

# The Sarapeion of Thessaloniki: An Architectural and Cultic Overview

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**ABSTRACT** The subject of this paper is the architectural development of the Sarapeion of Thessaloniki, as well as the cult practices that took place within the sanctuary. The fact that the architectural remains of the sanctuary were reburied, as well as the incomplete publication of the various finds, makes the total comprehension and understanding of the cult quite difficult. However, the numerous inscriptions found in the sanctuary, somehow fill this gap. Moreover, the comparison with other sanctuaries of Egyptian gods, both in Macedonia, as well as in other locations of the Greek world can contribute, in part, to the understanding of the function and the restoration of the cult practices of the sanctuary of Thessaloniki.

**KEYWORDS** Sarapeion; Thessaloniki; Hellenistic religion; Isiac cults; Isis; Sarapis.

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The sanctuary of the Egyptian gods in Thessaloniki is one of the most important sanctuaries of its kind in Greece, second in importance after the corresponding sanctuary of Delos<sup>1</sup>. This reputation is mainly based on the large number of inscriptions found in the sanctuary (more than 70), thus making the cult of the Egyptian gods one of the most thoroughly studied in Thessaloniki. Another important element is the fact that in contrast to the relatively limited life span of the sanctuaries of the Egyptian gods in Delos, the cultic activities in Thessaloniki seem to have lasted for over 500 years, from the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. until the mid. 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

## 1. LOCATION OF THE SARAPEION

The sanctuary was unearthed after the great fire of 1917<sup>2</sup>, which destroyed the South Western part of Thessaloniki. Excavations were then repeated in the beginning of 1939. The sanctuary is said to have been located in the area of Karaoli-Dimitriou Street. The reports of Ch. Makaronas, indicate that the exact spot of the 1920 excavations was located a few meters away from the 1939 excavations, in the middle of the diagonal Karaoli-Dimitriou Street (Figs. 1, 2). This area of the city seems to have had a “sacred” character<sup>3</sup>. Beside the Sarapeion, other sanctuaries have also been located nearby<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For the cult of the Egyptian gods in Delos, see ROUSSEL 1916.

<sup>2</sup> BCH 45 (1921), 540, fig. 14.

<sup>3</sup> VICKERS 1972, 164; VITTI 1996, 86.

<sup>4</sup> KAZAMIA-TSERNOU 1999-2000, 61-63.

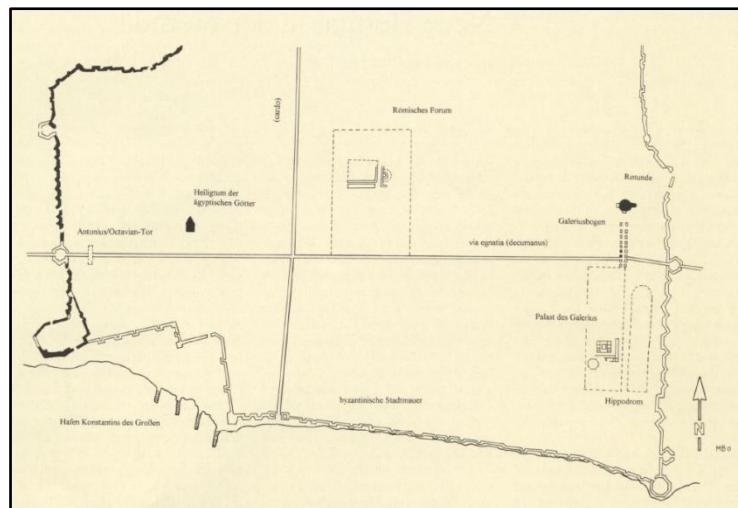


Fig 1: Location of the Sarapeion in the city of Thessaloniki  
(Photo from BOMMAS 2000, 618, fig. 3).



Fig. 2: Topographical plan of the Sarapeion in the modern urban plan of Thessaloniki  
(Photo from KOUKOUVOU 2012, 104, fig. 1).

## 2. HISTORY OF THE EXCAVATIONS

As mentioned above, the excavation in the area of the sanctuary started after the fire of 1917, when an inscription was found during the construction work for a diagonal new street, connecting the Governor's Building, with the area of the Golden Gate (Vardariou Square). The excavation was done under the supervision of St. Pelekidis, curator of the Ephorate of Macedonia. At least four buildings were unearthed that were once part of the sanctuary. The excavation was completed in various phases. During the first phase, in the years after 1917, a small rectangular temple was found (Fig. 3). Its foundations consisted of carefully placed stone blocks, while on the north and east sides, walls were preserved, with their masonry consisting of bricks and rough stones. Inside the temple, there was an accumulation of stones over a pebble floor. The narrow sides of the temple were ca. 5 m. long, while the temple was built on an East-West axis, with the entrance to the East. The temple was either prostyle or distyle in antis. Among the finds from the

interior of the temple, the reports mention “many sculptures and architectural members”, “numerous Roman coins” and “three Greek inscriptions”<sup>5</sup>.

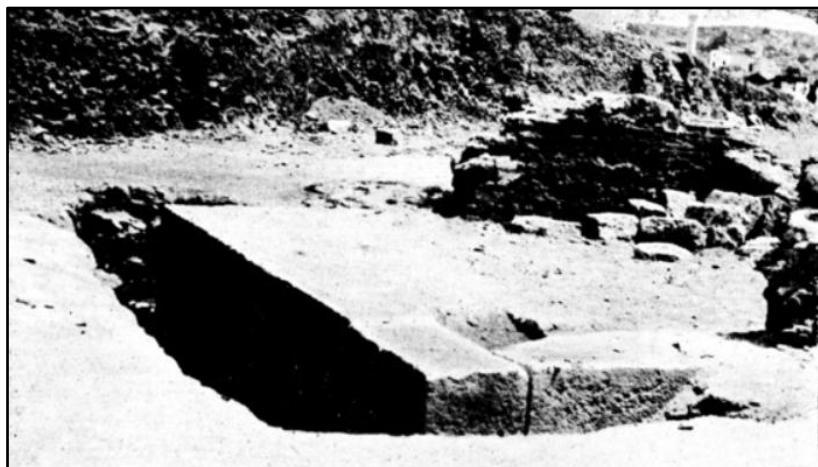


Fig. 3: Temple “A” found during the 1917 excavations  
(Photo from *BCH* 45 (1921), 541, fig. 14).



