



THE PTOLEMAIC TOWER AT ABU SIR  
KNOWN AS ARABS' TOWER

*Photo : Dr. Henry Maurer*

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# MAREOTIS

BEING A  
SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE HISTORY  
AND ANCIENT MONUMENTS  
OF THE  
NORTH-WESTERN DESERT  
OF EGYPT  
AND OF  
LAKE MAREOTIS

BY  
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## BAHIG

Proceeding eastwards one comes to the pretty little village of Bahig, with its great artificial mounds, trees, and windmill. The road to the right by the police outpost leads to Abu Menas. A little farther a track leads over the ridge on the left and takes one down to lake level. Here will be found the long town site so clearly shown on Sheet 37 of the *Atlas Géographique* of the *Description de l'Égypte*, but omitted from modern maps. This town was built on an island close to the south shore. Many buildings can be traced, and at the eastern end the circular stone platform and oblong well of an ancient sakia will be found. Stone channels are traceable leading from this sakia to the cisterns of the town. To the south of this are the remains of two very interesting pottery kilns with a large heap of broken pottery thrown there as it was "scrapped" from them. North of the sakia there is a long jetty running into the lake from which ferry-boats once plied. It was not a causeway reaching to the northern shore as shown in the French map, but a jetty running down into the deep water. Quantities of small coins have been picked up from the crevices in the pavement of the jetty, and one can only suppose that they were dropped in the course of hundreds of years in handing small change to the watermen. These coins became exposed by the weathering and disintegration of the masonry.

## MAREA OR MAREOTIS

When one views the formless heaps of stones which lie among the barley and the yellow daisies by the roadside near El Huwariya, it is almost impossible to realise that this was once the principal city of north-western Egypt—before Alexandria was thought of. Equally difficult is it to realise that once it was a fortified town whence Amasis went forth to become Pharaoh of Egypt, and that from here sailed <sup>1</sup> Inaros, the King of Marea, with his army to rid Egypt of the Persian oppressor.

When the enlightened astronomer of the Khedive Ismail, Mahmud Pasha el Falaki, identified this site nearly seventy years ago, he found the ruins to lie over an area of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  kilometres long by 800 metres wide. It is no wonder he wrote :

The site of these ruins denotes an important strategical point : Julius Cæsar, in order to join the army of Mithridates, could do so by land only by circumventing Marea ; Amr was able to go from Fūstat to besiege Alexandria only by way of Marea ; and lastly Napoleon took practically the same route as Julius Cæsar to penetrate into the interior of Egypt with the French army : in a word, it is the key of Egypt on the African side just as Pelusium is the key on the Asiatic side. The valley of the lake is almost closed, its width is less than 1 kilometre and there are traces of ancient fortifications alongside it.

<sup>1</sup> See Thucydides, Book i. 104.

This does not seem to be an over-statement of fact, except so far as Napoleon is concerned. Elsewhere I have mentioned the defensive advantage of the Taenia, and how it was easy to bar the advance of an enemy coming from the west by this the only land road to Alexandria ; but before Alexandria was founded undoubtedly the best strategic position in the district was the town of Marea itself. Behind it was the easy line of communication by which reinforcements could come by water from any part of Egypt, and land forces could be sent from Marea to meet a Libyan incursion at any point. Hence it was probably the main garrison town in north-west Egypt in the time of the Pharaoh Apries and possibly earlier.

There are signs of an ancient advanced frontier post at Khashm el Eish, and somewhere on this frontier was the Fortress of the West in the thirteenth century B.C. ; and we know that both Ramses II. and Ramses III. were interested in it, for we find traces of Ramses II. as far west as El Gharbaniyat, and Ramses III. built a town near the Mount of the Horns of the Earth in this western country.

For thousands of years, from about 1220 B.C. down to A.D. 1915, Egypt has been frequently attacked from the west, and this is still the most likely side for an attack on her to be made.

Botti once wrote that there were two towns of



Marea, the ancient and the new, but whether both were on the same site is not clear.

The ancient town was the capital of an independent state in the fifth century B.C., and, as already pointed out, this kingdom of Marea included the whole of the country of the north-west Delta up to the banks of the Canopic Nile, and later when Alexandria was built and became prosperous, the town of Marea was still remarkably important according to Professor Breccia. It was the principal town of the nome and chief port on the south side of the lake. The region was renowned for its wine, its olive oil, and its papyrus, which played an important part in the life of those days.

Breccia<sup>1</sup> has written that by the second century of our era Marea had sunk to be a mere village ; but I find this hard to believe, because for another thirteen centuries at least Marea continued to exist. It was still important when Nicetas used it as a base for his operations in A.D. 602. It remained long the chief commercial depot of the nome ; one has only to see the lake port to realise this. It was when the lake began to recede from Marea that the trade of the place declined. Yet even as late as 1400 Maqrizi was able to write that Marea was a market of some importance to Alexandria. Quatremère<sup>2</sup> quotes an

<sup>1</sup> I think Breccia bases his assertion on the rather wild statements of Athenæus about Marea.

<sup>2</sup> E. Quatremère, *Mémoires Géographiques et Historiques sur l'Égypte*, Paris, 1811.

anonymous Arab geographer who speaks of Marea as "a large hamlet with numerous gardens, and produces a large quantity of fruit which is sent to Alexandria. The almonds cultivated there have such a thin skin that they can be broken between the two fingers easily."

But the end of the town of Mareotis could not have been far off, it had been raided more than once from the west, and must have been abandoned very soon after the Turkish conquest of Egypt in 1517, when Alexandria itself declined so much. The lake was gone, and Marea was deserted by its last lingering inhabitants who retired into Alexandria.

