Propagation of the Cult of Sarapis and Isis in Greece

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I. A New Inscription from Thessalonica

Charles Edson published in his recent fascicule of the *Inscriptiones Graecae* an inscription from the city of Thessalonica recording the introduction of the cult of the Egyptian gods to Opus.¹ This testimony, together with other writings on stone, was found during the excavation of the sanctuary of Sarapis soon after World War I but published only now. The inscription in question, although commented on and partly restored by Edson and Klaffenbach, needs further investigation as a curious piece of ancient religious propaganda. The text, with some supplements of my own, reads as follows:

I-II Century copy of an earlier text

----- ἵλιον . . .
    ----- φαξεα . . . κατὰ τὰν πρεσβείαν

[-----] κομίζεται ἐν οἰκον, ἐδοξε καθ’ ὑπὲς ἐπιστάντα
[ν παρ’ αὐ]τον Σάραπιν ἐπιτάζει διὸς παραγενόμενος ἐν Ὠποίντα
5 ν ἀναγείλῃ Εὐρυνόμων τῷ Τεμασθέευον ὑποδείκται αὐτόν τε καὶ
νν τὰν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ Εἰνι, τὰν τε ἐπιστολὰν τὰν ὅδον ὑπὸ τῶν ποτι-
ννον κεφαλαίων ἀναδῷ αὐτῷ· τὸν δὲ ἐγερθέντα βασιλέα τε τὸν
[νν δ]υερον καὶ διαποιεῖν τί πο λιτότεν ἐκτὶν διὰ τὸ ὑπάρχειν ἄυτῷ
ἀντίπο-

ν λειτεῖαν ὅτι Εὐρύνομον· καθυπνώσας δὲ πάλιν καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ ἱδόν

10 ν καὶ ἐπεργεῖεις τὰν τε ἐπιστολὰν εἰβρε ὑπὸ τῶν ποτικεφαλαίων
ν καθὼς αὐτῷ ἐτεκμάρθη· ἐπανελθὼν δὲ ἀνέδωκε τὰν ἐπιστολὰν

The document reveals that a certain Xenainetos came from the city of Opus to the shrine of Sarapis in Thessalonica to obtain advice on some problem, probably a matter of health. During his sleep in the dormitory, he dreamed that Sarapis approached him and put under his pillow a written message for Eurynomos, a man from Opus, whom the god charged with receiving him and his sister Isis into the city. Having awakened and fallen asleep again, Xenainetos had the same dream. He was perplexed by this vision because of enmity existing between him and Eurynomos. The record uses the term ἀντιπολειτεία, meaning opposition on the score of ideas or policy. Having returned home, Xenainetos conveyed the message of Sarapis to Eurynomos, who read it, talked with the messenger, and in spite of his embarrassment, after some hesitation decided to comply with the will of the god. Sarapis and Isis were installed in the house of a certain Sosinike. The document describes later the sequence of priestesses in the service of the Egyptian gods.

We find different methods of spreading the cult of Sarapis, but this...
document from Thessalonica exemplifies what scholars are accustomed to call ‘Himmelsbriefe’, or letters sent from heaven. Other letters supposedly from gods and used as a means of disseminating religious ideas and cults may serve to clarify the background of our text. (1) Aristides in his *Sacred Talks* reports that once he was ordered in a dream to seek advice on behalf of the health of his nurse, Philoumene, in Pergamum. Entering the sanctuary he found a letter at the feet of Asklepios’ statue, probably prescribing the cure. (2) Pausanias reports (from the archives of the sanctuary in Epidaurus) the story of Phalysios, the founder of the cult of Asklepios in Naupactus (10.38.13). Informed of this man’s blindness, Asklepios appeared to the poetess Anyto in a dream and handed her writing-tablets with the order to submit them to Phalysios for reading. When the blind man opened the tablets, his sight was restored. (3) This report recalls a detail from the story of the introduction of Sarapis into Delos. For a long time this cult had no decent sanctuary. Apollonios, the grandson of the founder, built the temple in spite of all manner of difficulties. In a critical moment Sarapis came to him in sleep and ordered him to search for some writing hidden in the frame of the door which should instruct him where and how to build the temple. (4) Among the papyri of Zenon there is a letter of a certain Zoilos about the construction of a temple of Sarapis in some coastal city. Consulting the god on behalf of the health of Apollonios, the finance minister of the Ptolemaic administration, Zoilos was approached by Sarapis in his sleep and was ordered to urge his sick master to build a sanctuary, dedicate a holy precinct, and install a priest to offer the sacrifices. Zoilos neglected to accomplish the mission and was himself punished with sickness. He was unable to transmit the order of the god until he recovered.

