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Beware Greeks Bearing Gods

Serapis as a Cross-Cultural Deity

caelum, non animum, mutant, qui trans mare currunt

It is their climate, not their mind, that men change when they rush across the sea.

(Hor. *Epist.* 1.11.27)

Serapis, a syncretic deity who embodied aspects of multiple Hellenic and Egyptian deities, is typically viewed as the ingenious creation of Ptolemy I Soter. The arrival of the new god into Alexandria has been perceived as a pragmatic device, a god specifically created to unite the indigenous Egyptian population with new Hellenic immigrants.¹ Whether Ptolemy was responsible for the arrival and appearance of Serapis is difficult to determine. The visual and

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¹ Kahil 1996, 77.

literary evidence suggests, however, that the introduction of the cult of Serapis failed to unify the diverse inhabitants of Alexandria through worship and patronage of a shared god.

The newly founded city of Alexandria in Egypt (c. 331 BCE) was occupied by people of many cultures and languages.² According to Eleni Fassa, such a place must be ‘characterised not by occasional contact, but by a demand, either internal or imposed, for continuous coexistence’.³ Papyri of Ptolemaic date provide a record of immigrants in Alexandria from over 200 places in the Greek world, including the Black Sea, Syracuse, Macedon, and potentially even Marseille.⁴ The foundation of a city such as Alexandria with a diverse population required measures to unite the populace. Aristotle, a tutor of both Alexander and Ptolemy, provided advice about what the institution of a new rule of law required (*Pol.* 6.1319b):

...different tribes and brotherhoods must be created outnumbering the old ones, and the celebrations of private religious rites must be grouped together into a small number of public celebrations, and every device must be employed to make all the people as much as possible intermingled with one another, and to break up the previously existing groups of associates.⁵

In contrast to the deliberate machinations of his leader and childhood friend, Alexander the Great, who sought to unite the people of East and West through intermarriage, ‘Ptolemy certainly never sought, in any way, to fuse the races of his kingdom’.⁶ Eric Turner agrees that ‘fusion or integration was neither a conscious element of policy, nor a result of the presence of

² The term ‘Alexandria ad Aegyptum’ was the subject of scholarly debate during the middle of the twentieth century. A short note summarising the debate about the location of Alexandria is found in Fraser 1949, 56. More recently, Macdonald 2021 has provided a detailed analysis of the contentious phrase.

³ Fassa 2013, 117.

⁴ Lewis 1986, 10.

⁵ Translation by Rackham 1944.

⁶ Ellis 1994, 64.

the Ptolemies in Egypt'.⁷ Some scholars, such as Jean-Yves Empereur and Christine Michael Havelock, argue that Ptolemy created Serapis to aid in the development of a harmonious relationship between the different groups of people living in Alexandria.⁸ The Athenian tyrant, Peisistratos (sixth century BCE), had secured stability in Attica by using religion to forge a sense of civic and political unity through events such as the Panathenaia in honour of *Athena Polias*.⁹ Alexandria did not have a patron god of the city, but the cult of Serapis could have been deployed in a similar fashion. In this city, as elsewhere, clubs and social groups were organised around cult rituals, including the calendar of festival days that were celebrated together.¹⁰ Papyri found at Oxyrhynchus reveal invitations to banquets in honour of Serapis, with some apparently arranged as celebrations of gratitude to the god for a happy event that had occurred.¹¹

Jerome Pollitt and John Stambaugh, among others, disagree with the suggestion that Serapis was created by Ptolemy I Soter, with Stambaugh asserting that the available evidence requires the use of terms such as 'the creation of the Sarapis cult' or 'the introductions of a Hellenised image'.¹² This pre-Ptolemaic Serapis is difficult to identify, and challenging these assertions is similarly difficult. The absence of Serapis from surviving texts of mythology — compounded by the lack of narrative tales about his activities as a god — aligns with the assessment of Serapis as a synthesised creation.

Scholars generally agree that Serapis derives, at least in name, from a conflation of the Egyptian gods Apis and Osiris. The alternate spellings of 'Serapis' and 'Sarapis' are used

⁷ Turner 1972, 167.

⁸ Empereur 1998, 90; Havelock 1981, 4.

⁹ Garland 1992, 39.

¹⁰ Lewis 1986, 31.

¹¹ See Youtie 1948, 14 for discussion of relevant papyri: P. Oxy. I, no ; III, 523; XII, 1484; XIV, 1755; P. Oslo. III, 157.

