Founding a Sarapeum

Kent J. Rigsby

THE MOST FAMOUS DOCUMENT in the Zenon archive and most often reproduced is surely the letter of 257 B.C. from one Zoilus to the *dioiketes* Apollonius.[1] John Oates, however, has always taught us to read even the familiar with a skeptical eye. The text is well known; a translation will help suggest its tone:

> To Apollonius, greetings, from Zoilus, Aspendian, of the ..., and recommended to you by the king's friends. While petitioning the god Sarapis for your health and success with King Ptolemy, it had been happening to me that Sarapis often ordered me in dreams to sail over to you and present you with this order of his, that there must be built for him ... and a precinct in the Greek quarter by the harbor, and for a priest to officiate and to sacrifice on the altar in your behalf. When I asked ... that he release me from this task, he cast me into illness so great that I was in danger of my life. So I prayed to the god that he cure me, so that I might submit to the duty and do what he had ordered. When at once I became well, someone from Cnidus came who set about building a Sarapeum in that place and imported stones; but later the god warned him not to build it, and he left. When I came to Alexandria and hesitated to meet with you about these things but instead about the business you had granted to me, once again I relapsed for four months, so I was unable to come to you promptly. So, Apollonius, it would be well for you to act in accord with the god's orders, so that Sarapis be gracious to you

[1] *PSI* IV 435; *P.Edgar* 7; *P.Cair.Zen.* I 59034 with photograph [*SB* III 6713; Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*[4] (Tübingen 1923) 121–128 no. 2 with photograph (also at *Paul*[2] [1927] pl. 2); P. M. Fraser, *OpAth* 3 (1960) 54 no. 12; V. Longo, *Aretalogie nel mondo greco* I (Genoa 1969) no. 62; W. Clarysse and K. Vandorpe, *Zénon, un homme d'affaires* (Louvain 1995) 78–85 with photograph; *C.Zen.Pal.* 31].

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 42 (2001) 117–124
© 2001 *GRBS*

> and make you far greater with the king and more conspicuous in bodily health. Do not be alarmed by the outlay, that will be a great expense to you, to the contrary it will be by way of substantial profit to you; for I will join in overseeing all these things. Farewell.

In what city was this shrine of Sarapis intended? Overseas from Egypt, it is agreed; and probably a city allied with the Ptolemies, where Apollonius would have authority. Most scholars have looked to Caria, as Apollonius has been thought to be Carian and the interloper came from Cnidus; or else to Palestine, where Apollonius had an estate; or, most recently, to Aspendus in Pamphylia, where Zoilus came from, on the theory that this was also Apollonius' native city.[2] The letter has often been cited as testimony to the Ptolemies' program of spreading the cult of Sarapis as an instrument of their rule.

The suggestion of Palestine is unhelpful, as we do not know where Apollonius' estate was. But it has the merit of addressing how Apollonius might have been in a position to take charge of the matter. Criscuolo's argument for Aspendus is attractive for the same reason, for it would explain why Apollonius' help was sought at all: Aspendus was his home (on her theory), in which he might reasonably take an interest, whereas his authority or influence elsewhere in the Ptolemaic possessions is doubtful.

But it remains to ask how Apollonius could supervise such a distant project, or why his cooperation was needed to found a cult even in his native city—surely the cooperation of the local civic government would have been more to the point. We should be surprised to find a foreigner, the Cnidian, arriving in a Greek

[2] After Edgar, Wilcken, *ArchPF* 6 (1920) 395; Père Vincent, *RBibl* 29 (1920) 169–175 (Gaza); P. Roussel, *RHLittRel* N.S. 7 (1921) 35 and *Syria* 23 (1942) 26 (Aspendus?); Deissmann, *Licht* 123; E. R. Bevan, *Later Greek Religion* (London 1927) 69 (translating Zoilus' διαπλεύσω as "cross the sea"); Fraser (*supra* n.1) 41–42 (Ptolemaic, so not Aspendus); R. S. Bagnall, *The Administration of the Ptolemaic Possessions Outside Egypt* (Leiden 1976) 98; P. Pestman, *Guide to the Zenon Archive* (*Pap.Lugd.Bat.* XXI [1981]) 507, 511; L. Criscuolo, *Studia hellenistica* 34 (1998) 66–72 (Aspendus). For an exception see n.8 *infra*.

polis and starting to build a shrine, without reference to any authorization by the city; much the same objection applies to Zoilus even if he was a native, who discusses the project without the least reference to a polis and its assembly. And it would be astonishing if any Greek city (Aspendus was reputedly founded by Argos) had a "Greek quarter."[3]

This reading of the geography is based upon a single word, the verb διαπλεῖν in line 5: ὅπως ἂν διαπλεύσω πρὸς σὲ, "sail over/across/through to you." The interpretation goes back to Edgar: Zoilus would have used παραπλέω if he were on the coast of Egypt or καταπλέω if he were coming down the Nile.

