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Cults in Hellenistic Alexandria

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Alexandria is the first Greek town to become the base of a Greek monarchy in Egypt. Her double character as a traditional city and the capital of a kingdom gives her a special character, that of a town in which the power no longer comes from the citizens and that must invent a new relationship with the population, based on authority but also on care for this population. The native monarchy remained isolated, and international dynastic prestige was reserved for Greeks and Macedonians. The court, the festivals, and the monuments were the instruments of the delicate balance between Egyptians, on the one hand, and Greeks and Macedonians, on the other, realized under Ptolemy II, which made Alexandria the center of a new world (see Strabo 17.1.6-12, which gives a very detailed description of the town as it was about 25 B.C.). We have no time to dwell on this fascinating text, which describes the district of the palaces, the Basileia with the royal gardens, the Mouseion, the Library, and the Sema, which Ptolemy IV considered the grave of Alexander the Great, and which was also the grave of the first Ptolemies.

What was most remarkable was the Serapeion, the sanctuary that became the biggest of the town. It was in the new town, Neapolis, where the agora, the tribunals, the theater, the boule, and maybe the gymnasium had been erected. But it lacked an important divinity, which was unusual since it was not far from the civic center, and most Greek cities had sanctuaries in such an area. The vast sanctuary of Serapis was built much further south, on a hill overlooking the district that kept the ancient Egyptian name, Rhakotis. Some scholars think that the Serapeion was perpetuating an older, local cult. But this is not proved. The form of this sanctuary and the cult of Serapis, as well as the place where the temple was built, could merely indicate the will of the first Ptolemies to underline a symbolic continuity with Egyptian heritage.

Paradoxically, very little is known about the Egyptians in Alexandria during the third century. On the other hand we know much about the Celtic mercenaries because of their many tombs in the third and second centuries in Alexandria. This is also the case of the Jews, who perhaps were established by Alexander the Great himself but in any



FIG. 1
Statue of Serapis, from the
Faiyum. Sycamore wood. Roman
period. Alexandria, Graeco-
Roman Museum.

case constituted an important community from the time of Ptolemy VI and were grouped in one district at the end of the Ptolemaic era.

I will not speak of the Egyptian religion and its relationship with the pharaohs. It is very difficult to try to summarize the significance of the cults in Hellenistic Egypt. The leitmotif of the Egyptian religion is in fact the passage from life to death and the question of what happens in the other world. It is not everyday life that concerns Egypt but the uncertainty of what happens after death. For the Egyptians it seems to be the same life but in another form, more spiritualized. Mummification, the building of the tombs, the decoration of the tombs with statues, reliefs, stelae, and gifts—from a simple pot to the most beautiful gold—and the cult offerings in the tombs and temples all suggest that after physical death there is a continuation of life.

Through art, we have in some way a description of the future, of an eternal, more beautiful existence. Egyptian religion deals with the same problem as all religions: what is the contact between man and god. The gods have their plans, and man answers gods with prayers and offerings. But in Egyptian religion, not every man is allowed into the vicinity of the god, but only the king, the pharaoh, and his priest. This attitude is

certainly one that lasted many thousands of years. During the period that interests us—the Hellenistic period of the Ptolemies—the new leaders, Greeks who now ruled the land of the Nile and were living in the most beautiful city, Alexandria, tried to understand the power of God and his omnipresence. They also tried to find a form that suited Egyptians as well as Greeks. They did it with success, and they found a name, Serapis, the new artistic creation of the new pharaoh, Ptolemy I Soter. The creation was a brilliant idea that tried to unify the ethnic, cultural, and social differences between the old and the new leaders of Egypt.

We know that for hundreds of years, Greeks and Egyptians had been in contact and that they already had the same beliefs about some deities. With the foundation in about 620 B.C. of Naukratis, a Greek colony that became extremely prosperous, and even before that time, contacts were maintained. It is enough to read Herodotos (middle of the fifth century) to see how close the parallels were between some Egyptian and some Greek gods.

Serapis is the hellenized form of Osor-Hapi, whose cult was established in Memphis in the late period and who was in fact the bull Apis (see Riad fig. 1 above), who, after his death, became an Osiris, as did all who died. This god, who at first was little known except in Memphis, was represented as a hybrid, with the body of a mummified man and a bull's head, carrying the solar disk between his horns. But the god who appeared to Ptolemy had the aspect of an old, imposing man with a beard (fig. 1), holding a scepter, with the dog Kerberos seated at his side. This image, which would be the iconography of Serapis for the coming centuries, has nothing to do with the old Egyptian iconography.

Yet Serapis presented aspects that linked him to his Egyptian past. He is a god of the dead, a sort of double of Osiris, and like him, a god of fertility: he wears a *modius* on his head (see Riad fig. 3 above). But he is also a healing god, and this is a new element, for the Egyptians had no gods with such a specialty. Serapis became closely linked to the royal couple of the Ptolemies and their wives in all sorts of prayers.