¹² Stambaugh 1972, 13; Pollitt 1986, 179.

interchangeably in ancient inscriptions and modern scholarship, with the former being more prevalent in English scholarship. The etymology of the name was clearly defined by Ulrich Wilcken in 1906, and there have been no significant challenges to ‘Serapis’ deriving from ‘Osiris-Apis’ in the years since.¹³ An alternate theory from the fourth century philosopher Rufinus of Aquileia provides a more unique interpretation (*Hist.* 11.23):

...others claim to have found in Greek histories of old that a certain Apis, the head of a house or a king located in Memphis in Egypt, provided ample food from his own store to the citizens when the grain ran out in Alexandria during a famine. When he died, they founded a temple in his honor in Memphis in which a bull, the symbol of the ideal farmer, is fed; it has certain markings on its hide and is called “Apis” after him. As for the *soros* or coffin in which his body lay, they brought it down to Alexandria and by putting together *soros* and Apis they at first called him “Sorapis,” but this was later corrupted to “Serapis.” God knows what truth if any there is in all this.¹⁴

It is important to recognise that this account is written by a Christian who was recording the destruction of the Serapeum and the temples of other pagan gods in Alexandria. It is, however, an interesting record and, despite the divergences from other texts (the coffin, *soros*, appears to be unique to this account), it is also an account of the god Serapis being the result of an amalgamation with the Apis bull. Ann Nicgorski postulates that Alexander the Great may have encountered the deity Osiris-Apis (or Oserapis) being worshipped in the vicinity where he was soon to found the city of Alexandria.¹⁵ Additionally, Arrian reports in his *Anabasis* that Alexander made sacrifices to Apis at Memphis (3.1.4). It is possible that the village of Rhakotis

¹³ Wilcken 1906, 249–251.

¹⁴ Translation by Amidon 1997.

¹⁵ Nicgorski 2014, 153–4.

(or Rhacotis), situated beside the site of the new city, may have once contained a sanctuary of Serapis at an early date, but little archaeological evidence remains to test this assertion.¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria described Ptolemy II Philadelphus receiving a statue and that ‘the king set it up upon the promontory which they now call Rhacotis, where stands the honoured temple of Sarapis; and the spot is close to the burial-places’ (*Protr.* IV). A series of bilingual foundation plaques excavated at the site of the Great Serapeum at Alexandria record ‘Sarapis’ in Greek, accompanied by ‘Osorapis’ in Egyptian hieroglyphs that date to the reign of Ptolemy IV (221–204 BCE).¹⁷ For Stefan Pfeiffer, this dedicatory inscription equates Osiris-Apis with Serapis.¹⁸ Does this mean that the Egyptians also recognised Serapis as a manifestation of Oser-Apis, or the underworld form of the Apis bull?

Alan Samuel describes Ptolemaic Egypt as representing a ‘continuation of Hellenic patterns, rather than a radical break from the past’.¹⁹ Similarly, Stambaugh describes the cult of Serapis as appealing almost exclusively ‘to Greeks and those of other racial stock who had become Hellenised’.²⁰ It is important to recognise that Greek identity is associated with shared culture and language rather than ethnicity.²¹ Ambitious Egyptians adopted the culture of the ruling class if they wished to advance their careers, and there was a tacit assumption in Alexandria that the Greek language was superior.²² For those in Alexandria, participation in cult worship also served as a declaration of loyalty to the governing family.²³ Within the Ptolemaic population registers, the senior roles in administration and finances were held by those who

¹⁶ Dunand 2000, 152.

¹⁷ Renberg and Bubelis 2011, 190.

¹⁸ Pfeiffer 2008, 39.

¹⁹ Samuel 1989, 83.

²⁰ Stambaugh 1972, 102.

²¹ For an overview of the composition of Hellenic populations through the analysis of population registers, see Clarysse and Thompson 2006 volumes 1 and 2.

²² Samuel 1993, 203; Momigliano 1975, 7.

