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The Greek form Sarapis ([Σάρραπις](#); Sárapis), and in later sources **Serapis** ([Σέρραπις](#); Sérapis), derives from the combination Wsjr-Hp (Osiris - Apis [1]), which is ...

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When I first made contact with this angel, I received an impression that it was the “Energy of Achievement,” and when I asked its name, I saw the signature of Serapis.

Price, John Randolph (2010-11-24). *Angels Within Us: A Spiritual Guide to the Twenty-Two Angels That Govern Our Everyday Lives* (p. 107). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Σέραπις

Σάραπις

At Nineveh, in the library of King Assurbanipal (5,000 BC), a rich collection of books on oneiromancy (or the interpretation of dreams) was used by Artemidorus. In the oneiromantic science of the time, there was already a technique, an interpretative reading of the dream context: to fly was interpreted as a way of escaping from a dangerous situation; to dream of flying was therefore the sign of that dangerous situation. It is possible to deduce the moral principles of certain interpretations of that time, already implied in the dream narrative: to dream of drinking wine meant to have a short life, while to dream of drinking water was the sign of a long life. Such a principle denotes the presence in the dreams of a 'social', critical character, corresponding to what, since Freud, we call the 'super-ego'. The system of values of the time belonged to the grammar of the dream discourse, just as did a certain socio-political and religious interpretation. In Egyptian and Mesopotamian society dreams played an important role. In Egypt divination through dreams was officially recognized. The Egyptian 'Book of the Dead' takes account of the 'world of dreams' and its interpretation. There is even mention of miraculous cures through dreams in which certain gods intervened. The Egyptian god of dreams was Serapis. A temple, the 'Serapeum', was dedicated to him. At Memphis too (in 3,000 BC), in one of the most important temples of the city, there was an oracle for the interpretation of dreams.

[The Theatre of Dream](#) (page 24)

By Salomon Resnik

Serapis

For other usages, see Serapis (disambiguation).

Serapis (Σέρραπις, Attic/Ionian Greek) or **Sarapis** (Σά-



Marble bust of Serapis wearing a modius (Louvre)

ραπις, Doric Greek) is a Graeco-Egyptian god. Serapis was devised during the 3rd century BC on the orders of Ptolemy I of Egypt^[1] as a means to unify the Greeks and Egyptians in his realm. The god was depicted as Greek in appearance, but with Egyptian trappings, and combined iconography from a great many cults, signifying both abundance and resurrection. A serapeum (Greek *serapeion*) was any temple or religious precinct devoted to Serapis. The *cultus* of Serapis was spread as a matter of deliberate policy by the Ptolemaic kings, who also built an immense Serapeum in Alexandria.

However, there is evidence which implies Serapis existed before the Ptolemies came to power in Alexandria - a temple of Sarapis (or Roman Serapis) in Egypt is mentioned in 323 BCE by both Plutarch (*Life of Alexander*, 76) and Arrian (*Anabasis*, VII, 26, 2). The common assertion that Ptolemy “created” the deity is derived from sources which describe him erecting a statue of Sarapis in Alexandria: this statue enriched the texture of the Sarapis conception by portraying him in both Egyptian and Greek style.^[2] Though Ptolemy I may have created the cult of Sarapis and endorsed him as a patron of the Ptolemaic dynasty and Alexandria, Sarapis was a syncretistic deity derived from the worship of the Egyptian Osiris and Apis (Osiris + Apis = Oserapis/Sarapis)^[3] and also gained attributes from other deities, such as chthonic powers linked to the Greek Hades and Demeter, and benevolence linked to Dionysus.

Serapis continued to increase in popularity during the Roman period, often replacing Osiris as the consort of Isis in temples outside Egypt. In 389, a mob led by the Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria destroyed the Alexandrian Serapeum, but the cult survived until all forms of pagan religion were suppressed under Theodosius I in 391.

1 About the god

“Serapis” is the only form used in Latin,^[4] but both Σάραπις, *Sárapis* and Σέρραπις, *Sérapis* appear in Greek, as well as Σαραπο *Sarapo* in Bactrian.

His most renowned temple was the Serapeum of Alexandria.^[5] Under Ptolemy Soter, efforts were made to integrate Egyptian religion with that of their Hellenic rulers. Ptolemy’s policy was to find a deity that should win the reverence alike of both groups, despite the curses of the Egyptian priests against the gods of the previous foreign rulers (e.g. Set, who was lauded by the Hyksos). Alexander the Great had attempted to use Amun for this purpose, but he was more prominent in Upper Egypt,



This pendant bearing Serapis's likeness would have been worn by a member of elite Egyptian society. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

and not as popular with those in Lower Egypt, where the Greeks had stronger influence. The Greeks had little respect for animal-headed figures, and so a Greek-style anthropomorphic statue was chosen as the idol, and proclaimed as the equivalent of the highly popular Apis.^[6] It was named *Aser-hapi* (i.e. *Osiris-Apis*), which became **Serapis**, and was said to be Osiris in full, rather than just his *Ka* (life force).

2 History

The earliest mention of a Serapis is in the disputed death scene of Alexander (323 BCE).^[7] Here, Serapis has a temple at Babylon, and is of such importance that he alone is named as being consulted on behalf of the dying king. His presence in Babylon would radically alter perceptions of the mythologies of this era: the unconnected Babylonian god Ea (Enki) was titled *Serapsi*, meaning 'king of the deep', and it is possible this Serapis is the one referred to in the diaries. The significance of this Serapsi in the Hellenic psyche, due to its involvement in Alexander's death, may have also contributed to the choice of Osiris-Apis as the chief Ptolemaic god.

