

MVSE

ANNUAL of the
MUSEUM of ART and ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

NUMBER EIGHT: 1974



A Syncretistic Statuette

The name given to the fusion of various divinities in a polytheistic system is syncretism. Although the phenomenon has been over-emphasized by many modern scholars who are used to thinking in terms of monotheism and therefore cannot bring themselves to think polytheistically,¹ it remains a salient characteristic of late paganism, and one of the cults which it characterizes particularly is that of Sabazius.² It is therefore welcome to have a monument which confirms a specific syncretism in the Sabazius cult.

The Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri-Columbia recently acquired a bronze statuette of the god Sabazius³ which seems to show signs of syncretism with the god Men. The statuette shows the divinity clad in typical "Phrygian" costume, i.e. sleeved tunic, cap, long trousers and boots. Both his hands are upraised in an attitude of benediction. The feet are placed on a ram's head. On top of the god's head, above his bearded and mustachioed face, there is a crescent moon bearing a knob at each end.

In most respects the statuette, which portrays the divinity in a half-seated position, and is unfinished on the back, belongs to a well known group of Sabazius statuettes, intended to be attached to the palms of the votive hands frequently dedicated to this god.⁴ Several of these are still attached to the hands, e.g., one in the National Museum of Naples, found in Herculaneum in 1746, and one in the St. Louis Art Museum.⁵

A Sabazius-hand found in Pompeii shows such a figure of Sabazius still in place on a votive hand.⁶ It is interesting for this study because it seems to show Sabazius with the crescent moon on his head, thus betraying lunar syncretism. The statuette, however, is without the knobs which characterize our piece. There is also a similar figure without crescent moon on



Bronze statuette of the god Sabazius, showing syncretism with the god Men. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia.

a hand found in Vado, Liguria, in 1894 (present whereabouts unknown), although in this case the resemblance is slighter, as the god's hands are not raised in blessing, nor is there a ram's head.⁷

There also exist at least four of these statuettes now separated from the hands to which they once belonged: one in the Louvre, one in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, one in the Musée de Picardie (found in Amiens), and one in the Berlin Antiquarium (found in Sardinia). All but the first of these bear a very strong resemblance to our figure, as well as to the figures on the Naples and St. Louis hands.⁸ There also exist hands to which such figures were originally attached but are now lost. Such are hands in Budapest and in Baltimore, although in both these cases the ram's head was cast in one piece with the hand, not with the Sabazius statuette, thus ruling out the possibility that any of the known figurines belong to these hands.⁹

The one thing which, of course, immediately distinguishes this figurine from all the examples mentioned previously, except the Pompeii hand, is the crescent moon on top of the head. Although crescent moons occur on some of the votive hands,¹⁰ Sabazius is not particularly known as a lunar divinity. Admittedly, there are occasional lunar figures found in conjunction with Sabazius. Such, for instance, is the small bust of Selene to the left of Sabazius' head on a well known relief in Copenhagen, balancing the bust of Helios on the right.¹¹ There is also a crescent near the head of a figure (sometimes wrongly identified as Men) which is shown leading Sabazius on a chariot on the relief with inscription commemorating the introduction of his cult into the *Κολονηῶν κατοικία* in A.D. 100-101.¹² But nowhere that I know of is Sabazius actually portrayed as a lunar divinity, except in a statuette from Pompeii, now in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-



Votive Sabazius-hand from Pompeii, showing the figure of the god with a crescent moon on his head.

Museum, Braunschweig.¹³ This shows Sabazius with a ram's head beneath his feet and a crescent moon on his head but, unlike our statuette, Sabazius in this case has only the left arm (the hand is missing) raised in blessing. The right arm (the hand likewise missing) is outstretched to hold some attribute.

The most surprising feature, however, about the article in which von der Osten published the Sabazius statuette from Braunschweig, is that he published another with it, which he stated to be in a private collection in Ankara. This is so strikingly similar to the figure now in Missouri that it must either be the same figure, which has somehow made its way here in the course of time, or at least be from the same mold. All attempts to trace this statuette have unfortunately failed. Neither can Mrs. von der Osten give any information, nor can the dealer in New York from whom it was acquired, except that it had been in his hands since the late 1950's.

The remarkable thing about these two (or three) statuettes, as von der Osten realized, is the presence of the crescent moon, which can hardly be interpreted as pointing to anything except a syncretism of Men and Sabazius. Particularly striking is the fact (a point apparently overlooked by von der Osten) that the crescent which adorns the divinity's head in the Missouri and Ankara statuettes (assuming them not to be one and the same) has knobs on either end. These knobs are particularly characteristic of the cult of Men, and occur on a number of monuments of this divinity.¹⁴ This syncretism, now attested in art, would seem to offer archaeological confirmation of a passage in Proclus¹⁵ which has hitherto stood alone in attesting a connection between these two gods:

Ἐπεὶ καὶ παρ' Ἑλλησι μηνὸς ἱερὰ
 παρειλήφαμεν, καὶ παρὰ Φρυγῆι Μῆνα
 Σαβάζιον ὑμνούμεον ἐν μέσαις ταῖς τοῦ
 Σαβαζίου τελεταῖς.