²³ Lang 2012, 64.

were either Greek or considered ‘tax-Greek’.²⁴ Those recognised as Hellenes by the ruling administration were rewarded with a favourable tax-status; this was occasionally extended to other groups, including Egyptians.²⁵

In the Egyptian sphere before Roman rule, the Ptolemies and Serapis were linked. Dedications termed ‘hyper-style’ and directed to the gods for the ruling family, or ‘double-dedications’ which are dedicated to the gods and the ruling family, are rare outside of Ptolemaic Egypt.²⁶ Inscriptions to Serapis specifically are primarily in Greek, even those dated well after Latin was also a common language in the region.²⁷ Philippe Borgheaud and Youri Volokhine note that the lack of temples built to Serapis by the Egyptians in the Ptolemaic period is evidence for the disinterest in the god, further recognising that Serapis would appear much like a counterfeit version of the Egyptian god.²⁸ It is clear that Egyptians never saw the Hellenic Serapis as a local deity, whereas those from Greece — and later those from Rome — associated him with the centre of his cult and monument production, Alexandria, and viewed him as the consort of Isis.²⁹ Serapis appears in mythology as a liminal god, a mediator between the Greeks and Egyptians, and between the divine and the human. Through occupying this position, Serapis was also a god of paradox, being simultaneously local and foreign.³⁰

The Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, written and added to from the fourth century onwards, refers to a priest being appointed ‘for the great gods Sarapis and Apis’, indicating that the two were linked but separate beings (Ps. Callisth. 284).³¹ This contention is further

²⁴ Clarysse and Thompson 2006, 344.

²⁵ Clarysse and Thompson 2006, 138.

²⁶ Fassa 2015, 134.

²⁷ Pavlenko and Mullen 2015, 119.

²⁸ Borgeaud and Volokhine 2000, 61.

²⁹ Hornbostel 1973, 20; Pfeiffer 2008, 392.

³⁰ Fassa 2013, 11.

³¹ This is the Armenian version of the text, closely related to *Alexander A*.

supported by the conversion of the temple of Apis in the necropolis at Memphis into a Serapeum in the third century BCE, with additional sculptural details serving to ‘Hellenise’ the structure.³² The burial niches used to entomb the Apis bulls at Memphis, however, are not consistent in size with the ones at Alexandria: they are far too small and appear to have been used to bury the mummified dogs sacred to Anubis.³³ Even at the Serapeum in Alexandria the worship was not directed solely towards the Greco-Egyptian Serapis.



Figure 1: *Statue of Osiris-Apis*, c. 131–138 CE, Marble.³⁴

A partial statue of Osiris-Apis in the Vatican Museum depicts a Janus head with a bull's head on one side and the head of Osiris on the other. This attribution is similarly problematic since scholars have identified the human side of the bust as being female and therefore that it is likely

³² Fassa 2013, 124.

³³ Pierce 2007, 243–244.

³⁴ Where copyright permissions were unable to be obtained, artwork by the author has been substituted. All efforts have been made to record accurate likenesses. See pages 53–54 for detailed information about images used.

to be Isis rather than Osiris.³⁵ A portrayal of Antinous as Osiris is another highly credible possibility. Neither of the sculpted portraits on this bust share any similarity with the Hellenistic or Roman depictions of Serapis. Instead, they utilise Egyptian iconography. Despite this, the statue has been dated by the Vatican Museum to the reign of Hadrian and was excavated at his villa at Tivoli. A marble bull was dedicated by Hadrian to Serapis at Alexandria, suggesting that the Roman emperor was familiar with the god in Egypt. If the two pieces are dated as being roughly contemporary, this reinforces the recognition of the Apis bull as a deity of importance to the Roman rulers of Egypt.



Figure 2: *Statue of Hermanubis*, first–second century CE, Marble.

Another syncretic deity of Alexandria, Hermanubis, a conflation of Hermes and Anubis — possibly due to their roles as psychopomps — is attested to by Plutarch and appears with the head of a dog in a statue in the Vatican (*De Iside* 61). There are relatively few depictions of

³⁵ Ashton 2010, 219.

Hermanubis in comparison to Serapis, and for this reason it seems that he did not gain similar widespread patronage or recognition. This is likely because the Hellenised population were accustomed to seeing their gods in human forms, whereas the Egyptians already had the jackal-headed Anubis in the position that Hermanubis would fill. Similarly, Osiris, or Osiris-Apis, already occupied the niche of Serapis.