Fig. 4: Photograph of the 1939-1940 excavations.  
On the top right the ruins of Temple “B” are visible  
(Photo from KOUKOUVOU 2012, 111, fig. 8).

Excavations in the area of the sanctuary were repeated in 1939, the opportunity provided by the imminent construction of a building in the plot next to the archaeological site (plot of S. Vassiloglou) (Fig. 4). Several buildings were uncovered, which, according to the excavator Ch. Makaronas, certainly belonged to the same sanctuary<sup>6</sup>. The most important, and the only building described in the reports, was a small temple, measuring 11 by 8 m., with a cella and a pronao (Fig. 5), and built on a North-South axis. It was probably a prostyle temple. On the north side, there is a semicircular niche at the height of 2 m. above the floor level. In front of the niche there was an offering table made by bricks. The masonry of the walls consisted of rough stones and plaster, interrupted at intervals by three rows of bricks. The floor of the cella

<sup>5</sup> *BCH* 45 (1921), 540-541; KOUKOUVOU 2012, 105.

<sup>6</sup> MAKARONAS 1940, 464; KOUKOUVOU 2012, 106.

was decorated with small irregular multicolored slabs, forming simple geometric shapes<sup>7</sup>.

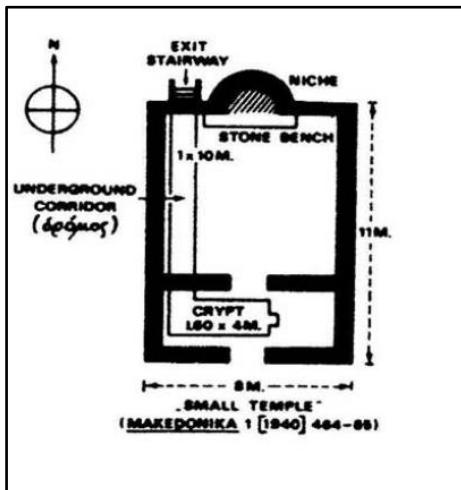


Fig. 5: Plan of Temple "B"  
(Photo from STEIMLE 2002, 295, fig. 2).

Under the pronaos, an underground vaulted rectangular space was uncovered, measuring 1,60 by 4 m., and built on an East-West axis. In the middle of the eastern side of this room, a small herm was found in situ<sup>8</sup>, inserted in a marble base. A vaulted underground corridor, ca. 1 m. wide and 10 m. long, with a Northwestern direction, led to the rectangular space. It passed through the foundations of the temple and was parallel with the western wall of the cella. The entrance to the corridor was located west from the niche, at the back of the temple. There was no direct connection of the interior of the temple with the underground spaces. Both spaces – underground room and hallway – are characterized by Makaronas, as "Crypt"<sup>9</sup>. The differences in masonry, suggest different dating for the various parts of the building. According to the excavator, the underground spaces were later additions<sup>10</sup>.

The latest excavations in the area of the sanctuary took place in 1957, and specifically at the intersection of the current Karaoli – Dimitriou and Svoronou Streets. During the excavation, parts of sculptures were found, probably coming from the Serapeion<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> MAKARONAS 1940, 464. There is a small plaster model of the temple in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, depicting the building as it looked when it was found during the 1939 excavations. The model was probably created in the conservation facilities of the Museum in the 1950s.

<sup>8</sup> DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU–TIVERIOTIS 1997, 61-62 n. 45.

<sup>9</sup> MAKARONAS 1940, 464.

<sup>10</sup> STEIMLE 2002, 298.

<sup>11</sup> For the head of the goddess Isis, see DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU–TIVERIOTIS 1997, 112-113 n. 85. For the other female head, see DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU–TIVERIOTIS 2003, 37, n. 175.

### 3. ARCHITECTURAL LAYOUT AND DATING OF THE SANCTUARY

In 2002, within the framework of the *16<sup>th</sup> Conference on the Archaeological Fieldwork in Macedonia and Thrace (AEMTh)*<sup>12</sup> and then in his 2008 book *Religion im römischen Thessaloniki*<sup>13</sup>, Ch. Steimle published a topographic plan of the sanctuary (Fig. 6). The plan shows the architectural remains unearthed during the first excavations of the 1920s, as well as those of 1938-1939. In particular, in the Northwestern part of the area depicted, indicated with the letter “A”, is the location of the small temple discovered in the 1920s and described in the report of the *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*.

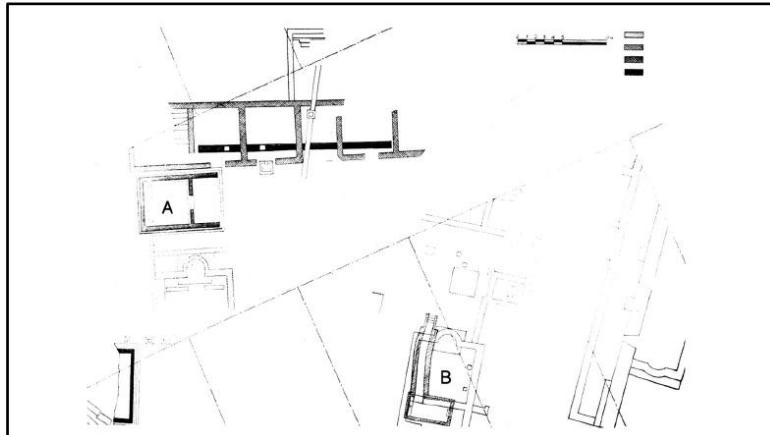


Fig. 6: Plan of the Sarapeion  
(Photo from STEIMLE 2002, 295, fig. 1).

