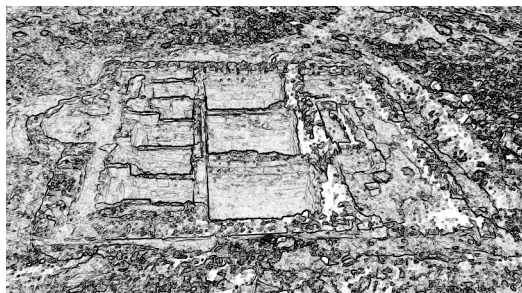
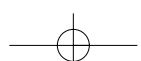
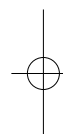
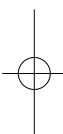
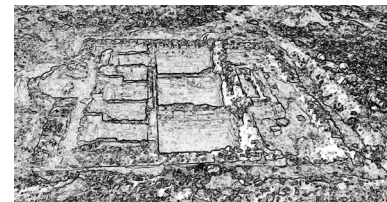


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MAREA ON LAKE MARYUT





Marea or Philoxenite? This question comes to mind first. There are doubts as to the identification of the site with Herodotus' Marea owing to the fact that nothing in the assemblage appears to pre-date the 6th century at the earliest. Judging by the accumulation of coin finds, the town had its heyday in the 7th century and was abandoned not later than the first quarter of the 8th century, as demonstrated pointedly by the total absence of typically Islamic glazed pottery. But if not Marea, then what could it have been? One idea is that the settlement was founded at the end of the 5th century by Philoxenos, prefect of Byzantine Emperor Anastasius, to accommodate pilgrims traveling across the lake to the monastery of a major Coptic saint, St Menas. A city by the name of Philoxenite is indeed mentioned in the historical sources of the period.

The fertile land of Mareotis spreading on the southern shore of Lake Maryut

(ancient Mareotis), to the southwest of the city of Alexandria, was extolled in Antiquity for its quality wines, olives and fruit. The lake and the channels connecting it with the Nile and feeding sweet water into it, constituted a convenient route for transporting Egyptian goods from deep inland, via Alexandria, to the Mediterranean in general. The now submerged Mareoticus harbor in the southern part of Ptolemaic and Roman Alexandria once served as a transit point for ships sailing down a man-made canal to the great port of Eunostos already on the Mediterranean. With time, however, the canals silted up for lack of maintenance and the lake all but dried up. The shores of the lake became largely depopulated. Even so, the Mareotis region was still supplying Alexandria with fruit and almonds in the early 19th century, as described by E. Quatremère, while four hundred years earlier the Arabian traveler Maqrizi reported seeing flourishing villages

there. In 1801, when the British opened the floodgates from the sea in order to cut off the French regiments from fresh water, the lake was re-flooded.

The Taenia or Abu Sir Ridge, as it is called today, ran between the lake and the Mediterranean Sea connecting Alexandria with Cyrenaica. It was the easiest road and both Julius Caesar and Napoleon marched their armies this way.

Trade necessitated the building of harbors along the coast, hence the presence of several complexes of ruins on the southern lake shore. The biggest of these, featuring four massive stone-built piers up to 150 m long, was identified by Khediv Ismail's court astronomer Mahmoud el-Falaki as the ancient Marea in 1866. The first plan of the harbor installations was drawn up by A. De Cosson in 1935.

According to Herodotus (II 30,2), Marea was a post of Egyptian soldiers guarding the Libyan border during the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. Under the Persians, it was the capital of an independent Libyan and Egyptian kingdom, which spread from the Canopic arm of the Nile to Cyrenaica. Its king, Inaros, rose unsuccessfully against the Persians and was captured and executed in 454 BC. The town's heyday came in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods when it functioned as a major trade centre in the region, second only to Alexandria.