Despite the Egyptian name, Serapis displays attributes that are more commonly seen in Hellenic deities. There is a precedent for the conflation of Greek and Egyptian deities, with Herodotus giving the Greek names of the Egyptian gods he encountered. In his *Histories*, the goddess Isis became “Demeter in the Greek language” (2.59). Similarly, Herodotus described how other gods were viewed as being identical to those of the Greek pantheon, just bearing a different name (2.144):

Before these men, they said, the rulers of Egypt were gods, but none had been contemporary with the human priests. Of these gods one or another had in succession been supreme; the last of them to rule the country was Osiris’ son Horus, whom the Greeks call Apollo; he deposed Typhon, and was the last divine king of Egypt. Osiris is, in the Greek language, Dionysus.³⁶

Serapis is depicted as an anthropomorphic being in Greek garb, as opposed to the theriomorphic Apis bull and other indigenous Egyptian gods. His hair and beard are curly and somewhat unkempt in marked contrast to the highly stylised facial hair that appears in Egyptian art of a similar period.³⁷

The visual language used to convey the appearance of Serapis is inherently Greek rather than Egyptian. The Fayum portrait in Figure 3 (below) shows a coloured image of Serapis with his

³⁶ Translation by Godly 1920.

³⁷ BM 1950,0104.3 and BM 1875,0517.152 are two examples.

modius, beard, and unkempt hair. The lack of grey in the hair implies youth and vigour, and these qualities are in keeping with his role as a god of abundance. Elsewhere, Cerberus or other three-headed animals appear beside the god regularly, as does an eagle either on top of the *modius* or on the ground beside the god. These visual attributes associate Serapis with Zeus and Hades, although they omit Poseidon who represents the third member of the powerful Greek trinity of elder gods.³⁸ Outside of Egypt, Zeus-Serapis became a widely accepted syncretic deity, although references are rare before the end of the Hellenistic period.³⁹

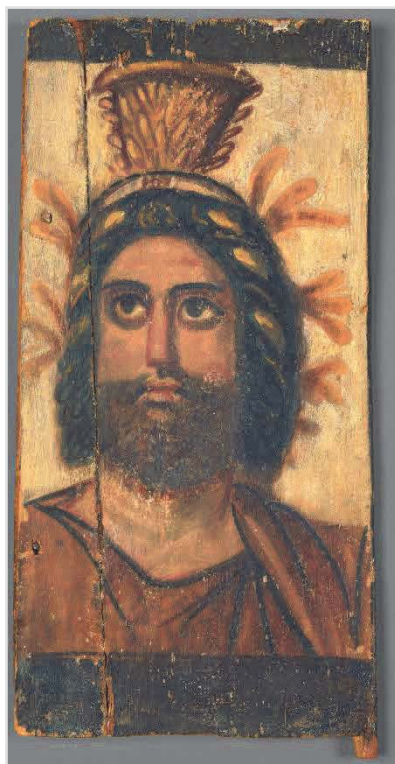


Figure 3: *Panel with Painted Image of Serapis*, 100–200 CE, Tempera on wood.

The appearance of Serapis is entirely in keeping with Greek conventions of elder male gods. Without the attribute of a *modius* or *calathus* upon his head, it would be very easy for misidentification as Zeus, Poseidon, or Hades to occur. The *modius*, a cup used for measuring

³⁸ Appearance-wise, Serapis and Poseidon looked similar, but there are no clear cultural associations between the two gods in the same way as between Serapis and Zeus or Serapis and Hades.

³⁹ Lang 2012, 64.

grain, is a symbol of fertility and in keeping with similar headdress iconography already in use in Egypt such as the *atef* crown or the solar disc. The appearance of such an accessory is not too unusual later, but at the time of the founding of Alexandria the *modius*-as-hat was more commonly seen in association with female figures, including the Egyptian Mut and terracotta figurines from Greece, Cyprus, and South Italy. Due to some difficulty in identifying early images of Serapis wearing a *modius* headdress, it may be assumed that this accoutrement is a later addition to his iconography and is not fully codified until the Roman period, where it is associated with abundance. The terracotta shown in Figure 4 (below) depicts Serapis wearing the *atef* crown of Osiris, with the central *hedjet* and feathers on the sides. There is some damage to the sculpture, and this makes it difficult to distinguish if there are also horns on the crown. The figure of Harpocrates beneath the right hand of the god is almost obscured by the damage but it is evident that the seated figure is not accompanied by Cerberus.



Figure 4: *Serapis and Harpocrates*, 300–200 BCE, Terracotta.