From lines 5 and 17–18 of the inscription from Thessalonica we learn that Sarapis sent a message to Opus asking that he be received into the city. The verb ἐποδέχεσθαι (lines 5 and 17) has an important

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6 2.394 K.: καὶ ἀμα λαμβάνω τινὰ ἐπιστολὴν πρὸ πολῶν κειμένην τοῦ Διώς Ἀσκληπιοῦ.
8 P. Cairo. ZEN. 59034. Fraser, *op. cit.* (supra n.1) 54 no.12.
history in the spread of Greek cults. Leto, mother of Apollo, wandered about looking for a place where she could give birth to her son. Nowhere did she find hospitality until she came to Delos. Eu­ripides' Bacchae describes the wandering of Dionysos through various lands in search of hospitality. We know something about the reception of Asklepios in Athens when he came there from Epidaurus about 420 B.C. Sophocles had been appointed as host to receive the god, and in reward for this service he was given after his death and heroization the title Dexion, 'Receiver'. Pausanias relates different kinds of welcome experienced by Demeter during her search for Kore. A certain Phythalos, a native of Attica, offered the goddess hospitality and was given in reward a fig tree. It was a common belief in antiquity that gods sometimes visited human beings, especially the good and just ones. We read in an inscription from Mantinea that the priestess of Demeter after the procession with the statue “received the goddess into her own house.” Livy gives us the description of the welcome and reception of the Mother of the Gods in Rome during the second Punic war (29.11.6-7). On the advice of the oracle of Delphi an embassy was sent to Galatia to bring the holy stone of the goddess, and an optimus vir (P. Scipio) was appointed to receive it in Rome. Another story of the reception of gods is reported by Diodorus (8.32.2). The Locrians, waging war against Croton, asked their mother city, Sparta, for help. The Lacedemonians, knowing the great strength of the Crotonians, refused to intervene militarily but offered instead to give the Dioscuri as helpers. The Locrian ambassadors took the reply as a good omen, accepted the aid, sacrificed and organized a reception for the gods on their ship, and sailed back home.

**Commentary**

Lines 18–19. The restoration is based on P. Lond. I 125.11: ἡ θεὸς ἡ καλομένη οἰκουρός. Sarapis was at first accepted as a god of the family of Sosinike, then some time later outsiders also joined this cult.

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10 Lines 769–70: τὸν δαίμον' οὖν τόυτο... ἄ δέσποτα, δέχου πόλει τῆς.
12 Paus. 1.37.2. Cf. 1.14.2; 2.18.3, 35.4; 7.27.9.
14 IG V. 2 265,21: ὑπεδέξατο καὶ τὸν θεὸν εἰς τὴν ἱδιὰν οἰκίαν καθὼς ἔστιν ἔθος τούς ἀεὶ γνω­μένους ἱερεῖς.
G. Klaffenbach proposed the reading \( \kappa[\alpha]\epsilon\mu\epsilon\tau\omega\chi\omega\nu\epsilon \). The right supplement, I think, should be \( \kappa[\alpha]\epsilon\mu\epsilon\tau\omega\chi\omega\nu\epsilon \). The familial cult had been opened to people not closely related. Cf. Dittenberg. SIG3 1125.11: \( \Lambda\iota\omega \ldots \mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\beta\omega\lambda\delta\varsigma \epsilon\mu\epsilon\tau\omega\chi\omega\nu\epsilon \). For the mysteries in the circles of Sarapis and Isis consult Th. Hopfner, RE 8 (1935) 133ff, and L. Vidmann, Isis und Sarapis bei den Griechen and Römern (RelVersVorarb 29, Berlin 1970) 124–38.

LINES 22–23. The verb \( \pi\rho\omicron\theta\omicron\nu\epsilon \) means here 'sacrifice in the name of somebody else'. See on the subject my Lois sacrées de l'Asie Mineure (Paris 1955) 125.