The ruins were investigated by Fawzi el-Fakharani in 1977-1979 who excavated a double bath, waterfront street, harbor fortifications and grain storage facilities. The site explored by the Polish team covers ca. 19 ha of land enclosed by the lake on the north and east, and limited on the west by a road connecting Burg el-Arab with the Alexandria-Siwa Oasis highway. Lying to

the south is Hawwariya village. During seven campaigns archaeologists have laid out a site grid and prepared a topographical contour map of the area. A bath with adjoining well supplying the facility with water and a funerary chapel have been explored, and the excavations of a Christian basilica are underway.

The brick building of the bath was located 300 m south of the lake. It occupied an area of 642 m² and contained a men's and women's part with separate entrances preceded by porticoed courtyards. Heated by two furnaces stoked from a large vaulted cellar, it featured a hot-air circulation system consisting of an under-floor part (hypocaust) and clay pipes inserted into the thickness of the walls (*tubulatio*). The interiors were richly decorated with marble-slab pavements and marble columns bearing Corinthian capitals, and the plastered walls bore colorful murals, all strongly suggestive of the luxurious character of this establishment. Four shops presumably for selling fragrant oils and other bath accessories, and a public latrine were discovered by the excavators outside the north wall of the bath edifice.

The bath turned out to have its own well supplying it with water. The well, located 5 m to the north of the building, was a stone-walled structure 5 m deep, supported by four buttresses on the ground level. Running around it was a path for oxen turning a horizontal wheel that put into motion a vertical one furnished with pottery jars for raising water from the well. Until recently such devices, called *sāqiyah* in Arabic, have been used by Egyptian villagers to irrigate their fields and gardens. The invention itself appears to originate in the 3rd century BC. Taking advantage of the

principle of connected vessels, ancient builders caused the water to flow from the pool by the *sāqiyah* through a clay pipe behind the northern wall of the bath and up the wall of one of the shops straight into the bathing pools. There must have been a number of such installations supplying the bath with water, but only one of them has been discovered.

Another 100 m to the south there were the ruins of a building which were identified as a funerary chapel. This edifice was furnished with a west-oriented apse and three masonry grave chambers containing a number of burials associated with very poor grave goods. A Gaza amphora under the floor of the apse verified a 6th century date for the construction of this complex.

The most interesting building, however, is a basilica situated on a hill near the longest harbor pier. It was discovered by Wolfgang Müller-Wiener, outstanding architect, topographer, and director of excavations at the nearby monastery of Abu Mena in the 1960s and 1970s. But it was Peter Grossmann who first determined the plan and dimensions of the building in 1986. Grossmann also excavated part of the northern wall of the transept, an architectural feature found in only three other churches from that period, as well as the buttresses of the apse, and established a 6th century date for the structure. Surprisingly, none of the ancient written sources carried a mention of this church which was, at 49 m length and 47 m width, the second largest building of its type in Egypt (after Abu Mena). Some idea of the plan was apparent even before excavation began. It was a squat building, divided by columns into three aisles, fur-

nished with a wide transept terminating in rounded arms and a relatively tiny apse. The liturgical rooms were not on the outside, as was the rule, but incorporated into the body of the building on either side of the apse. The baptistery with round baptismal font apparently remained from an earlier building, possibly a small chapel, which had preceded the great basilica.

Two burial chambers, each 1.80 m deep, were discovered under the floor of the apse. One of these preserved a stone vault and a door slab in the entrance from the west. Multiple burials had been made in the chambers, the dead being laid there in coffins as indicated by the presence of decayed pieces of wood. The graves had been plundered making it difficult to determine the original position of the burials. Anthropological examination identified over 100 individuals: men, women, children and even the unborn. They appear to have been buried there during the invasion of Chosroes II in AD 619 when Persian troops torched Alexandria and ravaged the region. Many poorly preserved coins were found with the burials, as well as a bronze finger ring, fragments of a large amphora from the early Roman Period, and a considerable number of clay spindle whorls, an unusual discovery in this context (unless they were simply buttons?).