A gold medallion held at the Brooklyn Museum depicts Isis and Serapis and is dated after 300 BCE (Figure 5, below). This artefact is evidence of the early Ptolemaic iconography of the god. Serapis wears an *atef* rather than a *modius*, a headdress worn by Osiris in ancient Egyptian art. The headdress is different, however, being much smaller and more of a decorative item used for identification rather than a crown.



Figure 5: *Medallion with Busts of Isis and Serapis*, after 300 BCE, Gold.

The association between Isis and Serapis is consistent throughout the Hellenistic and Roman period and is also a continuation of the earlier representations of Isis and Osiris, who appear as husband and wife.⁴⁰ On a coin attributed to the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator, Isis and Serapis appear together once more, and Serapis wears the *atef* crown paired with a wreath.⁴¹ This identification of the headdress is made cautiously by Thomas Landvatter, who recognised that earlier scholars interpreted it as a *pshent* — the double crown of upper and lower Egypt — or

⁴⁰ BM 1950,0104.3 and BM 1875,0517.152 are two examples.

⁴¹ SNG *Cop.* 1287

as a stylised lotus.⁴² David Sear lists this as Serapis being ‘surmounted by a small cap of Osiris’.⁴³ The association between the ruling Ptolemaic family and the gods Serapis and Isis, is reinforced through the use of minted coinage, which could spread further than the influence of any single cult statue or building.



Figure 6: *Ptolemy IV AR Tetradrachm* SNG Cop 197, Svoronos 1124, B.M.C. 6.79.

For Fassa, the cult of Serapis served as a chameleon-like construction that shifted and changed to meet the needs of the communities to which it was introduced.⁴⁴ As a syncretic deity combining elements of Greek and Egyptian gods, he was anthropomorphised and depicted according to Greek conventions.⁴⁵ Among a very long list of gods conflated and associated with Serapis are Greek deities such as Zeus, Asklepius, Hades, and Helios, as well as the Egyptian Apis and Osiris. Serapis supplants and melds with Osiris as the spouse of Isis, and

⁴² Landvatter 2012, 61–63.

⁴³ Sear 1951, 741.

⁴⁴ Fassa 2013, 117.

⁴⁵ Green 1990, 406.

they are often depicted with Harpocrates/Horus as their child.⁴⁶ This association with Osiris and Hades is delineated in the *Histories* of Tacitus, where the cult statue is brought to Alexandria from Sinope following a dream of Ptolemy Soter (4.83). Tacitus writes (4.84):

Many regard the god himself as identical with Aesculapius, because he cures the sick; some as Osiris, the oldest god among these peoples; still more identify him with Jupiter as the supreme lord of all things; the majority, however, arguing from the attributes of the god that are seen on his statute[sic] or from their own conjectures, hold him to be Father Dis.⁴⁷

Significant in this passage — and the preceding description of the movement of the statue to Alexandria — is the suggestion that the Greeks associated Serapis with Hades rather than Osiris. This seems unusual because if Osiris and Hades/Pluto were viewed as the same figure, then it would make sense for the gods to be syncretised rather than adding a new figure with a new name to the established pantheon. Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.84) is informed that the god's cult statue comes from another place and is installed in a location where there was formerly a shrine to Serapis and Isis. This gives a priestly authority to the story and suggests that Serapis was present in Egypt before the Ptolemies, although Tacitus seems to prefer the association with Dispatēr.⁴⁸ Some scholars, particularly Anna Swiderek, have proposed a pre-Ptolemaic origin.⁴⁹ This pre-Ptolemaic Serapis is more likely another appearance of Osiris-Apis or Oser-Apis rather than a figure that is recognisable as Serapis.

Writing during the Roman period, Tacitus makes it clear that the origins of the god are uncertain and that he is presenting the most popular version of events, which is merely one of

⁴⁶ Stambaugh 1972, 4.

⁴⁷ Translation by Rolfe 1914.

⁴⁸ Luke 2019, 200.