Geography and philology combine to address this puzzle. As to geography, it wants little imagination to see what water in Egypt one might have occasion to "sail across." Crossing the Nile is a part of daily life in Egypt, then and now. As to philology, in Greek Egypt people did speak casually and often of "sailing up" and "sailing down," ἀναπλέω (*e.g. PSI* V 483; *P.Mich.* I 55; *FGrHist* 608 F 8) and καταπλέω (*P.Oxy.* XVIII 2189.5). The meaning was obvious, and was sometimes made explicit as when one talked of sailing down to Alexandria (*C.Ord.Ptol.* 29.3; *cf. P.Mich.* I 97 κατ[ε]νεχθῆ). By contrast, διαπλεῖν and διαβαίνειν were the normal Greek words for crossing a river, or some comparable span of water.[4] In Egypt, when someone says, without further elaboration, that he will "sail across to you," surely the first body of water that his listener

[3] Criscuolo (*supra* n.2: 66) cites the Aspendian decree *SEG* XVII 639 granting citizenship to Pamphylian, Lycian, Cretan, Greek, and Pisidian troops *ca* 300 B.C.; but this act does not show that any of these soldiers settled in Aspendus, or that there would consequently be a "Greek quarter" forty years later.

[4] Examples are legion; to cite only the most famous of crossings, Plut. *Caes.* 32 ἡ διάβασις (the Rubicon). Of other narrow bands of water: *e.g.*, the Euripus, Thuc. 3.93.1 ὁ διάπλους. In 307 B.C. Demetrius "sailed along" from Caria to Cilicia, whence he "sailed across" to Cyprus: παραπλεύσας εἰς Κιλικίαν ... διέπλευσεν εἰς Κύπρον (Diod. 20.47.1). Each year in the ceremony called the διάβασις of the great god Ammon, his statue was paraded across the Nile from Thebes to Karnak (*P.Tor.Choach.* 12.ii.2, viii.20). Crossing to islands in the Nile (διαβαίνειν): *P.Eleph.* 29.7; *W.Chr.* 11.31, 38; Plut. *Mor.* 359C.

will think of is not the Mediterranean but the Nile. Zoilus and Apollonius were simply on opposite sides of the river.

The other word that is suggestive in the letter is "you": Zoilus does not say that the god told him to "travel to Egypt," but to "sail over to you." The trip seems to be not a grand one between Asia and Africa but an intimate one between my place and yours. The tone of the letter is apologetic; and one does not apologize for not dropping by if this would entail a voyage from western Anatolia to middle Egypt.

All this implies a far more constricted geography than has been envisaged: in Zoilus' letter we are in the world of Memphis (where Apollonius usually lived) and its countryside, including the Fayum. We should eliminate this document from the discussions of Ptolemaic religious policy overseas. And as Fraser observed (*supra* n.1), it is not about Ptolemaic policy at all, but the demands of Sarapis himself. That scholarly agenda has sustained a reading of the letter that is needlessly strained: nothing in it suggests a wider scope than the Nile valley.

What then of the man "from Cnidus"? Again the issue is tone: giving this level of detail makes Zoilus' narrative credible. To say more, giving the man's name, would call for explanation. To say less, merely "someone," would sound vague and evasive, even hostile, like the τινες, "certain persons," often invoked in petitions as the source of the petitioner's difficulty. There were Cnidians in Ptolemaic Egypt;[5] this detail tells Apollonius that the problem is real and urgent, without distracting him onto the topic of exactly who the interloper was.[6]

Where, therefore, was the intended temple of Sarapis? "In the Greek quarter by the harbor." To a reader in Egypt, this can only have meant one place: Memphis, with its Greek quarter

[5]Two others in the Zenon archive alone: *P.Cair.Zen.* I 59003, II 59173.