### II. Sarapis in Magnesia

We find another kind of propagation in the decree of Magnesia on the Maeander connected with the installation of the cult of Sarapis. This text has been published by many scholars, but without full explanation.\(^{15}\) I propose to read this document as follows:

Text

--- τὰ μὲν ἄλλα εἶναι

[πάντα κ]αθότι καὶ το[ἰς ἱερεῖς τῶν θεῶν ὅσοι θύε]-
tαι ἐν τῶι ἑνιαυτῶι [ἑκάστωι δημοσίαι. τὰ ὅ ὅματα]
5 τοῦ οἱ οἰκονόμοι Φαρσαλ[ἰων θυεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ δήμου, ἐν ἑκάστῃ]
[τ]ῶν ἐφορτών παραιτάντες [τὸ εἰς τὴν θυσίαν μεμεριμέ]-
[ν]· τὰ ὅ ὅθεν ἐκτάσεις καταναλικές[τ]ῶι[σ]αν ἐν τῶι ἱερῶι· κατὰ]
[δ]ὲ τὸν ἄλλον χρόνον προσμεθοῦσαι οἱ [θυσιάζοντες]
[τ]ὰ ἱερὰ καθότι γέγραπται· καταστήσει δὲ κ[αὶ ἱερά ἐν τῷ]
10 [τ]ὲμένει τῶι ἀνατεθνεῖτι τῶι θεῶι· λήψεται δ[ὲ τῶι θυμιέων]
[ἐ]ν τῶι τεμένει ἀφ’ ἑκάστου ἱερείου σκέλος καὶ [τῶι τιθέμενων]
[τ]ῷ[ε]θεῖ τὰ τρίτα μέρη· ἐν ἄλλω δὲ τόπωι μὴ [ποιεῖτο ἵε]-
[ρ]ῶν Σαράπιδος· εἰ δὲ μή, ὀφειλέτω τῶι δήμωι δ[ραχμάς — ]
[k]αὶ ὁ τόπος ἐκτό τῆς πόλεις· φανέτω [δὲ ὁ χρήσαν ἐπὶ τῷ]
15 [ἡ]μύει πρὸς τοὺς εὐθύνους, οἱ δὲ εὐθύνου [καὶ ὁ εὐθύς[ο]i εἰςαγόν].
[τ]ῶι[ν] εἰς τὸ καθ’ ἐξάμηνον παρασκευάσαν δ[ιακατήριον ἄφαι]-
[π]είτω[ν]σαν δὲ οἱ οἰκόνομοι έκ τῶν ἐφιάλων ω[ν[άρ] δραχ]-

\(^{15}\) O. Kern, Die Inschriften von Magnesia (Berlin 1900) 99; Dittenberg. SIG3 554; Sokolowski, op.cit. (supra p.445) 34; Fraser, op.cit. (supra n.1) 53 no.8; Vidmann, op.cit. (supra n.1) no.294.
The city of Magnesia is acknowledging the cult of Sarapis as a public institution and a certain Pharsalios as its official priest. This man earlier dedicated to Sarapis a precinct, probably on his own property, and planned to build a temple there. The city guarantees him victims for sacrifice during the feasts, grants the right to collect certain cultic requirements, and pays him with money from the sale of wood and food. On the other hand, Pharsalios agrees to appoint an auxiliary priest and to build something (I think a temple) in the precinct dedicated to Sarapis. He accepts also the obligation to build the chapel nowhere else than in the delimited place, or he will be fined and the potential site confiscated. This curious stipulation means that Pharsalios had been thwarted in his attempt to install the cult in a site other than the one agreed upon. Any misunderstanding on this point will be tried by a tribunal coming to Magnesia from abroad. 16

The dedication of the precinct, the building of the temple or chapel and the appointment of a priest figure as items in other documents related to the spread of the cult of Sarapis. So in Delos Apollonios, the