According to Plutarch, Ptolemy stole the cult statue



Bronze votive tablet inscribed to Serapis (2nd century)

from Sinope, having been instructed in a dream by the extquotedblunknown god extquotedbl to bring the statue to Alexandria, where the statue was pronounced to be Serapis by two religious experts. One of the experts was of the Eumolpidae, the ancient family from whose members the hierophant of the Eleusinian Mysteries had been chosen since before history, and the other was the scholarly Egyptian priest Manetho, which gave weight to the judgement both for the Egyptians and the Greeks.

Plutarch may not be correct, however, as some Egyptologists allege that the Sinope in the tale is really the hill of Sinopeion, a name given to the site of the already existing **Serapeum** at Memphis. Also, according to Tacitus, Serapis (i.e., Apis explicitly identified as Osiris in full) had been the god of the village of Rhakotis before it expanded into the great capital of Alexandria.

The statue suitably depicted a figure resembling Hades or Pluto, both being kings of the Greek underworld, and was shown enthroned with the *modius*, a basket/grain-measure, on his head, since it was a Greek symbol for the land of the dead. He also held a sceptre in his hand indicating his rulership, with Cerberus, gatekeeper of the underworld, resting at his feet, and it also had what appeared to be a serpent at its base, fitting the Egyptian symbol of rulership, the *uraeus*.

With his (i.e. Osiris's) wife Isis, and their son Horus (in the form of Harpocrates), Serapis won an important place in the Greek world. In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias notes two *Serapeia* on the slopes of Acrocorinth, above the rebuilt Roman city of Corinth and one at Copae in Boeotia.^[8]

Serapis was among the international deities whose cult was received and disseminated throughout the Roman



High Clerk in the Cult of Serapis, Altes Museum, Berlin

Empire, with Anubis sometimes identified with Cerberus. At Rome, Serapis was worshiped in the Iseum Campense, the sanctuary of Isis built during the Second Triumvirate in the Campus Martius. The Roman cults of Isis and Serapis gained in popularity late in the 1st century when Vespasian experienced events he attributed to their miraculous agency while he was in Alexandria, where he stayed before returning to Rome as emperor in 70. From the Flavian Dynasty on, Serapis was one of the deities who might appear on imperial coinage with the reigning emperor.

The main cult at Alexandria survived until the late 4th century, when a Christian mob destroyed the Serapeum of Alexandria in 385, and the cult was part of the general proscription of religions other than approved forms of Christianity under the Theodosian decree.

3 Gallery

- Head of Sarapis, 1st Century B.C.E., 58.79.1 Brooklyn Museum
- Head of Serapis, Carthage, Tunisia
- Oil lamp with a bust of Serapis, flanked by a crescent moon and star (Roman-era Ephesus, 100-150)
- Statuette possibly of Serapis (but note the herculean club) from Begram, Afghanistan
- Head of Sarapis (150-200)
- Head of Serapis, from a 12-foot statue found off the coast of Alexandria
- Serapis on Roman Egypt, Alexandria, Billon Tetradrachm
- Head of Serapis (Roman-era Hellenistic terracotta, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich)

4 See also

- Serapeum
- Serapis Bey, the Ascended Master in charge of the Ascension Temple
- Greeks in Egypt

5 Notes

- [1] "Sarapis" in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 15th edn., 1992, Vol. 10, p. 447.
- [2] Stambaugh, John E. (1972). *Sarapis Under the Early Ptolemies*. Leiden: E. J. Brill. pp. 1–13.
- [3] Youtie, H. 1948. "The Kline of Sarapis." *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol 41, pp. 9-29.
- [4] Consulting the unabridged Lewis Latin lexicon shows that "Serapis" was the only Latin version of the name in antiquity: Lewis, Charlton (1879, 1980). *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford. pp. 1630, 1678. ISBN 0198642016.

- [5] “Of the Egyptian sanctuaries of Serapis the most famous is at Alexandria”, Pausanias noted (*Description of Greece*, 1.18.4, 2nd century AD), in describing the Serapeion at Athens erected by Ptolemy on the steep slope of the Acropolis: “As you descend from here to the lower part of the city, is a sanctuary of Serapis, whose worship the Athenians introduced from Ptolemy.”
- [6] According to Sir J.G. Frazer's note to the *Biblioteca of Pseudo-Apollodorus*, 2.1.1: “Apollodorus identifies the Argive Apis with the Egyptian bull Apis, who was in turn identified with Serapis (Sarapis) extquotedbl; Pausanias also conflates Serapis and Egyptian Apis: “Of the Egyptian sanctuaries of Serapis the most famous is at Alexandria, the oldest at Memphis. Into this neither stranger nor priest may enter, until they bury Apis” (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.18.4).
- [7] Reported from Arrian, *Anabasis*, VII. 26.
- [8] Pausanias 2.4.5 and 9.24.1.

6 Further reading

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7 External links

- E. R. Bevan: The House of Ptolemy, Chapter. II
- James Grout: “Temple of Serapis”, part of the *Encyclopædia Romana*
- “Immoralities of the Gods: Of the fugitive Serapis chased from Sinope to Alexandria”, by Theophilus of Antioch
- “Greco-Egyptian Mythology: The Alexandrian Synthesis”

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