[6]To cite a contemporary, much the same tactic is employed in Callim. *Ep.* 1.1 (ξεῖνος 'Αταρνείτης, his identity irrelevant); contrast the tone of *Ep.* 2 (ξεῖν' 'Αλικαρνησεῦ) for a friend who is named and is the subject of the poem.

attested since the time of Herodotus. For the rest of Egypt, Memphis was America, the land of hyphenated ethnics. We hear of a Greek quarter, a Carian (Polyaen. 7.3; Aristagoras *FGrHist* 680 F 9), a Syrian-Persian (all three in *PSI* IV 488 from the Zenon archive), a Tyrian (Hdt. 2.112), and of Phoenician-Egyptians, Carians, Greek-Memphites (*PSI* V 531 from the Zenon archive),[7] distinct communities which from pharaonic times on probably had been making aggressive claims about their privileges. To the Fayum and its vicinity, Memphis was the big city, and it looms large in the Zenon papyri.

Moreover, we happen to know, at least by name, where Apollonius was when he received this letter: at Berenice's Port, according to the docket his secretary wrote on the papyrus (ἐν τῶι Βερενίκης ὅρμωι).[8] Wilcken argued that this lay somewhat to the north of Memphis, and on the east side of the Nile; he has been generally followed.[9] Apollonius was there in February and March of 257, and for some of this time Zenon was with him.[10] Their constant involvement with Memphis suggests that Berenice's Port was immediately convenient to the great city, a kind of suburb; and Memphis stood on the west side of the Nile. The

[7]For further references see *Chrest.Wilck.* I p.18; Calderini, *Diz.geogr.* III 260; D. Crawford, *Memphis under the Ptolemies* (Princeton 1988) 10–20; W. Clarysse, *Studia Hellenistica* 24 (1980) 102. On the Phoenicians see W. Spiegelberg, *Kemi* 2 (1929) 107–112; G. Castagna, *QuadLingLettStran* 6 (1981) 195–204. On Caromemphites, from as early as the sixth century, O. Masson, *Carian Inscriptions from North Saqqara* (London 1978); Clarysse 105–106, tabulating "Hellenised Carians" in the Zenon archive. On Idumaeans, U. Rapaport, *RevPhil* II.43 (1969) 77–81; Crawford, *Pap.Congr.XVII* (Naples 1984) III 1069–1075.

[8]W. Schubart, in a general lecture *Die religiöse Haltung des frühen Hellenismus* (= *Der Alte Orient* 35.2 [Leipzig 1937]) 9 n.1, without comment translated the wished-for site as "by the harbor of Berenice's Port," which is not in the Greek—perhaps a slip.

[9]*ArchPF* 8 (1927) 70–71, developing a suggestion of Edgar; followed by Calderini, *Diz.geogr.* II 41; Pestman, *Guide* 481.

[10]*Cf.* Pestman, *Guide* pp.138, 265: Apollonius in Memphis on 26 Jan., in Berenikes Hormos by 3 Feb. through 10 March, then to Mendes, then he and Zenon in April came back to Memphis. Zenon was in Memphis by late Dec. 258, at Berenikes Hormos from at least 27 Feb. 257 for more than a month, overlapping with Apollonius. Our letter dates from 13 Feb. 257.

implication is that Zoilus was writing in Memphis. Memphis was Apollonius' place: well could he be expected to take an active part in a new cult construction there.

If we recognize that Memphis is the intended locale of the new shrine, then the religious geography makes sense. Zoilus has in mind not a replacement for the great Sarapeum four miles west of the city, but an urban surrogate, a precinct perhaps with only an altar,[11] a doubling familiar from Greek civic life. A famous example in Athens is the great temple at Eleusis and the little city Eleusinium by the Agora. To go from Memphis to the Sarapeum, one had to walk up out of the Nile valley onto the shelf of the western desert and out into the barren land, a walk of four miles. It is a good two hours on foot, and a significant climb. Memphites could not pay casual visits to the Sarapeum: this was a pilgrimage, the work of most of a day.[12] An urban precinct and altar, the least minimum apparatus of Greek cult (*cf.* Hdt. 2.178.1), would offer significant convenience to the pious, and specifically to the Greek pious, which is what Sarapis evidently wanted.

