TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE ICONOGRAPHY OF SABAZIUS*

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I. Introduction: Unquestioned Sabazius-Representations

In the course of my doing preliminary work for a corpus of the epigraphical material for the cult of Sabazius, to appear in a future volume of the Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain, it has become almost painfully evident to me that there exists no generally accepted standard for the recognition of this god in art, and that the most extremely variable iconographic types have in the course of the last fifty or so years been taken as representing this divinity, sometimes with little or no apparent justification. It seems to me therefore an indispensable preliminary step, if we are ever to construct a meaningful corpus of this material, to determine rather rigorously what is to be included and what excluded. We must try to determine what kind of a representation the artisan would have used the word "Sabazius" for when he was making it, and the average ancient observer would have designated "Sabazius" when he saw it.

Now in defining the iconography of this divinity, attested from the comedies of Aristophanes to the end of Greco-Roman paganism, there are two sure groups of monuments which can serve as our guide. The first group consists of inscribed reliefs which include both a picture of Sabazius and his name. There are to date, unfortunately, only six items to be discussed in this category, and two of these (nos. 4 and 6 below), as we shall see, are of questionable value.

1) A relief from Blaudos, present-day Balat, in Mysia.¹ The relief, accompanied by the inscription

Μένανδρος Ἀθηναίων

Dia Σαβαζίων

εὐχή

(surely Sabazius, in spite of idiosyncrasies of spelling), shows the
god seated on a throne, holding a spear in his left hand and making a libation from a patera which he holds in his right. We also observe an altar, a tree with a snake twisted around it, and two votaries. The god wears a long gown, and if the drawing which we possess of this relief is to be trusted, he is beardless.

2) A relief now in the British Museum, of unknown provenience in Asia Minor. With the inscription

Εὐτυχος Δί Σαβαζίων κατ' ἀναμνήσει τετερίον,

it shows Sabazius on horseback with chlamys and chiton, leggings and boots, bareheaded except for a diadem. He is holding a thunderbolt in his right hand and two spears in his left. On one side of the relief there is a tree, around which a snake is wound and on one branch of which an eagle sits. At the base of the tree are an altar and a crater.

3) A much-discussed relief from Koloe in Lydia. The long inscription commemorates the xaithério (

καθιέρως) (introduction of cult?) of Zeus Sabazios in 101 A.D. Here Sabazius is shown in a chariot, bearded. Above the two horses which draw the chariot is an eagle, below them a snake. Behind the horses there is an accompanying figure, probably intended for Hermes, holding a caduceus, and near him, there is a crescent moon. Perhaps also to be interpreted as Sabazius is a bearded figure, standing at an altar, and making a libation. Both the sure and the hypothetical Sabazius-figures are heavily draped. To be singled out in the lower register of the relief is an altar with a tree behind it, amid a group of votaries.

So far, on the basis of this group of examples from Asia Minor we can summarize as follows: Sabazius can be shown seated, on horseback, or in a chariot. A spear or scepter is twice an attribute, but also there are single occurrences of a patera, a thunderbolt, and a crater. On all three reliefs, an altar appears in the vicinity of the god, as does a tree, twice entwined by a snake. In all three cases a snake is somewhere present, and in two an eagle. Once a Hermes-figure accompanies Sabazius, and once there is a suggestion of lunar associations. The eagle and the snake, of course, do not mean much as they are among the most banal of animals in ancient religious iconography, but the combination of the two is not so