The great Temple of Serapis in Alexandria, with its precious foundation deposits laid by the first Ptolemies, attests, especially after Ptolemy III (246–221), to official intervention of royal power during the construction of the temple. The archaeological exploration on this site has been very difficult: The site has been altered many times, and it has been disturbed.

In fact, many sources tend to identify Serapis with Hades, the Greek god of the dead, and the advisors of the king persuaded him that Hades-Pluto was the Greek name for the Egyptian name Serapis.

From the description by Rufinus of Aquileia we can get an idea of the splendor of the Serapeion, its immense esplanade surrounded by walls, with exedras, rooms for priests, and taller buildings where the

guardians and priests lived together. In the center of this vast ensemble the temple rose with ornate columns and an exterior built of marble. The Serapeion's glory was immense, and its destruction by the Christians in A.D. 392 was felt in all Egypt as a scandal and a cause for mourning.

During the first century B.C. there was no conflict between the different cults that coexisted in Alexandria. It has been thought that the cult of Serapis, so much favored by the Ptolemies, had one objective—to unify the different elements of the populations living in Egypt. But this is only a guess. In the third century B.C. the Greeks played a major role in society and had privileges. Intermarriage was forbidden in Naukratis and probably also in Alexandria. The kings wanted to preserve a privileged position for the Greeks, and so it is improbable that they would have tried to achieve religious integration, which they refused elsewhere. The cult of Serapis concerned the royal court, the Greek population of Alexandria, except in Memphis, where the cult was assimilated to the cult of Apis. One should consider Serapis not as a god unifying different populations but as the god of Alexandria, as the god of a *polis* that patronized the new dynasty of the Ptolemies and its power.

Memphis is more interesting than Alexandria from the point of view of the integration of Greeks and Egyptians. In Memphis during the second century B.C., Greeks and Egyptians were both serving the god whose official name was Serapis but also Apis (he was worshiped in the shape of a bull living in a sacred precinct). There, in Memphis, the integration was a fact, and the believers recognized their god in his different shapes. Third-century Alexandria, with its culture and religion, was above all a Greek town. But some of the Egyptian gods there were already well known to the Greeks and belonged also to their universe: Athena was Neith, Aphrodite was Hathor, and so forth. And it was in Alexandria that traditional religion combined with Greek artistic techniques and modes of expression, giving the Egyptian gods a different and often more complex image. This supposes not only work from the artists who combined Greek and Egyptian elements but also mental, philosophical, and sometimes theological reflection, as we can see in Plutarch, for instance. In fact, we cannot speak of a mixed Graeco-Egyptian religion or civilization but of mutual influences, particularly in the cult of Serapis, who became universally known, with his very Greek image as Hades or Plouton. Like him, Isis was also represented, but more often under a hellenized aspect, invented in Alexandria, and not under her traditional, Egyptian aspect.

Nevertheless, an important Jewish community in Alexandria was also influenced by the Greeks, but there were conflicts between Greeks and Jews starting in the third century, not only for religious reasons, but for administrative or fiscal ones. However, the extension of Christianity in the third and fourth centuries was also one of the causes;



FIG. 2
Head of Alexander the Great.
Granite. First century B.C.
Alexandria, Graeco-Roman
Museum 3242.

the conflicts became more and more violent, and Egyptian religion itself would vanish.

This is not the place to go into greater detail about the different elements that constituted Alexandrian religion. Let us remember only that many Greek divinities were worshiped but that Isis and Serapis played the major role: The Ptolemies had adopted them, and the rulers were both pharaohs and kings. We must also not forget the importance of the festivals attached to a number of these cults. In a pamphlet written probably under the emperor Trajan, Dion of Prusa reproached the Alexandrians for passing their time with what he called "trivial entertainments," such as dancing, music, and horse racing. He compared them to maenads and satyrs, their life being just a komos, and not an agreeable one but a savage one: people dancing, singing, and pouring blood. Yet under the first Ptolemies, the artistic performances were not comparable to those mentioned by Dion of Prusa.

A few of these festivals must be mentioned, especially the great procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphos. It was described at the end of the first century B.C. by Kallixeinos of Rhodes and mentioned by Athenaios of Naukratis, a later Egyptian writer from the third century A.D. who was recalling the former splendor of his now-ruined country. In fact this festival was probably the Ptolemaia, celebrated first in honor of Ptolemy I Soter, between 279/278 and 271/270 B.C., a celebration considered equal to the Olympic Games in Greece. Three dates are given, the inauguration 279/278, the Penteteris of 271/270, and also 275/274.

