

Marea/Mareotis

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Since its foundation in 331 BCE and for almost a millennium after, Alexandria was the political, economic, and cultural capital of Egypt, and one of the most significant emporia of the Hellenistic and Roman world. Historical and archaeological research (see ALEXANDRIA) (Empereur 1998) has revealed the wealth of Greco-Roman Alexandria, much of which was generated by trade through its important and monumental harbors. The harbors of Alexandria included not only those on the sea, but also on Lake Mareotis to the south and west of the city. Lake Mareotis was a vital maritime link between the Mediterranean Sea and the River Nile and also supported along its shores important regional centers that were responsible for the production of a range of industries such as glass, textiles, pottery, and wine, all of which contributed significantly to the economy of Alexandria and of Egypt as a whole.

In 1935, De Cosson published the first comprehensive study of the history of human activities in the “Maryut District” (Figure 1). Subsequently, archaeological research focused on specific types of sites that classified amphorae production (Empereur and Picon in Empereur 1998: 75–88; Empereur 1998) and wineries (Rodziewicz in Empereur 1998: 27–36; Dzierzbicka 2010) in the Mareotis region. Important sites in the region were also investigated. The site of Marea (Al-Falaki 1966; El-Fakharani 1983) revealed a wealth of buildings associated with the Byzantine town, including baths, a winery, a grain mill, residential areas, a basilica, and a substantial harbor (Figure 2). However, El-Fakharani (1983) believed Marea was occupied much earlier, perhaps dating back to the late Pharaonic period. Rodziewicz’s subsequent investigations led him to challenge the identification of the site as Marea the capital of the Mareotic nome since the pre-Hellenistic period, because no archaeological remains had been found there prior to the fifth century. He

suggested instead it was the harbor town of Philoxenité that was established at the end of the fifth century as a stopover en route to the Christian monastic town of St. Mena (Rodziewicz in Empereur 1998: 27–36, 93–103; Rodziewicz 2010). Recent discoveries of an early Roman amphora kiln beneath the Byzantine basilica (Babraj and Szymańska 2010), and a Hellenistic and Roman metal workshop on the eastern peninsula of Marea (Pichot in 2010), indicate that while the town had its heyday in the seventh century and was subsequently abandoned in the early eighth century, it was in fact a thriving settlement prior to the fifth century, probably as early as the Hellenistic period, and that it never lost its importance as a commercial harbor.

Another substantial site on the north shore of Lake Mareotis is Taposiris Magna. The site has extensive remains that date from the early Hellenistic period to about the seventh century CE. Initial investigations focused mainly on the monumental structures, namely the Hellenistic temple and the tower-like funerary monument, a replica of the Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria (De Cosson 1935; Figure 3). However, Taposiris also displays evidence for thriving maritime and commercial activities, including one of the best-preserved harbors on Lake Mareotis (Empereur 1998: 225–7; Rodziewicz in Empereur 1998; Vörös 2001: 15–16). A double-opening gate or bridge, linked to a 1,600 m long artificially excavated channel defined at its eastern end by a ca. 230 m long quay, forms the semi-closed harbor basin of Taposiris Magna, which helped control the movement of people and goods across the lake. Recent excavations reveal that while the site was occupied during the Hellenistic period, the construction of the harbor took place during the early Roman period (Boussac and El-Amouri 2010).

In antiquity, Lake Mareotis was much larger than present, its main body extending for about 50 km south of Alexandria, and along its shores it supported many settlements that are now completely land-locked (De Cosson 1935; Al-Falaki 1966). Recent investigation of these sites by the Western Delta Survey has