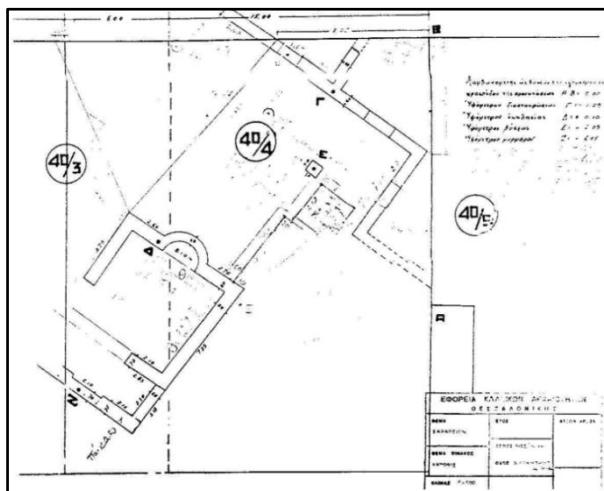


Fig. 7: Plan of the area north of Temple “B”  
(from STEIMLE 2002, 301, fig. 3).

Immediately north of that temple there is a portico consisting of a series of rooms and a part of another unspecified building. Right next to the temple, on the south, there is a temple-like building, built on a North-South axis, with an apsis niche on the northern side, thus recalling the apsis temple (Temple “B”), in the Southeastern part of the excavated area. There is a second plan of the Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities (Fig. 7), regarding the area north of the temple “B”. Ch. Steimle published

<sup>12</sup> STEIMLE 2002, 295, fig. 1.

<sup>13</sup> STEIMLE 2008, 85.

it at the Proceedings of the *AEMTh*<sup>14</sup>. Immediately north of the temple there is a small courtyard, with a large square in the middle, probably the base of an altar or statue. The aforementioned plan, raises the question of whether the buildings uncovered, were dedicated to one or more deities. Makaronas was certain that the buildings formed part of a single sanctuary<sup>15</sup>, the boundaries and original extent of which remain unknown. The relatively small size of the buildings, led many to believe that the central temple of the sanctuary was yet to be discovered. However, the existence of a large main temple is not necessary.

Temple “B” was probably used for the worship of one or more deities, due to the existence of the pronaos, the cella and the niche. However, its location in the sanctuary, in relation with the other buildings remains unclear. R.A. Wild, taking into account the temples of the Egyptian deities in Greece, known until then, considered this temple to be the main central temple of Isis and Sarapis<sup>16</sup>. He was based on the fact that in other similar sanctuaries, such as those in Delos<sup>17</sup>, the temples were of small proportions. Moreover, the main temple of the sanctuary of Isis in Dion<sup>18</sup>, of the imperial era, is symmetrically placed inside the sanctuary, and its dimensions are similar to the temple in Thessaloniki. Therefore, it probably has to be the main temple of the sanctuary, dedicated to Isis or Sarapis. However, the possibility of the common worship of the two gods in the same temple should not be excluded.

The cultic activities at the sanctuary of the Egyptian gods, seem to have started, based on the dating of some sculptures<sup>19</sup>, to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> - early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The sanctuary seems to have stopped operating during the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The royal decree of King Philip V, dating back to 187 BC. and coming from the sanctuary<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 8), constitutes a *terminus ante quem* for the start of the cultic activities<sup>21</sup>. However the sanctuary must have been founded much earlier, probably at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC<sup>22</sup>. The long period of the operation of the sanctuary is evident through the differences in the construction techniques of the various buildings, indicating continuous use and repairs, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. until probably the late 3<sup>rd</sup>/early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>23</sup>.

In the early photograph of temple “A” (Fig. 3), some carved stone blocks can be seen, carefully placed next to each other, forming the foundations of the temple. The rest of the masonry consisted of bricks. This construction technique suggests that the first construction phase of the temple dates back to the Hellenistic period. However, there is also the possibility that the foundations of the temple consisted of reused building materials.

<sup>14</sup> STEIMLE 2002, 301.

<sup>15</sup> MAKARONAS 1940, 464.

<sup>16</sup> WILD 1984, 1825.

<sup>17</sup> See BOMMAS 2005, 58, fig. 71, 59, fig. 73, 62, fig. 77.

<sup>18</sup> For the sanctuary in Dion see PANDERMALIS 1982. For the sculptures coming from the sanctuary see CHRISTODOULOU 2011.

<sup>19</sup> DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU-TIVERIOU–VOUTIRAS 1997, 46 n. 27; DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU-TIVERIOU–VOUTIRAS 2003, 17-18 n. 153.

<sup>20</sup> *IG X* 2, 1 3. This particular inscription led to the identification of the temple “A”, with the temple of Sarapis. This identification was gradually abandoned after the discovery of more structures belonging to the sanctuary.

<sup>21</sup> ADAM-VELENI 1985, 486-499.

<sup>22</sup> VITTI 1996, 174.

<sup>23</sup> *BCH* 45 (1921), 541.

Regarding temple “B”, M. Vitti reports<sup>24</sup> that its construction phases probably correspond to those of the aforementioned temple “A”. The underground crypt of the temple is probably Hellenistic. The building phases of the pronaos and the cella are rather dated in the Roman period, due to the opus mixtum technique utilized in the masonry. Vitti dates them in the 3<sup>rd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Von Scoenebeck<sup>25</sup> compared the masonry of temple “B” with the brickwork masonry of the Rotunda and the Arch of Galerius, thus dating it at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Based on this comparison, the cella of the temple can be dated in the transition from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. If we accept this dating, then temple “B” was built during the last period of operation of the sanctuary. During the reign of Galerius, Sarapis and Isis seem to have been established as the patron deities of the Tetrarchy. The depiction of those two deities on the arch of Galerius, is probably related to that role<sup>26</sup>. The construction of temple “B” should be therefore related to the revival of the cult of Sarapis and Isis, as part of the imperial propaganda during the time of Galerius<sup>27</sup>. However, since the ruins of the temple are not visible, this comparison with the buildings of Galerius and the consequent dating of the temple must be put into question.