These dates are not important in themselves. What is important is that the celebration commemorated the admission of Ptolemy into Olympos, where he joined Alexander the Great. Therefore, the Dionysiac part of the festival occupied the primary place, for the god Dionysos was

considered to be an ancestor of the dynasty. In the second century B.C. Satyros had written a treatise assuming that through his mother, Arsinoe, Ptolemy I was a descendant of Borkos, the brother of the king of Macedonia, Alexander the Philhellene, descendant himself, like Philip and Alexander, from Temenos, son of Hyllos, son of Herakles and Deianeira, herself the daughter of Dionysos. This complicated genealogy partially explains how the great procession was organized: in the Dionysiac procession there were statues of kings, namely the historic or mythical ancestors of Alexander the Great (fig. 2) and Ptolemy I.

The Ptolemaia was not easy to organize. Many representatives of Greek states were invited, as were artists. Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* 5.194-95 is particularly interesting on this point. In it we learn that soldiers, artists, and foreign delegations were sheltered under tents, the most beautiful of these being that of the official banquet. The procession began with the section dedicated to the parents of the kings, followed by the procession of "all the gods," and finally that of the evening star. A great number of animals were sacrificed, and on another day there was certainly a military parade of infantry and horsemen.

Dionysos appeared first as the founder of the dynasty but also as the god who presided over all dramatic contests, where actors, poets, musicians, and singers were competing. A number of persons were disguised as satyrs and sileni, and the statue of the god was carried on a chariot with four wheels: around it were all the cult officers, the priests, the priestesses, the thiasoi, the new initiates, all sorts of maenads (Macedonian, Thracian, and Lydian). They were all crowned with wreaths of serpents and held serpents and daggers in their hands. This was the beginning of the secret procession, which ended with the apparition of two *emblemata*: a gilded thyrsos 135 feet long, and a phallos, also gilded, 180 feet long, on top of which was a star. Mythological scenes illustrated the gods' aspects; a mechanical figure dressed as Nysa, the god's nurse, stood in her seat, poured a libation, and sat down again. Other chariots carried additional mythological scenes: the cave where Dionysos as an infant had been nursed by Hermes and the nymphs, and the altar of Rhea where Dionysos and Priapos had found refuge from Hera.

Some chariots glorified Dionysos as the god of wine. One carried an immense winepress, where a chorus of fifty satyrs with flute players pressed wine grapes while singing; a silenus was watching them. Another chariot carried a gigantic skin (this time not a goatskin but a pantherskin) from which wine dripped; 120 satyrs and sileni filled gold vases from it. On a third chariot a huge, beautifully decorated krater of silver was carried. In this procession old and young men carried precious objects from the pharaoh's storeroom: the objects were meant not only to honor the god but also to prompt admiration from the crowd. A chorus of six hundred singers and three hundred musicians playing kitharas

accompanied the procession, wine was distributed, and from the cave of the nymphs pigeons and other birds were released. Those who had the privilege of being seated in the stadium could drink sweet wine served by young men.

This procession to Dionysos was preceded by Victories with gilded wings who held thymiateria with gilded leaves. Then came allegories of the year and the seasons, and in the procession in honor of Dionysos a *pompe* depicted the triumphal return of the god from India. A chariot with four wheels bore the figure of the victorious god sitting on the back of an elephant. His army followed: five hundred young girls; 120 satyrs; five squadrons of asses mounted by sileni; elephants; chariots drawn by horses, by camels, and by all sorts of other animals from the forest and desert. Some later sarcophagi show us this imagery.

Then came the prisoners and the booty; women in chariots; camels; Ethiopians carrying gold, ebony, and elephant tusks; followed by the hunters with their dogs, the bird-catchers with cages full of birds, and finally, exotic animals.

The last chariot in the procession carried the religious and political message: the statues of Alexander the Great and Ptolemy I or Ptolemy II with crowns of ivy on their heads. Near Ptolemy I were figures of Arete and Corinth and a procession of women depicting the cities that Ptolemy had liberated during the time of Alexander the Great and had kept independent. Thus, the Macedonian dynasty of Egypt was proclaiming its philhellenism. Other gods followed: Zeus was first, and Alexander closed the procession on a chariot drawn by elephants; at his side were Athena and Nike. This is only a short resume of Athenaeus's text, which is very long, and it is strange that we never find any mention of Herakles.

I will not elaborate on another festival, that of Demeter, the Thesmophoria, in which Demeter is assimilated to Isis. But I will deal briefly with the festival in honor of the cult of Adonis, which was firmly rooted in Alexandria, coming from nearby countries, such as Phoenicia and Cyprus. The best description of this feast is a poem by Theokritos, *Idylls* 15 (278–270 B.C.). It evokes an annual celebration of the cult of Adonis organized inside the palace walls by Queen Arsinoe II. There was perhaps not only a religious festival organized by the queen but also a military parade organized by the king. The queen gave this feast to thank Aphrodite for having deified Queen Berenike, the wife of Ptolemy I Soter, and Adonis, the divine spouse of Aphrodite, who was protectress of both Berenike and Arsinoe II. This festival had a different sense than the usual one; it was not celebrating a myth concerning immortality.

