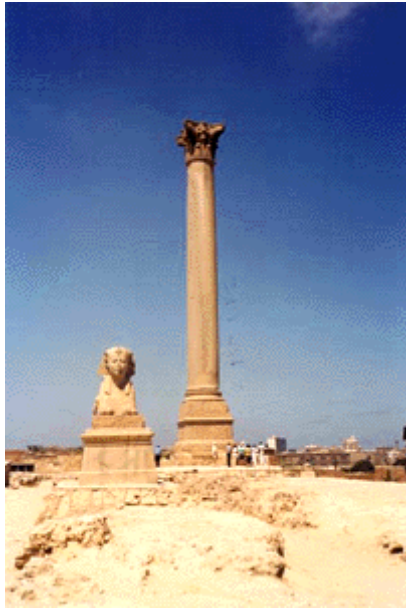


Rufinus *HE*  
The Destruction of the Serapeum  
A.D. 391



*(remains of the Serapeum in Alexandria)*

2. (19) The cult of idols, which had begun to be neglected and abandoned after the measures taken by Constantine and his successors, were completely overthrown during his (Theodosius') reign. With regard to these matters, he was so dear to God that the divine providence granted to him a special grace. For in the Thebaid, a certain monk named John was filled with the prophetic Spirit; through his counsels and answers, the emperor inquired whether it would be better to maintain peace or wage war.

(22) Meanwhile in Alexandria, new unrest at odds with the trust of these times was stirring against the Church. The commotion arose from a situation of this sort. There was a certain basilica belonging to the public domain, very old and quite neglected. The Emperor Constantius, it was said, had given it to the bishops who were publicly espousing his perverted faith. Because of the lack of maintenance over a long time, only the walls of the basilica were sound. The bishop, who at this time governed the Church, decided to ask the Emperor for this basilica in order that since the numbers of the faithful were growing, so should the number of prayer-halls. When the bishop had received the basilica and wished to begin renovation, caverns, so to speak, were found hidden in this place, dug out of the ground. The caverns were more suited for robbers and crime than for ceremonies. Accordingly, the Gentiles, who saw that their hidden retreats of crime and caverns of shame were being uncovered, finding it intolerable that evils concealed for so many centuries and covered by darkness should be exposed, as though they had drunk a

chalice of serpents, they all began to go mad and to rage openly. No longer with shouting and sedition, as was their wont, they strove to fight it out with force and with the sword. Both peoples/communities were staging frequent skirmishes in the broad public streets, and they met one another in open war.

Now our side, though in number and strength the superiors by far, because of the self-restraint of their religion were less fierce. So, very often when large numbers of our people were wounded and some even killed outright, they would flee to the temple as to a citadel. And taking quite a number of Christian captives with them there, they forced them to sacrifice at the burning altars. Those who refused they tortured with new and exquisite tortures and killed them. Some they fixed to forked-shaped yokes, they broke the shins of others, and they cast them into caves which a long past age had built carefully to be receptacles for the blood of sacrifices and other impurities of the altar. They did these things by day, at first from fear, then in confidence and desperation, and being shut up within their temple they lived by rapine and plunder.

Finally, raging against the blood of the citizens they chose a certain Olympius, by reputation and attire a philosopher, to be the leader of their crime and boldness, in order that with this standard-bearer they might defend their citadel and hold on to their tyranny. But those to whom the protection of the Roman law and the right of jurisdiction was entrusted, when they found out what had transpired, demanded to know the causes of this audacity. They asked what the mob (in which the blood of citizens was spilt before the altars in so great a crime) wanted. But the others, having strengthened the barrier, giving no explanation of the deed, kept shouting in confused and dissonant voices. Messengers, nevertheless, were sent to impress upon those inside the power of the Roman Empire, the coercive force of the laws and punishments which are accustomed to follow on acts such as theirs. Since the fortification of the place would not permit any action, unless there was greater force available, to be taken against men who were intent upon their acts of madness, the situation was referred to the emperor.