#### 4. THE UNDERGROUND CRYPT

The exact contents and their context from the underground spaces below temple “B” remain unknown. In his report Makaronas states that the external access to the underground corridor was sealed with marble slabs<sup>28</sup>. Ch. Edson, states that the entrance was sealed in late antiquity, and as a result its contents remained intact. He then refers to the sculptures and other finds from the 1939 excavation, without specifying which of them came from the underground spaces<sup>29</sup>. M. Bommas mentions numerous statues and 45 inscriptions that were found intact in the crypt<sup>30</sup>.

The finding of a herm in the niche of the narrow side of the underground space leaves no doubt about the cultic use of this space. Makaronas, had already characterized the room as “crypt”, used in religious ceremonies of mysterious character<sup>31</sup>.

R. A. Wild, based on this crypt, refers to religious ceremonies that took place in underground rooms<sup>32</sup>. In the case of Thessaloniki, he suggested that initially there was a local cult of Zeus Dionysos Gongylos, identified at a later period with Osiris, who was worshiped in a special underground space. These proposals are based on two inscriptions, found during the 1939 excavation, indicating the existence of a mystery cult. The first one<sup>33</sup> is votive, in honor of Osiris Mystes<sup>34</sup> and dates to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> VITTI 1996, 175.

<sup>25</sup> STEIMLE 2002, 297-299.

<sup>26</sup> CHRISTODOULOU 2015, 190-191 and fig. 10, 11.

<sup>27</sup> BOMMAS 2005, 98.

<sup>28</sup> MAKARONAS 1940, 465.

<sup>29</sup> EDSON 1948, 182.

<sup>30</sup> BOMMAS 2000, 619.

<sup>31</sup> MAKARONAS 1940, 464.

<sup>32</sup> WILD 1981, 190-194.

<sup>33</sup> IG X 2, 1 107; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0505 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 997).

<sup>34</sup> For Osiris Mystes and the importance of mysteries in the cult of the Egyptian gods of the Greco-Roman period, see MALAISE 1981, esp. 485-486.

century BC. The second one<sup>35</sup> is an honorary inscription in favor of a certain Julius, who bears the cult title *besartes* and was member of a religious association in honor of Zeus Dionysus Gongylos<sup>36</sup>. It dates to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Of the aforementioned deities, only Dionysos is usually rendered in the form a herm, such as the one found in the crypt<sup>37</sup>.

The crypt can also be associated with Osiris Mystes, as mentioned above<sup>38</sup>. An inscription<sup>39</sup> of the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. is referring to the creation of a road, made by the personal expense of the devotee. Another inscription<sup>40</sup> of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD., mentions the road of Osiris. This road could refer to the vaulted underground corridor. If the corridor was dedicated to Osiris, then the underground space to which it led must have also been dedicated to the same god. However, the presence of the herm may indicate that the ritual activities undertaken in the crypt were not exclusively in honor of Osiris, but also in honor of Zeus Dionysos Gongylos, with whom Osiris had been equated<sup>41</sup>. The aforementioned conclusions however, remain unclear. In addition, the relationship between the underground spaces and main temple “B” is uncertain. A comparison of the crypt of the Sarapeion with similar spaces, e.g. Mithraia, indicates that this space could be used for closed gatherings of religious nature. The size of the crypt was suitable for a small group of people. The existence of such groups in the sanctuary is revealed through various inscriptions.

In general, the mystical cults derived from Egypt were based on the mythical rituals undertaken by Isis, aiming at the resurrection of Osiris. Mystery cults existed in the Greek world, in honor of Greek deities, for example in the context of the Orphic and the Eleusinian mysteries. The term “mystery”, indicates the acquisition by the faithful of an inner wisdom through some trials, some of which could be painful. If he succeeded, he became part of an elite group, who possessed some occult knowledge and had gained the privilege of personal communication with the deity. Plutarch states that the mysteries of Isis reflected the difficulties faced by the goddess during her search for the members of Osiris. Therefore, people turned their prayers towards her in order to face difficulties and hoping for immortality<sup>42</sup>.

## 5. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, the importance of the Sarapeion of Thessaloniki is mostly due to the finding of numerous inscriptions in the sanctuary. For the majority of them, only the year of their discovery and their finding spot in general is mentioned,

<sup>35</sup> *IG X 2,1 259*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0537 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 983).

<sup>36</sup> The word appears once more in the inscription *IG X 2, 1 244*, which was also found in the Sarapeion, and bears a fragmentary list of members of a religious association, probably in honor of Zeus-Dionysus Gongylos. This cult could also be associated with the Egyptian god Bes, whose cult however is not attested in Thessaloniki, see DAUX 1972, 485-486; WILD 1981, 193. It could also indicate a Thracian element of this particular cult see DAUX 1972, 485-486.

<sup>37</sup> Dionysos could also be identified with Osiris, see D.S. 1, 96; Plu. *Mor.* 26, 5, 13.

<sup>38</sup> See notes no. 33, 34.

<sup>39</sup> *IG X 2, 1 118*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0542 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 955).

<sup>40</sup> *IG X 2, 1 111*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0554 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 999).

<sup>41</sup> STEIMLE 2008, 112; CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 338.

<sup>42</sup> WITT 1971, 152-153.

without any further details. This large corpus of inscriptions constitutes the most extensive epigraphic testimony for a specific cult in Thessaloniki. Of the inscriptions from the Sarapeion, about 40 are votive<sup>43</sup>.



Fig. 8: The royal decree of King Philip V  
(Photo from TZANAVARI 2003, 241, fig. 39).