Statuette of Sabazius (H. 6.1 cm.) from Pompeii. Photo courtesy of the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, Germany.

"Since also among the Greeks we have received the sacred rites of the month (or "of Men"), and among the Phrygians, Men Sabazius (or "Sabazius the month") being hymned in the midst of the ceremonies of Sabazius."

To return to our first statement: this passage from Proclus and the statuette are valuable not only in that they confirm each other, but in that they prove the existence of an actual syncretism which cannot be dismissed as mere wishful thinking by scholars used to conceiving things in monotheistic terms, and desiring to project their views into antiquity.

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¹ See the *caveat* of L. Robert, *Laodiceé du Lycos, le nymphée* (Quebec and Paris 1969) 290, à propos of the theories of W. M. Ramsay: "Effaçant arbitrairement le polythéisme des peuples d'Asie Mineure, on arrivera, par des manipulations qui ne sont que des affirmations faisant fi de tous les documents, à substituer aux dieux et aux déesses de ces siècles un dieu unique et une déesse unique, qui sont déjà plus satisfaisants pour des esprits formés à la théologie chrétienne, et plus encore dans une confession qui repousse le culte des saints."

² Cf. W.O.E. Oesterley, "The Cult of Sabazius, a Study in Syncretism," in *The Labyrinth*, ed. S.H. Hooke (London, n.d., ca. 1933), although this article unquestionably goes

too far in seeing syncretism where there is little evidence.

³ Acc. No. 71.139. Height, 9.2 cm., width, 4.2 cm. H. H. von der Osten gives 91 mm. as the height for the statuette which he publishes from a private collection in Ankara, "Eine neue Sabazios Statuette," *Orientalia Suecana* 2 (1953) 29 ff.

⁴ See my article, "Two Votive Hands in Missouri," *Muse* 4 (1970) 43-48.

⁵ C. Blinkenberg, *Archaeologische Studien* (Copenhagen 1904) 75, no. E 13. See also V. Tran Tam Tinh, *Le Culte des divinités orientales à Herculanum* (Leiden 1971) 94-95, no. 69 and figs. 32-33. The St. Louis piece is illustrated in *Muse* 4 (1970) p. 45.

⁶ This hand has been published in M. Della Corte, *Loves and Lovers in Ancient Pompeii* (Rome 1960) 90, fig. 16; Olga Elia, "Vasi magici e mane pantee a Pompeii," *Rendiconti dell' Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere, e Belle Arti, Napoli*, NS 35 (1960) 7-9 and pl. 3.

⁷ Blinkenberg, *op. cit.*, 77, no. E 17.

⁸ Louvre: S. Reinach, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine* II (1897) 480, No. 1; Bibliothèque Nationale: *ibid.*, p. 478, no. 3; Amiens: *Revue archéologique* (1894, II) 374; Berlin: Blinkenberg, *op. cit.*, 100, fig. 41. See also Giulia Sfamemi Gasparo, *I culti orientali in Sicilia* (Leiden 1973) 278, no. 337 and fig. 106.

⁹ Budapest: Blinkenberg, *op. cit.*, no. E 28 and fig. 38; Baltimore: D.K. Hill, *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehmann* (*Marsyas* Suppl. I, 1964) 132-135.

¹⁰ Blinkenberg, *op. cit.*, nos. E 1, E 29 and E 30.

¹¹ Blinkenberg, *op. cit.*, pl. 2.

¹² Eisele in W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* IV, col. 244, fig. 3. Cf. L. Robert, *Hellenica* 6 (Paris 1948) 111-113.

¹³ Most recent and best publication, H. H. von der Osten, *op. cit.*, 31 ff. and fig. 2.

¹⁴ Cf. E. N. Lane, *Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Dei Menis* I (Leiden 1971) nos. 96, 115, 285. The only reasonable explanation which seems to have been given for these knobs is that of F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des romains* (Paris 1942) 222. He would explain them on practical grounds in the case of free-standing crescents, to prevent breakage or injury to persons. On reliefs they simply reflect the representation of free-standing crescents. Although particularly characteristic of the Men cult, they do occasionally appear in other contexts. Cf. Cumont, *op. cit.*, fig. 52, a funerary stele from Pannonia Inferior.

¹⁵ *Scholia in Platonis Timaeum* IV 251 C. Proclus (5th century after Christ) is talking about the propriety of worshiping various units of time, but the fact that Men was often merely the deified month is borne out by the translation of his name as Mensis on the coins of Antioch in Pisidia.