*Theodosius - gold solidus*

He (the emperor Theodosius), who by his inborn clemency preferred to correct rather than to lose those who had gone astray, issued a rescript to this effect: punishment must not be exacted for those whom blood spilled before the altars had made martyrs, for the glory of their merits conquers the grief of their death. For

the rest of the situation however, the cause of the evil and the roots of discord, which came about for the defense of pagan images, ought to be excised completely. Once these were destroyed, the cause itself of the wars (*bellorum causa*) would be put to rest. When the emperor's rescript had arrived and after an unofficial truce of short duration was established to hear the emperor's words, both sides gathered before the temple. As soon as the first page of the letter was opened, in whose prologue the delusory superstition of the Gentiles was blamed, an enormous clamor rose from our people -- fear and astonishment invaded the Gentiles. One by one they attempted to find a hiding place, to pry open a narrow path of flight, or to merge themselves secretly with ourselves. For the presence of God gave courage to the people; and the madness of the Devil which before had raged out of control, was put to flight.



*bust of Serapis*

2. (23) The temple of Serapis in Alexandria all have heard of, I think, and many even know it. The sanctuary is raised a hundred or even more feet, not by nature but by a manmade structure, and extends on every side over a huge rectangular space. The whole edifice is built of arches with enormous windows above each arch. The hidden inner chambers are separate from one another and provide for the enactment of various ritual acts and secret observances. Sitting courts and small chapels with images of the gods occupy the edge of the highest level. Lofty houses rise up there in which the priests, or those which they call *agneuontas*, that is, those who purify themselves, are accustomed to live. Behind these buildings is a freestanding portico raised on columns and facing inward runs around the periphery. In the middle stands the temple, built on a large and magnificent scale with an exterior of marble and precious columns. Inside there was a statue of Serapis so vast that the right hand touched one wall and the left the other. They say this monstrosity was built of every kind of metal and wood. The interior walls of the chapels are covered in gold laminate at the lower level, in silver above the first, and finally in bronze, which was to provide protection for the more precious metals. Some parts of the temple were even designed by art and deception to evoke the astonishment and admiration of visitors. A very narrow window had been laid out on the side towards the rising sun in such a way that at dawn the Sun was brought in to salute Serapis -- for the moment had been rigorously calculated -- a captive sun's ray lights up through this opening, as though approaching the statue, the mouth and the lips of Serapis, so that to the eyes of the crowd, Serapis appears

to be saluted by a kiss from the Sun. There was yet another illusion of the same kind. As is commonly known, it is the nature of a magnetic stone to have the property of attracting and repelling iron. A craftsman had fashioned a likeness of the Sun out of very pure iron for the following purpose: a stone which had, as we have already said, the property of attracting iron, was fixed above in the ceiling plaster, and when the statue was put into its place below it, the stone attracted the iron to it by a natural force. The worshipper believed that the statue had been raised up and rested suspended in the air. But after this fake had been exposed by an unexpected fall, the ministers of the lie said, "The Sun has bid farewell to Serapis and has gone up to be with him." Many other such deceptions were constructed long ago in that place, but there is no need to go on and enumerate each one.

Thus, as we have begun to relate, after the reading of the rescript, our people were ready to overthrow the Author of Error. However, a belief had been spread abroad by the Gentiles themselves, that, if a human hand was laid violently on this statue, the earth would immediately open up, dissolving into chaos, and suddenly the heavens would collapse into the abyss. This story gave the people a senseless pause, when behold -- one of the soldiers, better protected by his faith than by his weapons, seizing a double-edged axe, stood up and with all his strength struck the jaw of the Old Man. A shout was raised by both groups of people, but neither the sky fell nor the earth sunk. Repeating his action several times, he cut off the worm-eaten genius of wood, blackened by smoke once it was cast down and thrown into the fire, and it burned as easily as dry wood. After which, the head was taken, having been torn away at the neck, with its modius broken. Then the feet and the other limbs were cut up in pieces by blows of the axe, quartered and dragged off with the aid of ropes. Then in each locale, member by member, the decrepit Old Man was burned under the eyes of his adoring Alexandria. Finally, the trunk which still remained was burned in the amphitheatre. Such was the end of the vain superstition and ancient error of Serapis.

..... *section on the origin of Serapis & the horrors of pagan cults ....*

2. (24) When these things were brought into the light and exposed in broad daylight, although the Gentiles had been dispersed either due to their confusion or to their shame; if one of them, however, had been able to remain there, he was astonished at having been snared for so many centuries by such sacrileges and shameful frauds. Consequently, a very great number of them, condemning the lies and discovering the crimes, embraced the faith of Christ and the cult of true religion ....