⁴⁹ Swiderek 1975, 670–675.

many. This Sinope tradition only describes the introduction of a statue to Alexandria, not the introduction of an entirely new god.⁵⁰ It is difficult to reconcile the concept of Serapis as an Egyptian god identified by the ruling Ptolemies because he is also a foreign god and one belonging to the Greek pantheon, just under a new name. Plutarch describes the identification of the statue (*De Iside* 28):

When it had been conveyed to Egypt and exposed to view, Timotheus, the expositor of sacred law, and Manetho of Sebennytyus, and their associates, conjectured that it was the statue of Pluto, basing their conjecture on the Cerberus and the serpent with it, and they convinced Ptolemy that it was the statue of none other of the gods but Serapis.⁵¹

The identification of the statue as Serapis by both Greek and Egyptian religious authorities legitimates the god by being visually recognisable to members of both cultures. Manetho was the Egyptian priest and author of the *Aegyptica*, whereas Timotheus was a member of the Eumolpid family which held the hereditary responsibility for administering the Eleusinian Mysteries, and which he likely introduced into the Alexandrian suburb of Eleusis.⁵² The rites of Serapis also included a ‘mystery’ aspect in distinct contrast to the traditional Egyptian patterns of veneration where there were secret rites accessible only to the priests and not to the general populace and worshippers.⁵³ It can only be assumed that the shared knowledge and experience of these rites further encouraged a sense of community among devotees.

Plutarch conflates Serapis and Hades in his account, saying that the statue of the god took ‘the name which Pluto bears among the Egyptians, that of Serapis’ (*De Iside* 28). It is still unknown

⁵⁰ Stambaugh 1972, 9.

⁵¹ Translation by Babbitt 1936.

⁵² Thompson 2018, 18.

⁵³ Burkert 1987, 40.

whether the Egyptians recognised Hades as being the same as Osiris at this time or if this syncretism was enhanced by the appearance of Serapis. Pfeiffer describes Serapis as being an *interpretatio Graeca* of the Egyptian Osiris.⁵⁴ Aside from functioning as a chthonic deity, Serapis was also linked to both healing and divination through his association with Osiris and Hades. Strabo, writing in the first century BCE, reports that at that time the temple of Serapis in Canopus was (17.1.17):

...held in great veneration, and celebrated for the cure of diseases; persons even of the highest rank confide in them, and sleep there themselves on their own account, or others for them. Some persons record the cures, and others the veracity of the oracles which are delivered there.⁵⁵

In Strabo's account, Serapis possesses the healing aspect of Asklepius. According to Diogenes Laertius, Demetrius of Phaleron is described as having his sight restored by Serapis, after which he composed poems dedicated to the god (5.76). Similarly, both Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.81) and Suetonius (*Vesp.* 7.2–3) record that the Roman emperor Vespasian was responsible for several healings after seeking guidance about the stability of his position.⁵⁶ One of the afflicted had an injured hand and, 'prompted by the same god, begged Caesar to step and trample on it' (Tac. *Hist.* 4.81). This healing ensured that the cult of Serapis functioned to enhance and aid in the legitimisation of authority for both the Emperor and the god. A variety of coins minted by Hadrian in Alexandria depict Serapis either on one side or with the two figures beside each other, deferring to the common Roman motif of Serapis with the *modius*-as-hat.⁵⁷ In the Roman period, the cult of Serapis also represented the abundance of grain being transported from Egypt

⁵⁴ Pfeiffer 2008, 395.

⁵⁵ Hamilton and Falconer 1903.

⁵⁶ Henrichs 1968, 54–55.

⁵⁷ For example: RPC III 3959, RPC III 5662, RPC 5789.

to Rome, a continuing occupation for the emperors.⁵⁸ The Romans harnessed this association with abundance and aligned themselves with the god, with coins issued from the reign of Nero onwards often depicting Serapis.⁵⁹ The god was worshipped far beyond Alexandria and received patronage from beyond the Greco-Egyptian sphere. This ongoing association between Serapis and Roman authority remained in place until the rise of Christianity.

Although the healing powers of Serapis are emphasised in our surviving texts, he was not exclusively a god of healing like Asklepius. Arrian, a historian who wrote during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, recounts in his *Anabasis* a section of the lost *Royal Journals* where companions of Alexander the Great sought healing for their leader and ‘slept the night in the temple of Sarapis to solicit the god’s answer’ (7.26.2). There is also evidence from Oxyrhynchus which reveals that until the third century CE, the local Egyptian population — or at the very least, a resident Hellenic population — were also frequenting Oracles to seek answers to their problems and advice from the god.⁶⁰ Serapis’ role in divination has led scholars such as Charles Bradford Welles to suggest that it was Serapis rather than Homer who appeared to Alexander the Great in a dream and told him to found Alexandria.⁶¹

The demotic text known as *The Oracle of the Potter* provides an Egyptian perspective on the Greek rulers of Egypt and their unwanted incursions into religious life.⁶² The text survives in the form of an ancient Greek translation dating from around 130 BCE.⁶³ It is assumed that the original text was written in demotic due to the negative attitude towards the Greek foreigners, described as ‘belt wearers’, likely in reference to the ethnically diverse Hellenistic personnel

⁵⁸ Aufforth 2013, 29–30.

