

## THE MAREA PENINSULA

# Marea site – general introduction

Valérie PICHOT - August 2012

### Geographical position



*The site, identified as Marea in the Description de l'Egypte and then by Mahmoud Bey el Falaki in 1866, is one of the rare examples of a harbour town on the shores of Lake Mariout that is essentially untouched since antiquity and accessible for archaeological studies.*

*Situated some 40 kilometres to the south-west of Alexandria, near the village of Huwariya, it stretches more than 25 hectares along the southern shore of Lake Mariout at a point where the width of the lake from north to south is less than one kilometre.*

1 - The region of Lake Mariout  
CGD I. Awad - © CEALex

### Marea - the ancient sources

To date, the identification of this site as Marea remains hypothetical. Marea, capital of the Mareotid, was one of the most important towns of the region in the Graeco-Roman period. Founded earlier than Alexandria, literary sources tell us of its occupation from the 5th century BC until the 14th century AD.

From the late Pharaonic period, Herodotus mentions the town and its territory. Situated on the frontier with Libya, the site had a defensive role and garrisons were stationed there during the reign of the pharaoh Psammetichus I (663-610 BC). Other authors write of the strategic importance of the site. Thucydides recounts that the "king of the Libyans, neighbour of the Egyptians", had established a base at "Marea, behind Pharos" in order to direct the Egyptian uprising against the Persians. Diodorus, in the 1st century BC, notes that the battle between Amasis and Apries (end of the first half of 6th century BC) took place "near the village of Marea".

The town of Marea was considered by Falaki as "the key to Egypt on the African side" just as Pelusium was that of the Asian side.

He remarked that at the time of the Alexandrian war (48BC) Julius Caesar's army had to pass through Marea to get round part of the lake and rejoin Mithridates of Pergamon near the Canopic Way in order to do battle with the army of Ptolemy XIII. At the end of this battle, the Alexandrian army had been massacred, Ptolemy fled and drowned in the Nile, and Cleopatra VII became the sole ruler of Egypt.

There is little information regarding when and why the town was abandoned. According to Maqrizi, Marea was still an important place of commercial exchange for Alexandria at the beginning of the 14th century. Etienne Quatremère quotes an anonymous Arab geographer who talks of Marea as being a large village containing "a great quantity of gardens" and producing fruit for Alexandria. As for De Cosson, he notes that Marea continued to exist at least until the 14th century and that it remained for long the principal commercial centre of the nome. He supposes that the site was deserted after the Turkish conquest of 1517 when Alexandria herself slipped into decline.

## Marea - the question of identification

Numerous researchers such as De Cosson and El-Fakharani have followed Falaki in his identification. However, until recently the majority of unearthed ruins dated from the 5th to 7th centuries.

Thus, certain specialists have interpreted the site as a staging post for pilgrims and a forward military garrison of the Byzantine era. They identify it as Philoxenite, a town founded by Philoxenos, a prefect of the praetorium of Emperor Anastasius (491-518), to welcome pilgrims en route for the monastery of Abou Mina some 30km to the south-west, whose fame would reach its peak from the 5th to 6th centuries and which would continue to be visited until the 10th. Coming by boat along the lake from Alexandria, the pilgrims would disembark at Philoxenite before continuing on to the monastery. Everything was available to receive these travellers (large port, baths, hostels) and for the unloading of the goods necessary for such a traffic as well as for loading the agricultural and industrial produce of the region.

Recent work has proven the presence of a settlement well before the 5th century AD, but while this would tend to knock down the identification of Philoxenite, the identification of the site as Marea still remains hypothetical.

Whatever name one gives to the site, it is one of the best examples of a lakeside town on the shores of Mariout, whose development was tied to exchanges between Alexandria and its hinterland (exports of agricultural produce as well as that of local industries, such as glass and metal production and, of course, pilgrim traffic in late antiquity). Its remarkable state of preservation allows us to consider the problems of the settlement and organisation of a large town on a lakeshore.

## Archaeological research - a brief history

It was only in 1977 that the site known as Marea was first excavated. Until 1981 these digs were undertaken by a team from Alexandria University led by F. El-Fakharani and they were concentrated on the port area.

The port is composed of a quay more than 2km long divided into basins by four jetties some 100m long that jut out into the lake.



Lac = lake / Zone inondable = Flood zone / Terre ferme = Dry land / Chaussée antique = Ancient causeway  
 Fouilles CEAlex 2003-2006 = CEAlex excavations 2003-2006  
 Mole = jetty / cale-seche = dry dock / magasins = shops / double thermes = double baths /  
 huilerie ou meunerie = oil or flour mill / secteur = sector / phare = lighthouse / jetée = jetty /  
 zone inondable anciennement le lac = flood zone previously the lake

This layout considerably increases the space for mooring and unloading boats. In the central part of town, the excavations have shown the quay to be bordered by a colonnade and a row of shops, the walls of which are preserved to height of around one metre. To the east of this ensemble, a building interpreted as either an oil or flour mill stands testimony to the agricultural activity of this once-fertile region. To the west of the shops, vaulted double baths have been unearthed. These two symmetrical constructions are equipped with water heaters and collective and individual baths. The walls and the floors are covered with marble and the rims of the individual baths are constructed from this same material. These baths were divided into three parts consisting of the cold bath (frigidarium), the warm bath (tepidarium) and the hot bath (caldarium). The custom of splitting the baths into two sections, one for men and the other for women, would perhaps explain the doubling of the buildings. Everything indicates the wealth of this bathing establishment. Other large baths were discovered in 2000 by a Polish team from the University of Warsaw to the south-east of the site.

The ensemble of these vestiges, dating from the 5th to 7th centuries AD, are representative of a port town with considerable capacity for receiving visitors, with large storage facilities as well as public buildings of very high quality. These discoveries attest an intensive occupation of the site in the Byzantine period.

**Since July 2003, the Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines has been working on the peninsula\* situated some 100 metres to the north-east of the town** : topography, prospecting on foot, geophysical examination and archaeological excavations have all helped to reveal the general organisation of the peninsula and the existence of a large workshop quarter.



3 - View of the isle and lake  
Photo V. Pichot, © CEALex

---

\* It is, in fact, an island connected to the mainland by a causeway.

---