The oldest votive inscription<sup>44</sup>, dates to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC., and it was made in honor of Sarapis and Isis. Of great importance seems to have been the relationship of the Egyptian cults and the Macedonian royal court, as evidenced by the royal decree of King Philip V<sup>45</sup> (Fig. 8), dated to 187 BC<sup>46</sup>, and related to financial matters of the sanctuary. The decree is addressed to the citizens of Thessaloniki, through a man named Andronikos, probably an official of the city. It mentions the decision of King Philip V, according to which the management of the treasures of the sanctuary will be done by him. This measure can be interpreted in two ways: either the fortune of the sanctuary was an important source of income for the king, or it was a measure of protection of the Sarapeion, as a sign of respect towards its sanctity, because the city of Thessaloniki – impoverished due to the continuous wars – had been mishandling and exploiting the resources of the sanctuary<sup>47</sup>. According to E. Voutiras<sup>48</sup>, the cult of the Egyptian gods was introduced to Thessaloniki on the private initiative of priests that came from Egypt, but obtained a public character<sup>49</sup>. The intervention of King Philip V through Andronikos was made in order to protect the wealth of the sanctuary from the impunity of various institutions of the city<sup>50</sup>. In other words, the city of Thessaloniki ceased to have the right of exploiting the resources of the sanctuary. This inscription functions at the same time as an indication that the cult had already existed for several decades and that the sanctuary had amassed a considerable wealth.

<sup>43</sup> DÜLL 1977, 151.

<sup>44</sup> IG X 2, 1 75; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0501 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. 971).

<sup>45</sup> IG X 2, 1 3; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0503 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 82); PELEKIDES 1934, 7-23.

<sup>46</sup> For the dating of the inscription see HATZOPoulos 1996, 39 n. 15.

<sup>47</sup> DUNAND 1973, 59; CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 336.

<sup>48</sup> VOUTIRAS 2005, 273-288.

<sup>49</sup> PACHIS 2003, 98.

<sup>50</sup> For a possible personal interest of Philipp V in the Egyptian cults, see PELEKIDES 1934, 9 n. 4.

From other inscriptions, information regarding buildings and facilities of the sanctuary that have yet to be located can be inferred. The inscription *IG X 2, 1 83* (37-36 BC.)<sup>51</sup>, mentions that in the *temenos* of Isis, where other deities were also worshiped, the *hydreion* was donated by Publius Salarius Pamphilus, priest of Sarapis and Isis, and his son<sup>52</sup>. The term *hydreion* could indicate a basin or a reservoir used for the sacred water of the river Nile<sup>53</sup>, and consequently the building in which it was housed. In the case of the Sarapeion of Thessaloniki, it was probably a small-sized structure, which contained a small drawing basin, filled with the sacred water. It could also be decorated with sculptures of Egyptian deities, as well as with portraits of the donors<sup>54</sup>.

The inscription *IG X 2, 1 109* (39-38 BC)<sup>55</sup> mentions the dedication to Osiris and other deities of the sanctuary of the *Osirieion* and of the peristyle inside of it. It was probably a temple surrounded by a portico. The dedication was made by the same people who also dedicated the *hydreion*. The same inscription mentions the *didymaphorion*, which is related to the myth of Isis and Osiris<sup>56</sup>. It was the storage place for the *didymaion*, a symbolic representation of the genitals of Osiris. It has been suggested that it was a small building<sup>57</sup> however, the second component of the word indicates that it was a container or box, with which various ritual objects were transported. In the fragmentary inscription *IG X 2, 1 124* (42-32 BC)<sup>58</sup>, a propylon is mentioned. Based on the aforementioned inscriptions, Ch. Habicht<sup>59</sup> claimed that after Thessaloniki was declared a free city by Antonius (after the battle of Philippi in 42 BC), and within the following five years, the city experienced an intense construction activity, of which the Sarapeion was particularly benefited. This phenomenon could be related to the influence of Cleopatra on Antonius, a case suggested by other authors<sup>60</sup>. The inscription *IG X 2, 1 97* (22/21 BC), mentions the dedication of a cella and altars to Isis Lochia<sup>61</sup>, while *SEG 43:458*<sup>62</sup> (late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC/early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD) mentions the refurbishment of the temple of Isis, and the construction of its pronaos. The inscription *IG X 2, 1 102* (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD)<sup>63</sup> mentions the construction of a temple of Isis Memphis and its propylon, a portico, and stone altars inside the temple.

Regarding other finds, as well as the pottery found in the sanctuary, no reference is made anywhere. A rare exception is an architectural member, listed in the catalogue of the architectural members of the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, as coming from the Sarapeion<sup>64</sup> (Fig. 9). It includes the corner of a pediment, as well as part of the gable, with the cornice, the ridge and the gutters in the shape of lion heads. The technical details and the relatively small dimensions (maximum length: 1, 44 m.,

<sup>51</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0521 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1950).

<sup>52</sup> Pamphilus and his son also dedicated an altar to the gods who were worshiped in the sanctuary, see *IG X 2, 1 84*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0522 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 986); DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU–TIVERIOU–VOUTIRAS 1997, 64 n. 47; CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 340.

<sup>53</sup> ALVAR–GORDON 2008, 315, pl. 22.

<sup>54</sup> ARISTODEMOU 2019, 73-74.

<sup>55</sup> DAUX 1973, 587, n. 109; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0520 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ965); CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 339-340 with nn. 53-54, fig. 43.2.

<sup>56</sup> Plu. *Mor.* 26, 5, 18.

<sup>57</sup> DUNAND 1973, 55.

<sup>58</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0519 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 876); CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 337-338.

<sup>59</sup> HABICHT 1974, 489.

<sup>60</sup> TRAKOSOPOULOU–SALAKIDOU 1989, 154; VITTI 1996, 59; VOM BROCKE 2000, 40.

<sup>61</sup> CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 340.

<sup>62</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0532 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 8173).

<sup>63</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0549 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 968).

<sup>64</sup> GRAMMENOS–KNITHAKIS 1994, 98.

maximum height: 0,48m, maximum width: 0,85m), indicate that it formed part of small temple or temple-shaped structure.