⁵⁹ Stambaugh 1972, 18; for example: RPC 5274, RPC 5279.

⁶⁰ Frankfurter 1998, 161.

⁶¹ Welles 1950, 276.

⁶² Dillery 2004, 256.

⁶³ Koenon 1984, 9.

of both Alexander and the Ptolemies.⁶⁴ The last line of the text — which confirms that it was ‘translated as b[e]st as possible’ — also makes it clear that this is written from an Egyptian perspective.⁶⁵ In this oracle, the arrival of a foreign ruler to ‘this city’ (Alexandria) signifies the start of Egypt’s disasters. The city, it states, by ‘moulding gods anew will create for itself its own idol’.⁶⁶ This apocalyptic text reveals an undercurrent of antipathy towards the ‘belt-wearing’ foreigners, as well as confirmation that the Greeks were remaking or ‘moulding’ gods, a likely reference to the advent of Serapis. Samuel identifies a strain of cultural chauvinism among the new arrivals to Egypt, expressed through the resistance to learning additional languages.⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, this would lead to increased animosity between indigenous and immigrant populations, and the apocalyptic oracle predicting punishments and torments upon the foreigners reflects this sentiment.

The philosopher Antoninus predicted that ‘even the great and holy temples of Serapis would pass into formless darkness and be transformed’ (Eunap. VS. 471). In 391 CE the Bishop Theophilus instigated Roman troops who destroyed the Serapeum at Alexandria and brought an end to one of the last remaining vestiges of pagan cult practice.⁶⁸ Rufinus of Aquileia (c. 344–411) records that ‘on the site of Serapis’s tomb the unholy sanctuaries were leveled, and on the one side there rose a martyr’s shrine, on the other a church’ (*Hist.* 11.27). In the place where the great god of Alexandria’s sanctuary had once stood there now remains little more than the evidence of the temple foundations.

Despite his Greek appearance and attributes, Serapis never existed as an independently Greek

⁶⁴ Kerkeslager 1998, 68.

⁶⁵ Cited in Beyerle 2016, 176.

⁶⁶ Cited in Ladynin 2016, 164.

⁶⁷ Samuel 1989, 83.

⁶⁸ Empereur 1998, 95–6.

deity.⁶⁹ He is best viewed as a god of Alexandria, whose cult was strongly associated with the ruling Ptolemaic Dynasty, and this royal patronage conferred legitimacy in both directions. Although the local Egyptians were not deliberately excluded from the cult, they would not have recognised Serapis as a local god due to his foreign attributes and appearance. Serapis was a Greek god to the Egyptians and an Egyptian god to the Greeks and Romans. He did not unify the populace in any distinctive way, but we cannot discount how he represented the multi-faceted character of ancient Alexandria.

⁶⁹ Stambaugh 1972, 44.

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Images

Figure 1

Statue of Osiris-Apis, c. 131–138 CE, Marble.

50 × 37 × 24 cm, 22807

Vatican Museum, Rome

Image by Author.

Figure 2

Statue of Hermanubis, first–second century CE, Marble

155 × 50 × 28 cm, 22840

Vatican Museum, Rome

Image by Author.

Figure 3

Panel with Painted Image of Serapis, 100–200 CE, Tempera on wood

39.1 × 19.1 × 1.6 cm (15 3/8 × 7 1/2 × 5/8 in.), 74.AP.21

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California

Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Figure 4

Serapis and Harpokrates, 300–200 BCE, Terracotta

17.5 × 8.54 × 3.8 cm, EA37562

The British Museum, London, United Kingdom

Image by Author.

Figure 5

Medallion with Busts of Isis and Serapis, after 300 BCE, Gold

1 1/8 × 15/16 × 1/4 in. (2.8 × 2.4 × 0.6 cm), 73.85

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund.

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Figure 6

Ptolemy IV AR Tetradrachm.

SNG *Cop* 197, Svoronos 1124, B.M.C. 6.79

Image by Author.