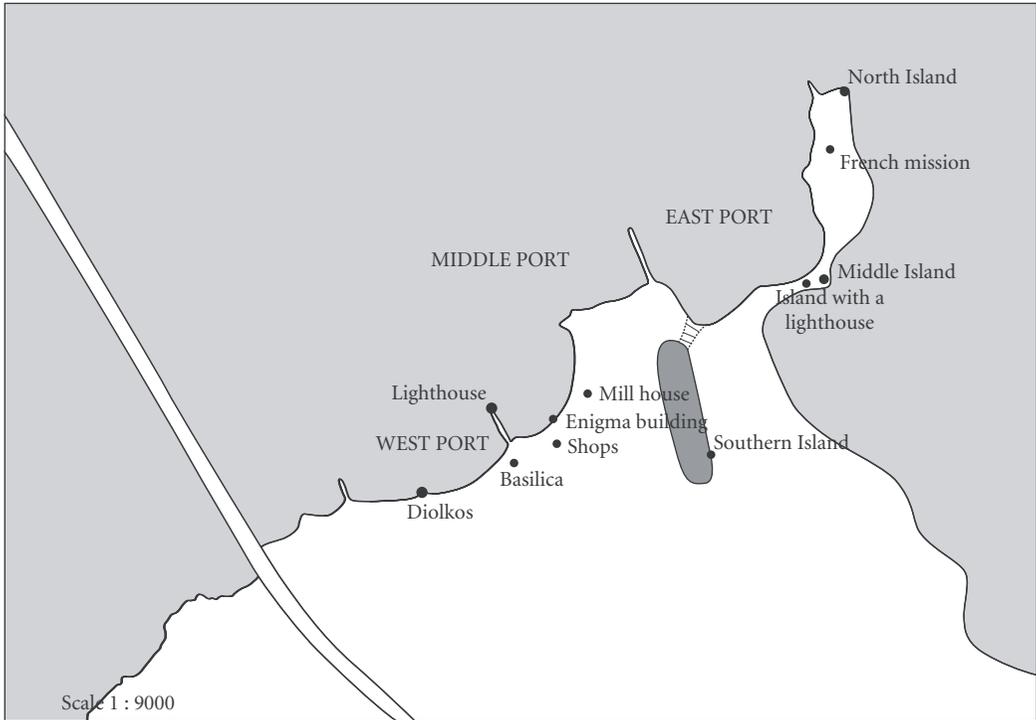


Figure 2 Marea's public buildings at the lake shore. With permission of M. Haggag.

revealed that many were previously located near the southern and eastern shores of Lake Mareotis (Wilson 2010). They date from the Ptolemaic to the late Roman period, the period during which maritime traffic was most active on Lake Mareotis, and are believed to have functioned as key agricultural and production sites in the service of Alexandria, as well as trans-shipping stations and points of control around the lake (Wilson 2010).

The Lake Mareotis Research Project has further highlighted the importance of this region. A comprehensive survey of over seventy archaeological sites dating from the Hellenistic period through to the seventh century CE was recently completed along the shores of the western arm of Lake Mareotis (Blue and Khalil 2010). The sites vary extensively in nature, size, and function, but demonstrate the importance that this area had in relation to Alexandria and the mechanisms by which Mareotic products were produced and

arrived at the city. Local pottery production is indicated by the numerous industrial-scale amphorae kilns discovered in the region, and considerable quantities of imported pottery reveal the range of international contacts. Rural small holdings to large urban settlements describe the range of settlements, many with associated production sites, water storage facilities, as well as warehouses and jetties to facilitate the movement of goods around the lake (Khalil 2010). Large, densely occupied, distinct tell sites characterise the north shores, predominantly civic and residential in nature, while settlements on the southern shore were more commonly associated with industrial, commercial, and agricultural activities. Mareotis Island reveals a dense concentration of urban settlement, particularly in the Hellenistic period (Blue and Khalil 2010).