The rich interior decoration of the basilica included several fragmentary column shafts. The biggest ones were cut of grey striped marble and were originally located in the nave. The smaller ones may have supported the *ciborium* over the altar or constituted part of some architectural elements difficult to reconstruct today. Corinthian capitals decorated columns

of various sizes. The interior decoration of the basilica also included engaged columns of stone with Corinthian capitals formed of unpainted stucco, and wall mosaics of which small marble cubes found in the building are the only surviving evidence.

A kind of money exchange intended presumably for pilgrims visiting the basilica was discovered in 2004 beyond the southwestern corner of the building. Rare examples of bronze weights used to verify coin weight were found inside this room. Another theory is that the place was an assay office located next to the church. Were that true indeed, it would help to explain certain important questions of economy in Byzantine Egypt.

Owing to the fact that this exceptional architectural building had not been explored methodically before, it has provided a unique opportunity to verify the regulations listed in the Codex of Theodosianus II of AD 431 (IX 45, 4) concerning various facilities like living quarters for priests, gardens, baths, etc. appearing in the immediate neighborhood of churches. So far, a latrine and some apparent shops have been discovered on the northern side of the church facing the lake. The building was undoubtedly an episcopal church (*episkopeion*), although a bishopric so close to Alexandria seems untenable and indeed has not been confirmed in any of the known sources. Therefore, the basilica in Marea could not have functioned as anything more than a large parish.

One more reason why the investigation of this church is of such importance is that it must have drawn on the Alexandrian edifices for inspiration in both structural

and liturgical terms. Similar remains from Alexandria are lacking, while historical sources mentioning churches of Alexandria reveal precious little about their architecture. The basilica in Marea is also important as a source for reconstructing the general appearance of churches in Alexandria, especially as most of the marble decoration used here, like much of the pieces found in the monastery of Abu Mena, must have been salvaged whenever possible from Alexandrian buildings.

A total surprise awaited archaeologists digging under the church apse. At a depth of 1.80 m below the preserved top of walls, a grate belonging to a large amphora kiln was discovered. The part of the church intended for liturgical practices used it as a foundation. More of the grate appeared once the floor of the burial chambers under the apse was cleaned. The kiln had a diameter of 8 m, the thickness of the grate being 0.50 m. One of only a few discovered in the Nile Delta, it still contained upon discovery the last batch of amphorae and the stacking elements of clay used to separate dried vessels inside the kiln. The vessels were dated to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The wall of the kiln still stood 93 cm high and was built of mud bricks coated with mud plaster. A hole was cut in the middle of the grate to accommodate the foundations of the church. The structure of the kiln is not unlike others from the period with pillars under the grate pierced with holes to support easy circulation of hot air.

Marea or Philoxenite? The question of identity remains. The currently excavated ruins of Byzantine date are spread along the coast for 1.5 km. There can be no doubt that the four piers in the harbor were constructed

earlier than the Late Antique city. A sound sewage system discovered by the Polish expedition and the huge basilica are mute witnesses of a thriving urban agglomeration inhabited by more than just pilgrims resting on their way to sanctuaries located further inland. Moreover, an Early Roman kiln suggests that there had been a center of some

importance existing on the spot already in earlier times. Thus, the Byzantine city appears to have been founded near a harbor (possibly Herodotus' Marea), taking full advantage of existing installations and a developed city sewage system. There is every reason to believe that the harbor remained important throughout the Byzantine period.

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Plan of the site of Marea with excavated structures
(Drawing M. Niepokólczycki, B. Wronska Kucy)





*Baths in Marea, seen from the west
(Photo P. Suszek)*

*Baths in Marea. The pools and shops backing
the outer wall, viewed from the north
(Photo T. Kalarus)*





*Baths in Marea. Apodyterium with basin and ornamental column seen from the west
(Photo T. Kalarus)*

*Sāqiyah in Marea. Well and pathway for oxen turning the device, viewed from the south
(Photo T. Kalarus)*





*Funerary chapel in Marea seen from the north
(Photo P. Suszek)*

*Reinforcing the steps under the apse of the basilica,
view from the northwest. Note amphora kiln in the foreground
(Photo J.M. Kucy)*