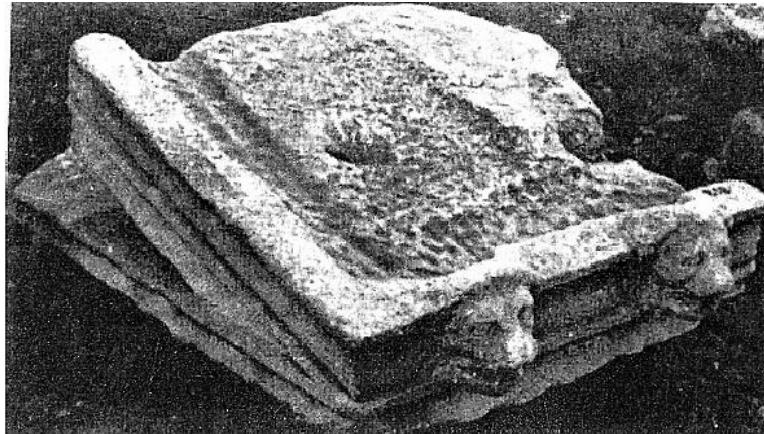


Fig. 9: Architectural member from the Sarapeion  
(Photo from STEIMLE 2008, 85, fig. 4).

## 6. THE CULT OF THE EGYPTIAN GODS WITHIN THE SANCTUARY

Contrary to the prevailing characterization of the sanctuary as Sarapeion, the inscriptions prove that Isis is the most frequently mentioned deity. The goddess appears in 30 of the approximately 70 inscriptions from the sanctuary. The votive inscriptions are addressed either exclusively to Isis or to the goddess in relation to some other deity (e.g. Sarapis, Harpokrates<sup>65</sup> and Anubis). Sarapis appears on 16 votive inscriptions, but always accompanied by other deities. Ch. vom Brocke pointed out that although initially Sarapis was mainly mentioned, as time went by Isis prevailed<sup>66</sup>. Furthermore the goddess often bears numerous cult epithets, related to various attributes of her divine nature, e.g. *Tyche*<sup>67</sup>, *Tyche Agathe*<sup>68</sup>, *Nike*<sup>69</sup>, *Lochia*<sup>70</sup>, *Epekoos*<sup>71</sup>, *Orgia*<sup>72</sup>, *Memphitis*<sup>73</sup>. Through those epithets, certain characteristic qualities of the goddess are underlined: she was worshiped as a higher power of fortune, which listens to and protects the faithful especially, the pregnant women (as *Lochia*). Of special interest is

<sup>65</sup> IG X 2, 1 81; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0512 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 980).

<sup>66</sup> VOM BROCKE 2000, 137.

<sup>67</sup> IG X 2, 1 99; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0531 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1951); IG X 2, 1 104; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0566 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1955). For the connection of Isis to Tyche see MALAISE 1972, 185.

<sup>68</sup> IG X 2 1 95; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0514 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1954); IG X 2, 1 96; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0515 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 977).

<sup>69</sup> IG X,2 1 82; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0513 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 975).

<sup>70</sup> IG X,2 1 97; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0523 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 966).

<sup>71</sup> IG X,2 1 98; BRICAULT 2005a I, n. 113/0529 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 998). For deities characterized as “Epekooi”, see WEINREICH 1912; FASSA 2019, 52-54. For a votive relief bearing ears, in honor of Isis Epekoos, see DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU–TIVERIOU–VOUTIRAS 1997, 66-67, N. 49.

<sup>72</sup> IG X 2, 1 103; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0522/0552 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 986).

<sup>73</sup> See note n. 63.

her association with the subject of victory (as Isis-Nike)<sup>74</sup>. The epithet *Orgia*, probably refers to the fact that Isis was credited with the creation of Mysteries<sup>75</sup>. The topographic epithet *Memphitis*<sup>76</sup> links Isis to Memphis, in Egypt, where a major sanctuary of Isis and Sarapis was located. Indicative of the various properties of the goddess, is an aretalogy inscription (*IG X 2, 1 254*), dated in the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century AD<sup>77</sup>.

Horus-Apollo is also mentioned<sup>78</sup>, as well as groups of anonymous deities such as *theoi sunnaoi*<sup>79</sup>, *theoi entemeniori*<sup>80</sup>, *theoi megaloi*<sup>81</sup>, *theoi euergetai*<sup>82</sup> etc. Osiris appears in 4 inscriptions<sup>83</sup>, while his cult is also attested through the mention in an inscription of the *Osirieion*<sup>84</sup>, which was located in the sanctuary. Some inscriptions referring to Dionysos come from the surrounding area of the sanctuary<sup>85</sup>.

A single Latin inscription (*IG X 2, 112*)<sup>86</sup> of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. proves that Ammon-Jupiter was also worshiped in the sanctuary.

## 7. PRIESTHOOD AND RITUAL ACTIVITIES

The information regarding the priests of the Sarapeion of Thessaloniki in the Hellenistic period is fragmentary. Several priests are mentioned in the inscriptions, as being appointed priests of the Egyptian gods in general or more specifically as priests of Sarapis and Isis. A priest of Harpokrates is also mentioned however it remains uncertain whether there was a separate temple and priesthood for this deity in the sanctuary. It is probable that there was an interpreter of dreams in the Sarapeion. A votive inscription was made after a divine command was pronounced in a vision, or during a dream. The

<sup>74</sup> DUNAND 1973, 55-56.

<sup>75</sup> DUNAND 1973, 188; 1975, 32.

<sup>76</sup> The epithet could also refer to the non-hellenized, Egyptian character of the goddess, and doesn't refer to any other specific properties of the goddess, see BRICAULT 2005a, I, 156; 2005b.

<sup>77</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0545 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1683); PELEKIDES 1934, 4-5. For the form and the contents of the Aretalogies, see TOTTI 1985; VERSNEL 1990, 41 and n. 6; PACHIS 2003, 106-107.

<sup>78</sup> *IG X 2, 1 85*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0525 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1953). Regarding Horus-Apollo and his equation with Harpokrates, see MALAISE 2000, 418.

<sup>79</sup> *IG X 2, 77*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0508 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 964); *IG X,21 78*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0509 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 951); *IG X 2, 1 80*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0511 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 97); *IG X 2,1 88*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0534 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 954).