Alexandria was neither an agricultural nor an industrial city; its economy was primarily based on commerce, administration, and the services

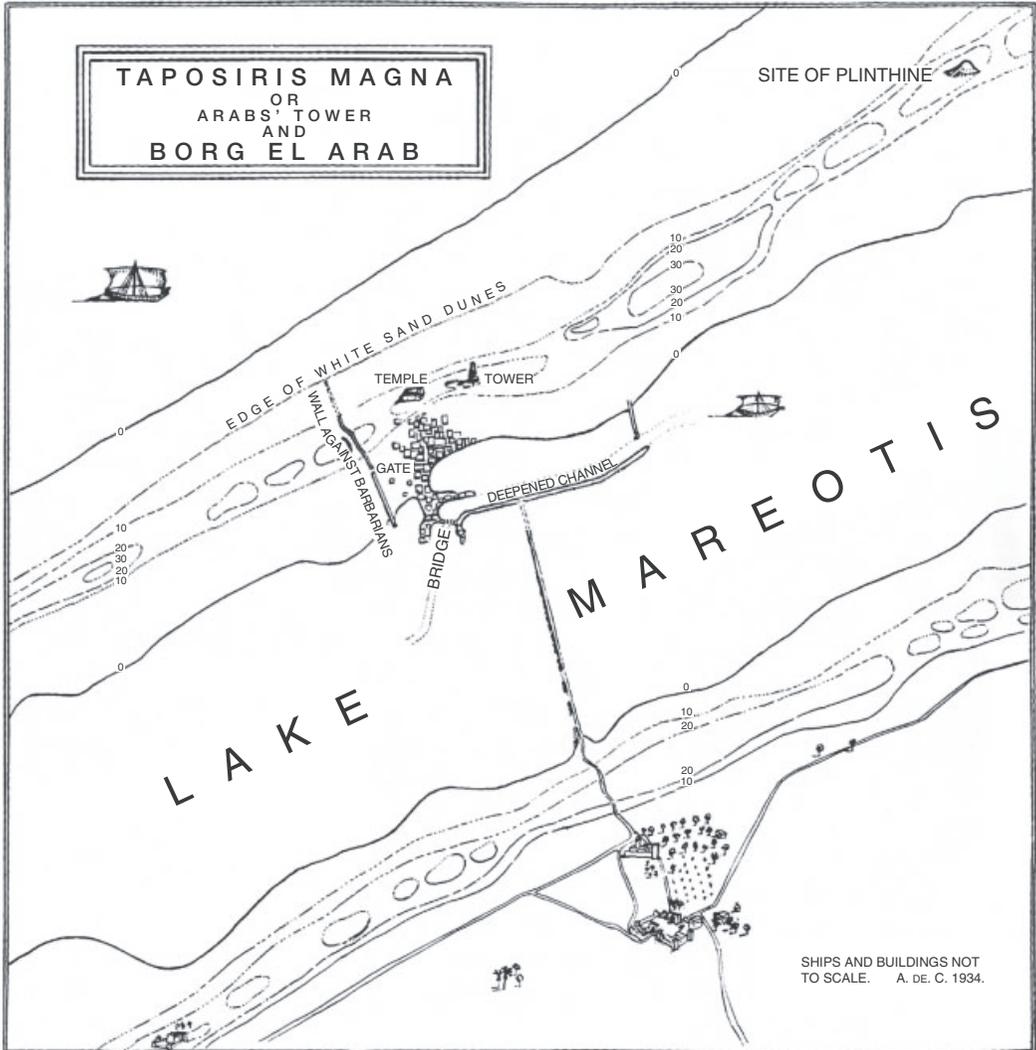


Figure 3 Plan of Taposiris Magna. From De Cosson (1935).

that the city and its harbors provided for internal and overseas transport (Lukaszewicz in Empereur 1998: 109). It is increasingly evident that the Mareotic region in general and the western Mareotic Arm in particular (Blue and Khalil 2010; Wilson 2010), played a critical role in the economy of ancient Alexandria. Commercial activities in Alexandria were directly related to agricultural and industrial activities around the shores of Lake Mareotis. The continuous supply of staples, raw materials, and manufactured products from the Mareotic

region to Alexandria was thus vital for the survival of the city itself, as well as for its commercial role as an entrepôt of trade for the Hellenistic and Roman world.

SEE ALSO: Mediterranean harbors.

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