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grandson of the founder of the cult, had been facing long-time opposition in building a suitable temple to his god.\textsuperscript{17} The Zoilos mentioned above (cf. n.8) was urged by Sarapis to build something (probably a temple), to dedicate a precinct and to appoint a priest for the sacrifices. A fragment of an inscription from Ephesus mentions someone who accomplished all three requirements: \textit{idôs Katâ prôstagma toû theou toû ierô[v] vac kai tôn naôn wnikodâmêven, kai toû têmenos ânâdeixen ierôn, toû theou prostrάxantos, iereiûs genûmenos Plaunikâs Meukrâ-tous.}\textsuperscript{18} The clause about the building of a temple in the decree of Magnesia can be illustrated by an inscription from Syria.\textsuperscript{19} Three brothers, all priests of Sarapis, owned the precinct of their god in the city: \textit{têmenoc idôskrtos}.\textsuperscript{20} Certain people erected there statues or steles, paying taxes to the city, and the priests, fearing encroachment of the authorities on their property, protested and succeeded in winning their point. The tax in question was to be paid in the future not for placing the dedication but for the monument itself. We have another testimony of the opposition shown to the introduction of the Sarapis cult into the city of Histria.\textsuperscript{21} The acceptance of this cult had been sharply debated and resisted in the council; the decision could not be taken until an embassy had been sent to the oracle of Apollo in Chalcedon for advice on this question.

**Commentary**

**Line 3.** For the supplement cf. Dittenberg. SIG\textsuperscript{3} 1015 = \textit{my Lois sacrées de l'Asie Mineure} nos. 1, 5; 73, 10 and 26.

**Line 5.** I think that Pharsalios was the official priest and performed the sacral duties during the Sarapieia on behalf of the city. We can compare here the decree of Histria honoring a certain Diogenes whose father dedicated the temple to the Muses and left money for the celebration of \textit{Mouseia: eî[j[a]v tôn ierâ\mu Mousoâv kai proboûen tôc Mouceîous}.\textsuperscript{22} See also my book quoted above on no.24 A 25-30. The feast of Sarapis became a public event, all

\textsuperscript{17} IG XI.4 1299. SIG\textsuperscript{3} 663 and 664. Cf. supra n.7.

\textsuperscript{18} J. Keil, \textit{AngWien} (1954) 217 no.3. Fraser, \textit{op.cit. (supra n.1)} 37 n.4. But see also L. Robert, \textit{BullEp} 1955, 193.


\textsuperscript{20} For this term cf. IG XII suppl. 37 n.124,18: \textit{êxou [dè xwrip]ov [I]dôsktto\nu ... kal têsaueace kai eî toû[ou têmenôc] te kai naôv.}


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Histria}, Monografie Arheologicâ 1 (Bucharest 1954) 477 lines 17-18.
participants were entertained, and perhaps for this reason meat from the sacrifices could not be exported from the sacred precinct.

Line 8. O. Kern restored here οἰκονόμοι because he was thinking of the lease of the cult by these state officials; Dittenberger guessed at victims which the οἰκονόμοι were furnishing. Both opinions seem mistaken because of the middle form of the verb προσμεθῶσθαι. P. Stengel restored τερεῖκ, thinking of priests who sometimes furnished additional requisites for use in the sacrifices. 23 I suppose that the τερέα are victims which were usually bought by people wanting to celebrate a private sacrifice; I therefore read θυσίαντουσκε. 24

Line 9. In my edition of this text in 1955 I restored τερέα, and I prefer to retain this reading. Pharsalios, the founder and main priest of the cult had to appoint an auxiliary, as happened in many other religious groups and cults. 25 Such a priest in the service of Sarapis in Delos was called φιλερεῖκ. 26 My supposition is based on the rule in line 12, according to which the priest, i.e. the main priest, receives two-thirds of all dedicated parts of victims; one-third went certainly to the auxiliary priest. Such an arrangement was made between the priests serving as partners in the same cult. 27

Lines 12–13. I read τερόν instead of βωμόν as proposed by Kern. I think that the building of a temple or chapel was more important for the establishment of a cult than that of an altar. See above p.447.

Lines 21ff. I think that the lease of this cult was introduced some time later.

Line 26. For the verb as restored cf. IG XII.2 511 a 1–6, SIG 1096 n.7.


Lines 29–31. For the supplements cf. SIG 664,8; 783, 36; 1218,8–9. 28

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23 Hermes 49 (1914) 95 and BPW 16 (1896) 686.
25 Cf. Sokolowski, op.cit. (supra n.24) 87, the commentary.
27 Cf. HThR 50 (1957) 136ff.
28 I thank Professor Herbert C. Youtie for kindly reading this paper and for helping me with his admirable knowledge.