(26) .... But while these things took care of some Chaldaeans, in our day, when Theophilus the bishop of God came, no sweat could succor at all, nor could any deceptive trick with wax come to the aid (of the Canopic deities). Everything was destroyed and razed to ground-level. (27) But that was nothing compared with how he transformed the place of squalor. The dens of vices and

tombs of dissipation were pulled down and lofty churches of the true God were constructed. And indeed, even in the sepulcher of Serapis, when the profane buildings had been leveled, on one side a martyrium was erected, and on the other a church. It seems to me worthy of interest to recall how the occasion presented itself for the construction of this martyrium.

2. (28) In the days of Julian (the Apostate, 361-363), as if their bridles had been loosened, the ferocity of the pagans broke out with every possible violence. Because of this, it happened that near Sebaste, a city of Palestine, they overran the tomb of John the Baptist with rabid intent and sacrilegious hands. They scattered his bones, and then after having gathered them together again, they burned them with fire and scattered the sacred ashes in the fields and countryside, having mixed them with dust. But the providence of God arranged that, some monks from the monastery of Philip, the man of God, were coming from Jerusalem to pray there at that very moment. When they saw that such a crime had been perpetrated by human hands -- though with a bestial spirit -- preferring death to the defilement of such a sacrilege, they earnestly joined in conflict with those who were gathering the bones for burning. As far as it could be done, after having collected them with great piety, they furtively left the stupefied and demented pagans, and bore the venerable relics to their holy father Philip. Concluding that he was not worthy to preserve such a treasure under his own care, he sent the undefiled relics of the victim to the patriarch, who at that time was Athanasius, through the agency of Julian, his adjunct and bishop of Parentium. When he received them, Athanasius, in the presence of a great throng of witnesses, sealed in the hollow wall of a sacred building, and in a prophetic spirit, preserved them for those in coming generations.

And now, with the vestiges of idolatry destroyed and prostrate, in formerly profane buildings, golden roofs are raised. But after the fall of Serapis -- who had never lived -- could the sanctuaries of any other demon remain standing? It is too little to say that all of the shrines dedicated to some demon or other in Alexandria, were destroyed almost column by column. In every Egyptian town, fortified post, village, and the entire countryside, along the banks of the river and even in the desert, all of the sanctuaries -- or rather, all of the tombs -- which could be found were overthrown and razed, thanks to the zeal of each bishop, with the result that the land which had been unjustly assigned to demons was once again given over to cultivation.

(29) Moreover, it happened at Alexandria that the busts of Serapis which were on the walls, in the entrees, on the doorposts and even in the windows of each house, were completely torn away and defaced in such a way that there no longer remained any possible trace of a divine name, of a god himself, or any other demon. In each of their places, the sign of the Lord's Cross was painted on the doorposts, entrees, windows, walls, and columns. Then those remaining pagans saw what had been done, and they remembered, it was said, a very important tradition which formerly had been confided to them. This Sign -- ours -- of the Lord's Cross, the Egyptians

possessed among those letters which are called hieratic -- that is to say, sacred -- possessing it among the other letters making up their alphabet. They were certain that the meaning of this letter or term was, "The Life to Come." Those who then were converted to the faith because they were filled with wonder in the presence of these events, said that this had been handed down to them by the ancients, and that those who remained until the coming of the sign representing life were greatly honored. For this reason, it turned out that some priests and temple ministers were converted to the faith -- a greater number than those still addicted to the impostures of error and the artifices of deception.

2. (30) It had been the custom in Egypt that the rod measuring the rising of the Nile's waters was an attribution of the temple of Serapis -- regarded as the author of the growth and inundation. When his statue had been demolished and consumed by fire, everyone said that Serapis, resenting the offense committed against him, would no longer lavish the high waters and customary growth. But in order that God might demonstrate that it was not Serapis who stood behind the Nile, but that He was the One who ordained that the river's waters should increase in their proper times; in the following season, no one could recall in human memory that there had ever been an inundation like that one before. In the city's theatres, the pagans of Alexandria, irritated at the unexpected occurrence, exclaimed in derision that the River, like an old man or fool, could not control his waters. For this reason, it was decided that the cubit, that is to say the instrument which measured the water level, (and which they called *pêchus*), would henceforth be deposited in the church of the Lord of the waters. Now when these events were announced to the pious emperor, raising his hands towards heaven, he said in response to this report, "I give thanks to You, O Christ, that without ruin/disaster to this great city, such an ancient error has been annihilated."