<sup>80</sup> *IG X 2, 1 116*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0517 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1003); *IG X 2, 1 84*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0522 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 986).

<sup>81</sup> *IG X 2, 1 51*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0528 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 952).

<sup>82</sup> *IG X 2, 1 90*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0565 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 973).

<sup>83</sup> See note n. 33; *IG X,2 1 108*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0506 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. 979); *IG X 2, 1 110*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0553 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 985).

<sup>84</sup> See note n. 55.

<sup>85</sup> *IG X,2 1 59*; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0558 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 829); see note n. 36.

<sup>86</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0578 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 869). Despite the later date of this inscription, Ammon-Zeus was one of the first Egyptian cults introduced into the Greek world. For the sanctuary of Ammon-Zeus in the city of Aphytos of Chalkidike, see LEVENTOPOULOU-GIOURI 1971; TSIGARIDA-VASILEIOU 2005.

Isiac deities appeared frequently in the dreams and visions of the faithful, and as a result the interpretation of their apparitions was necessary<sup>87</sup>.

The information about the priests of the Imperial period is also limited. The inscriptions reveal that the priests were elected for an annual tenure. During their tenure, or afterwards they financially supported the construction of various buildings and the general embellishment of the sanctuary. It is possible that the personal wealth of the prospective priests was an important factor in their election<sup>88</sup>.

There is no mention about a specific priest of Sarapis or Isis and therefore it is unknown whether a priest was in charge of all the cults, or whether each deity had its own priest. It seems however, that more than one priest was active on the same time at the sanctuary<sup>89</sup>. Except from priests, the inscriptions mention an *archineokoros*, whose office which was also annual. He was probably responsible for the guarding and the safekeeping of the sanctuary. Other priests are also mentioned, but their exact responsibilities remain unknown. As in the Hellenistic period, there must have been a person or a group of people for the interpretation of dreams, in which Isis and Sarapis appeared. Furthermore, during the Imperial period, the number of religious associations increased, although some of those already existed during the Hellenistic period. The *hieraphoroi*<sup>90</sup>, probably carried the various cult objects<sup>91</sup>, and could be identified with the *hieraphoroi synklitai*<sup>92</sup>, who are mentioned as having founded an *oikos*. Another inscription<sup>93</sup> mentions the association of the *threskeutai* and *sekobatai* of Hermanubis<sup>94</sup>. The cult of Hermanubis existed in Thessaloniki since the Hellenistic period, while in Southern Greece his cult is attested only in Delos<sup>95</sup>. It was probably a privately organized cult. The term *sekobatai* indicates that the members of this group had access to the cella of the temple, where the cult statue stood. It is uncertain, however, whether this group was associated with the Sarapeion, or whether it had a separate place of worship. An inscription of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. mentions the association of the *sunthreskeutai* of the *kline* of the great god Sarapis<sup>96</sup> which was probably linked to the Sarapeion.

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<sup>87</sup> DUNAND 1973, 56-57; PACHIS 2003, 102; FASSA 2016, 65; RENBERG 2016, 390-392; FASSA 2019, 48-49. For the importance of dreams in the cult of the Isiac deities, see VERSNEL 1990, 40 n. 3; MERKELBACH 1995, 210-224. There is no clear indication regarding the existence of this practice in the Sarapeion of Thessaloniki. However some votive formulas indicating the presence of the deities at the dreams of the adherents on a number of votive inscriptions from the sanctuary, make its existence possible, see BRICAULT 2005a, I, 141, n. 113/0513.

<sup>88</sup> CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 353.

<sup>89</sup> CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 338, 353.

<sup>90</sup> IG X 2, 1 222; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0526 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1002); IG X,2 1 258; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0557 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 862).

<sup>91</sup> See Apul. *Met.* 11, 10-11.

<sup>92</sup> IG X 2, 1 58; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0530 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1254). This association participated in ritual banquets and was placed under the protection of Anubis, see DUNAND 1973, 184. For the interpretation of those banquets, see MONTSERRAT 1992, 303-307.

<sup>93</sup> IG X,2 1 220; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0576 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 1790).

<sup>94</sup> PICARD-AVEZOU 1913, 94-5.

<sup>95</sup> BASLEZ 1977, 48-49.

<sup>96</sup> IG X 2, 1 192; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0575 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. 1786). For the *kline* of Sarapis see MILNE 1925. The term probably characterizes a banquet, in which an image of Sarapis was displayed, thus ensuring his participation, see MONTSERRAT 1992, 303.

In a poem dedicated by Damaios<sup>97</sup>, a man named Phylakides dedicated a shrine to Osiris, in the shape of a boat<sup>98</sup>. With this boat the god was supposed to sail to the skies during the festivities organized in his honor. This whole “navigation” concept played a major role in the celebrations in the Egyptian month Choiak, during which the search of the body parts of Osiris by Isis and the resurrection of Osiris was celebrated<sup>99</sup>. It can therefore be argued that the finding of the parts of Osiris was celebrated in the Sarapeion and one of the stages of this festival was the symbolic search for the god in the form of a night procession. The invention of sea-faring is generally attributed to Isis<sup>100</sup>, but it could also be attributed to Osiris, who was sometimes worshiped as a sea-god and protector of sailors. This could be a result of the *interpretatio graeca*<sup>101</sup>, since Osiris does not appear as a sea-god in Ptolemaic Egypt. The presence of the *hydreion* in the sanctuary also underlines the importance of water in the various rituals and especially in the purification rituals undertaken by the priests<sup>102</sup>.