This, then, was the probable end of the ancient city which had existed for at least two thousand years, and, in the four hundred years that have followed, its buildings have utterly crumbled away.

Yet the most interesting thing left to us of Marea is the lake harbour with the three fine jetties which run into the lake at right angles to the shore. The western jetty is 40 metres long and the other two are about 110 and 120 metres respectively. There are indications of a fourth jetty to the east, but it seems to me that the western one remains the most complete, and its height indicates that the rise and fall of Lake Mareotis was considerable. The top of these jetties may have been as much as 5 metres above the old lake bed, and 6 metres broad. The larger stone





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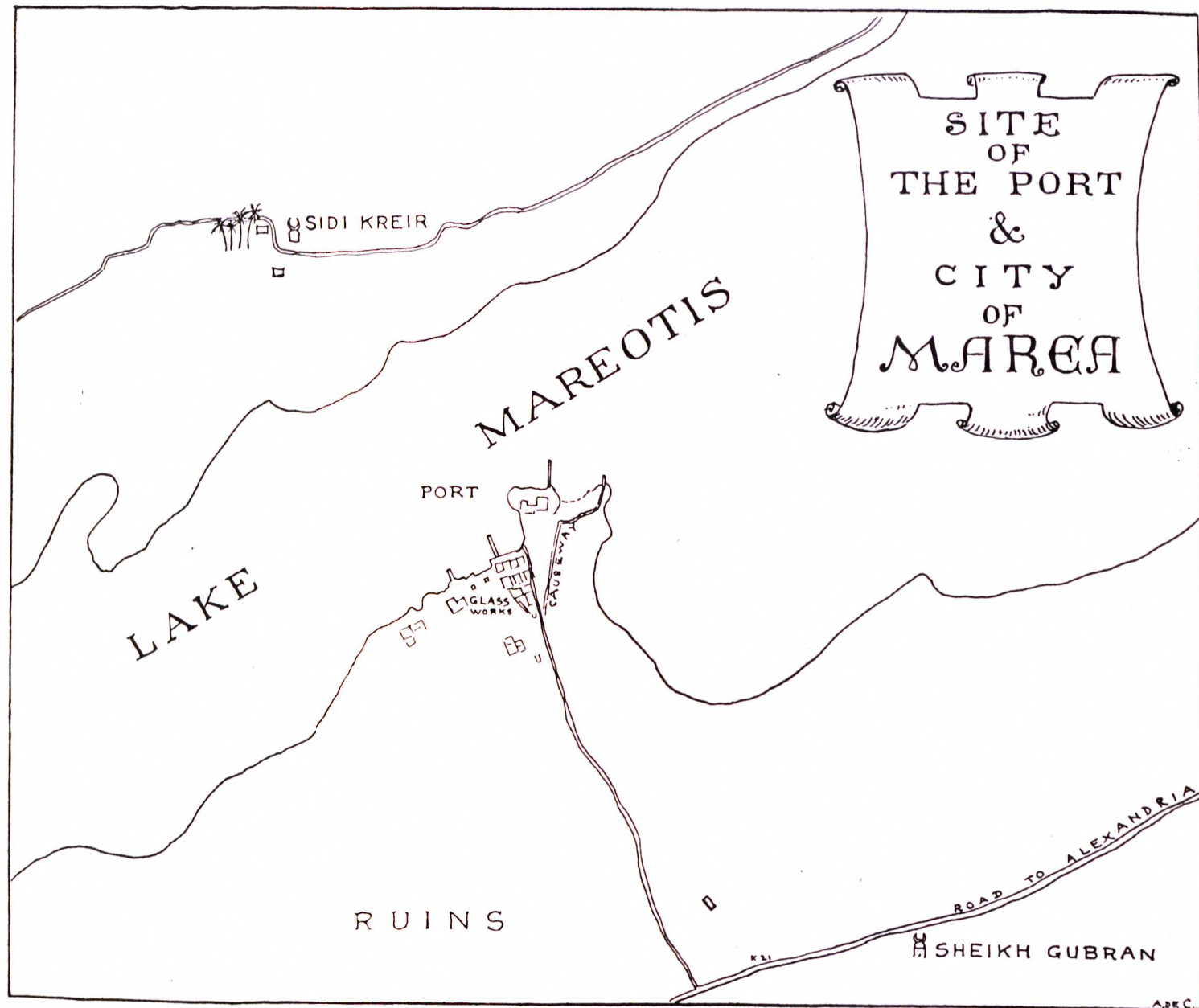
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blocks measure  $80 \times 50 \times 30$  centimetres. There are traces of quays, and between the western and middle jetties are the sites of glass works. (See Appendix C.)

The whole site east, west, and south needs careful examination. There is much of interest, and my plan shows only the harbour. This drawing was compiled from the Survey maps, air photographs, and actual measurements on the ground.

#### ABU SEIF HASAN

Near kilometre 17 to the north of the main road, east of Marea, are the foundations of an interesting building. The blocks of stone are much larger than those usually employed in domestic buildings in the Maryut district, and they seem to indicate the site of a small temple. These remains stand on a high part of the Gebel Maryut ridge, and command a very fine view over the lake. Below, close to the shore of the ancient lake and to the east, are several very conspicuous red mounds which tell the tale of the existence of large pottery works formerly.

Abu Seif Hasan is near El Sirr, where there is an ancient site mentioned by Mahmud Pasha el Falaki.

#### ABU MENAS

The remains of the shrine of St. Menas, soldier and martyr, who was killed in A.D. 296, lies about 11 kilometres south-east of Bahig station.

The great church fell into ruin, and, together