 35: \textit{...deos colentes eminenter: nusquam enim deorum mysteria sic perfitur quomodo ibi ab antiquo et usque modo, et paene ipsa omni orbi terrarum tradidit deos colere. See also 36: ubi deos, uti praediximus, colentes bene historias maxime eis offerunt (on the Egyptians in general). On this point Marasco 1996, 183ff. Note also Eun. c. soph. 6.10.8 (p. 37, Giangrande; p. 471, Boissonade).}

\textsuperscript{4} Rougé 1966, 30ff., 48ff. Marasco 1996 interprets the tract as a mirror of the contemporary religious policy of Emperor Constantius. For other aspects, see now Mittag 2006.

\textsuperscript{5} Fraser 1951.