I suggest that Zoilus' proposal to Apollonius was neither Ptolemaic imperial politics nor social engineering: it was instead a religious solution to a religious problem, the need to make piety a feasible part of Greek daily life. It is rather a Greek solution. Polytheism everywhere sees piety—religion—chiefly in its recurrent actions amid daily life more than in doctrines or ethics. But among polytheists, the Greeks were more laissez-faire than many others. The hierarchies and entitlements and

[11] In line 6 Wilcken restored συντελεσθῆναι αὐτῶι [ὑπὸ σοῦ Σαραπιεῖόν τε] καὶ τέμενος. But the "you" is arbitrary, an attempt to explain why Apollonius is approached; in my view it is unlikely that Sarapis would tell Zoilus that Apollonius should build a temple. Nor is the noun likely, for a "Sarapeum" would include the land on which it stood, the *temenos*. What is usually found on a *temenos* is an altar: I suggest [– ca 10 – βωμόν τε] καὶ τέμενος . "Altar and precinct" was an obvious way to inaugurate a sacred place—to wit, the altar mentioned at the end of the same sentence.

[12] *Cf. SB* III 6796.79–80: ἀναβαίνοντος Ἀπολλωνίου εἰς τὸ Σαραπιεῖον, "Apollonius went up to the Sarapeum" (from Memphis: early 257 B.C.).

power of Egyptian priests were largely alien to Greek experience. Greeks might have applied Joyce's phrase to the Egyptians, "a priest-ridden people"; Herodotus' reaction was akin to that (2.37). In Greece there were of course families entitled to supply the priest of some cult. But that is a far cry from the control of sacred space and its events by specialized and organized professional priests that characterized Egypt; their presence and authority must sometimes have been been intrusive and obnoxious to the Greek newcomers in their own exercise of piety. Zoilus' little shrine of Sarapis, established "in the Greek quarter," gave the Greeks of Memphis immediate and daily access to the god, in addition to and independent of the more ambitious pilgrimage to the great shrine up on the desert with all its native priestly formalities. Greeks, making their pious gestures to Sarapis now locally, would be free of supervision by the Egyptian hierarchy.

Zoilus' foundation then is hardly an assimilation to Egypt and its ways and gods. For the Greeks Sarapis was not just another Egyptian god. Individual Greeks saw him variously as a special patron of the Ptolemaic house, or as the local name of the healer Asclepius. He figures often in their prayers mentioned in the papyri. When a Greek begins a letter to a superior with the familiar formula "I make daily obeisance for you to Sarapis and Isis," we think naturally of a household shrine and statuettes. But here too is a motive for a local Sarapeum. A public and communal shrine gives greater honor to the god and greater satisfaction to the worshipper; yet no one could go daily to the great temple in the desert. The new cult would allow the Greek Memphites to honor Sarapis in a place more convenient not only geographically but also socially and administratively. Such access was the goal of Zoilus' dreams and the god's wish.

We do not have Apollonius' answer, but another papyrus may be relevant. In a list of lands devoted by Apollonius to the up-keep of various individuals and two gods, dated about two

years after Zoilus' letter,[13] one of the gods is Zeus Labraundeus, whom I would take to be the god of the Carians' temple in Memphis. The other is "Sarapis-Asclepius"; if we assume that this cult was in Memphis as well, perhaps it was the little shrine of Sarapis that Zoilus wanted.

The dominant modern view of the cult of Sarapis has been that it is all politics, not real religion—the Ptolemies spreading their empire overseas and integrating Greeks and Egyptians at home.[14] In the Zoilus letter we can read an articulated propagation of the cult of Sarapis in Ptolemaic lands. What does it imply about intentions? Neither Ptolemaic power nor social integration. What Zoilus wants is a little Sarapeum in the Greek quarter of Memphis, a convenient place for the Hellenomemphites to pay their respects to Sarapis. This does not look like an attempt to bring Greeks and Egyptians together. We can even suspect that an Egyptian might not have been very welcome if he had walked into the Greek quarter to take advantage of this shrine. For the rest, the letter offers what we see regularly in religious experience the world over: the motive is the god's command, and the theme is human reluctance and weakness and eventual acquiescence and enthusiasm. As an expression of piety, Zoilus' letter has the ring of truth.

March, 2002

Dept. of Classical Studies
Duke University 90103
Durham, NC 27708
krigsby@duke.edu

[13] *P.Mich.* I 31; the date is controlled by *P.Col.* IV 67 (August 255).

[14] An admirable exception is A. E. Samuel, *From Athens to Alexandria* (Louvain 1983) 75–101. Roussel long ago stressed that the coming of the cult to Delos owed nothing to Ptolemaic policy (*Les cultes égyptiens à Délos* [Nancy 1916] 239–245).