Theokritos's *Idylls* is a short, comic piece of verse in which two young girls from Syracuse are visiting the palace on the first day of the festival to Adonis; it tells us nothing about the gardens of Adonis.

One of the young girls is called Praxinoa; with her friend Gorgo and two servants she goes to the palace and meets many soldiers. The husbands of the two girls do not play any great role; one of them is only hungry and awaits his lunch. As usual during a feast in honor of Adonis, the women had a certain liberty and could visit the palace. Inside, in the entry room, pictures illustrated episodes in the legend of Adonis. A statue of the god depicted him lying on a bed of silver. A female singer from Argos sang in honor of Adonis, describing the klismos on which the god was lying, under a green bower where little erotes were flying from one branch to another. On the ends of the klismos were representations of the eagle carrying off Ganymede, also an apotheosis. All around were all sorts of offerings: fruits, flowers, alabastra with Syrian perfumes, and sweets. Naturally, there was much singing. The songs must have had a religious meaning and announced the ceremony of the second day.

As these examples show, the cults of the Ptolemies were sumptuous. The court wanted the Graeco-Roman population of Alexandria and the Egyptians to share in the cult activity. The exercise of the power to establish a cult seems to be a sign of divine nature. This process started in Greece in the fourth century, and especially in Macedonia. As soon as Alexander died, Ptolemy, the first satrap of Egypt, diverted this body from Macedonia to Alexandria. He built a magnificent tomb, the Sema, for Alexander and instituted a cult in his honor as founder of the city (we do not know if the Sema is preserved or where it lies). In about 280, Ptolemy II deified his parents, Ptolemy I and Berenike. He then instituted his own cult, associated with the cult of his wife, Arsinoe II, who died in 270. They were then called "the gods' brother and sister" (fig. 3).

This dynastic cult would continue to associate the living king with his deceased ancestors. It would be a cult celebrated in the Greek way, by priests and priestesses of Greek origin. The traditional ritual of Greek religion was preserved, with sacrifices, victims, and libations. One could suppose that this ideology came from the traditions in Egypt, in which the pharaoh was son and successor of the gods. Here the Greek ideal of *arete* (virtue) revealed the divine nature of the ruler, who was the embodiment of justice, generosity, military courage, and so on. The thunderbolt of Zeus and the cornucopia, symbol of prosperity, frequently appear on the coins. Perhaps it is this royal cult that was the real instrument of unification for a population of very different origins. The royal cult therefore had two levels: one Greek, especially in Alexandria, and one Egyptian in other sanctuaries of the country, and yet they do not contradict each other.

We have already spoken of Serapis and the role he played. But other Egyptian gods were as important, especially Isis (fig. 4), who had several temples in Alexandria, one at Cape Lochias, another on the



FIG. 3
Octadrachm with double portraits
of Ptolemy I and Berenike I (ob-
verse), Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II
(reverse). Third century B.C.
Alexandria, Graeco-Roman
Museum 25018.

FIG. 4
 Statue of Isis, from Ras el-Soda
 (Alexandria). Marble. Ca. A.D.
 140-150. Alexandria, Graeco-
 Roman Museum 25783.



island of Pharos. She was the protectress of mariners and of navigation. Her cult was extremely important in Alexandria already in the time of Alexander the Great. Arrian mentions that Alexander the Great erected a temple in honor of Isis the Egyptian. In the Hellenistic period Isis was certainly one of the most popular divinities of Egypt, a universal goddess. Before the foundation of Alexandria she already had a temple in Piraeus. She was identified by the Greeks with Demeter, and her image was mostly anthropomorphic. But she was also often identified with Aphrodite. It was during the Ptolemaic period in Alexandria that the Egyptian gods often got a new look. The Isis from Alexandria wore a dress of Egyptian origin but in a Greek fashion. She had no wig, her hair was floating or curled. She could be completely nude and reminds us then of an orientalizing Aphrodite. Her attributes, the *sistrion*, the discus, and the situla, were borrowed from an Egyptian repertoire but corresponded now to a Greek symbolism.



FIG. 5
Statue of Euthenia. Marble.
Ca. A.D. 160-180. Alexandria,
Graeco-Roman Museum 24124.

We could say the same of the Nile, which was now depicted in the Graeco-Roman tradition, no longer the Egyptian, and of Euthenia (fig. 5), who depicted abundance and fertility. The Egyptians in Alexandria quickly got used to the new look of their old gods, but in the country it took much longer, and it was only under the Romans that these images were spread widely, probably because of the coinage.

Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae

PARIS