In conclusion, it seems that the cult of the Egyptian gods in Thessaloniki was particularly vibrant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The existence of three or more religious associations, directly or indirectly related to the sanctuary, reveals the wide spread of the cult to a variety of social groups. The inscriptions related to these associations provide important insights into the social background of their members. The *sekobatai* of Hermanubis appear to be people of limited financial means, based on the mediocrity of their votive offerings<sup>103</sup>, while the *synklitai* of Anubis probably belonged to the upper, more affluent class. In fact, nine of the members of this group were Roman citizens. The same was true about the *synthreskeutai* of Sarapis, a member of which, Poplios Ailius Neikanor, bears the title *makedoniarches*, being probably the president of the provincial assembly of Macedonia<sup>104</sup>. The inscriptions reveal that some of the adherents had the financial means to dedicate jewelry and sums of money<sup>105</sup>, altars or even sponsor the construction of buildings within the sanctuary. Of particular interest is the dedication of vineyards to Zeus Dionysos Gongylos<sup>106</sup>. The wine produced was to be used for the various ritual activities of the religious association<sup>107</sup>. Many votive inscriptions reveal that the dedications were made after the apparition of the deity in a dream<sup>108</sup> and after an imperative command expressed by the deity<sup>109</sup>.

<sup>97</sup> IG X,2 1 108; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0506 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. 979).

<sup>98</sup> A so-called *larnax namophoros*, see Plu. *Mor.* 26, 5, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Regarding this celebration see CHASSINAT 1966.

<sup>100</sup> Hyg. *Fab.* 277.

<sup>101</sup> For the *interpretatio graeca* of the Egyptian deities, see BERGMAN 1969.

<sup>102</sup> DUNAND 1973, 58.

<sup>103</sup> BRICAULT 2005a, I, 165, n. 113/0576.

<sup>104</sup> DUNAND 1973, 185.

<sup>105</sup> IG X 2, 1 114; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0556 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 967). The inscription mentions the dedication of golden earrings, embellished with precious stones. Those could be placed on the ears of a statue of Isis, see BRICAULT 2005a, I, 158.

<sup>106</sup> See note n. 35.

<sup>107</sup> CHRISTODOULOU 2009, 338.

<sup>108</sup> IG X 2, 1 91; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0569 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 953); IG X 2, 1 121; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0573 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 982).

<sup>109</sup> IG X,2 1 92; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0570 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 960); IG X 2, 1 89; BRICAULT 2005a, I, n. 113/0555 (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, inv. n. MΘ 841). For this particular votive relief see DESPINIS–STEFANIDOU–TIVERIOU–VOUTIRAS 1997, 65-66, n. 48. Two footprints are depicted on the relief, a common practice in sanctuaries of the Egyptian deities. For those footprints and their various interpretations see GUARDUCCI 1942-1943; MANGANARO 1964;

These votives indicate that the officials of the Sarapeion could have given permission to the adherents to spend the night in the sanctuary, possibly in a specially defined location, where they would dream of the deity. Through those terms, the epiphanic character of the deities became obvious to all the new adherents of the sanctuary, thus propagating the powers of the gods and the fame of the sanctuary itself<sup>110</sup>.

Regarding the cult practices in the sanctuary, there were probably daily rituals commemorating various episodes of the myth of Osiris. Some of those are known from other sanctuaries, such as the decoration, perfuming and dressing of the cult statues, the transport of the sacred objects during processions and the divination through dream interpretation. The existence of a ritual boat used for the transport of the cult statues around the sanctuary is also possible, since it is a common practice in sanctuaries of the Egyptian deities. The rituals could also include night processions, with the transport of cult statues and sacred objects, a procedure which presupposes the existence of an organized priesthood. The priests prayed and sacrificed at the numerous altars. They performed two services each day, one in the morning and one in the evening<sup>111</sup>.

In general, as we are informed from other similar sanctuaries of the Greco-Roman world, the priests had to be purified. They also had to have shaved heads and be circumcised. They wore linen clothes and sandals made out of papyrus<sup>112</sup>. Woolen and leather clothing items were forbidden, since they derived from living beings. They also had to bathe in cold water three times during the day, and twice at night. Their daily rituals could be reconstructed as follows: the temple was opened by the priests before dawn. A lead singer performed a hymn in honor of Sarapis, while on the same time he purified the temple with fire and water. Incense was a necessary element of the cult of the Egyptian gods, symbolizing the fire of salvation, while at the same time perfuming the temple. The cult statues of the gods were revealed to the faithful every morning and they were dressed in precious clothes and jewelry. Those who entered the temple had already undergone a ritual purification. The priest then made libations with water from the Nile (either real or symbolic) and sprinkled the faithful with the water of Osiris, which contained the divine power of the god<sup>113</sup>. Ritual dances and musical performances followed, and as soon as the sacred fire was lit on the altar, a prayer was sung to Isis. In general, priests prayed to the gods four times a day. At the end of the day, they undressed the cult statues<sup>114</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is obvious that the available archaeological material from the Sarapeion, and especially the large number of inscriptions, offers a wealth of information, restoring to some extent the architectural form and layout of the sanctuary, while highlighting at the same time some of the cult practices that took place there. This is particularly important in the case of Thessaloniki, since the excavation of the

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CASTIGLIONE 1967; 1968; 1970; and DUNBAIN 1990. For the imperative commands given to the devotees of the Isiac deities, see FASSA 2016, 62-63.

<sup>110</sup> FASSA 2016, 64; 2019, 49.

<sup>111</sup> TZANAVARI 2003, 243.

<sup>112</sup> MALAISE 1972, 137-138. The appearance of the priests matched the iconography of the cult of the Egyptian deities, see PACHIS 2003, 113. For the depiction of priests in the art of the Imperial period, see EIGENARTNER 1991.

<sup>113</sup> Regarding the ritual significance and the role of water in the cult of Isis and Sarapis see DUNAND 1973, I, 24, n. 1, 58, n. 4; WILD 1981, 190-194.

<sup>114</sup> WITT 1971, 91-92.

sanctuary took place at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the architectural remains are no longer visible. Furthermore, the votive inscriptions reveal an impressive pantheon, consisting of Egyptian and Greco-Roman deities, who co-existed and were worshipped in the sanctuary. Finally, inscriptions, such as the royal decree of Philip V, restore to some extent the historical course of the local Egyptian cults, and their gradual integration into the city of Thessaloniki during the era of the Kingdom of Macedonia, already since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Since then, the Sarapeion and the corresponding cults underwent an evolutionary course that lasted until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, surpassing in duration and vitality other cults of the city.

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