

Alexander the Lost: How Temples of Greco-Egyptian Cults in Ptolemaic Egypt Can Help  
Identify Alexander the Great's Tomb

By  
Jan Váňa  
Department of History, University of Colorado at Boulder

Defense Date: April 5, 2022

Thesis Advisor:  
Yvona Trnka-Amrhein Ph.D., Department of Classics

Defense Committee:  
Yvona Trnka-Amrhein Ph.D., Department of Classics  
Peter Hunt Ph.D., Department of Classics  
Sungyun Lim Ph.D., Department of History

### **Alexander the Lost**

The location of the body and tomb of king Alexandros III of Macedonia, conqueror of the Persian Empire (also known as Alexander the Great, Μέγας Αλέξανδρος in Greek) has been a mystery for over 1,500 years. Its discovery, identification, and analysis has subsequently been the goal of chroniclers, historians, and archaeologists for nearly as long. The eventual negligence and likely destruction of the conqueror's grave and its contents is dated to somewhere between the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and start of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE<sup>1</sup> and is most often described as a consequence of the ban on pagan religious practices by the Roman emperor Theodosius in 392 CE and the rise of Christianity that came hand in hand with the emperor's command.<sup>2</sup> The site of the Macedonian king's burial and worship vanished after nearly 800 years of activity surrounding his cult which was initially instituted in some fashion even during Alexander's own lifetime (356-323 BCE).<sup>3</sup> The cult was more prominently established some time after his death and ceremonial reburial in the city of Alexandria, Egypt in 3rd century BCE, when the construction of his mausoleum was finished and the complex officially opened to worshipers.<sup>4</sup>

The work to recover the lost site of his tomb is strenuous and expensive, as much of ancient Alexandria is either built over by the modern inhabitants of the city, or has been swallowed by the rising sea level and now lies underneath the waves of the Mediterranean. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Erskine, Andrew. *Life after Death: Alexandria and the Body of Alexander*. (2002): 163–79.

<sup>2</sup> Chugg, A. M. (2004), *The Lost Tomb of Alexander the Great*, London.

<sup>3</sup> Arrian, edited by J. Romm (2010) *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, published by Pantheon Books, pp. 23-24, 282.

<sup>4</sup> Pausanias, *Ptolemy the Great History*. Published by Harvard University. Sections 1.6.3, 1.7.1.

second problem that the research is continuously fighting is that of the correct identification of the conqueror's tomb and temple among the great number of other Hellenic and Egyptian buildings that made up the entirety of the old city and likely surrounded the square at which the mausoleum stood. As such, the archaeological and historical research projects in Alexandria, focusing on finding Alexander's mausoleum, have been confused or misled nearly every season into thinking they have discovered the site. However, each time, they realize they have discovered yet another Hellenic temple, or royal quarter of the then-ruling dynasty of the Ptolemies, founded by one of Alexander's Greco-Macedonian generals.

Parallel to this research in Alexandria, a discovery was made, excavated, and analyzed in the Al-Fayyum Governorate of Egypt, south of Alexandria. The site is of a smaller temple to the Macedonian conqueror's cult. As far as the academic field is concerned, it seems to be the only one of its kind found this well-preserved, and after its initial excavation in the 1970s, it was analyzed and shared with the world by Edda Bresicani's team of mostly Italian archaeologists. Though the site has since been mostly inactive in terms of physical work, picture documentation and some further minor analysis of the preserved fresco imagery has been carried out. This work has suggested a link to Alexander the Great. That being said, because of the politicized nature and cultural ownership debate of many of the Greek and Macedonian sites in Egypt, there has been little to no cooperation between Alexander scholars in Alexandria and Al-Fayyum, to the likely detriment of both those trying to identify Alexander's tomb in the old city, as well as those trying to analyze his smaller temple and link it with the cult of conqueror's personality that was developed and cultivated in Ptolemaic Egypt for centuries.

A synthesis of the evidence found at each respective site has great potential to provide

historical context, as well as clues and material about the state of the conqueror's cult after his death, the visage of his mausoleum, and the cultural blending between Egyptian and Greek that could be expected in that appearance.. Though some of this information is supplied by the primary sources that deal with the descriptions of the ancient city of Alexandria, the conqueror's mausoleum, his death, his burial, and the eventual deification and cult formation, this information alone cannot facilitate a new and useful analysis. I have thus devised another way that has not been explored by the academic community which could help in furthering the scholarly efforts around the mystery of Alexander's body — comparing it to other Hellenic and Greco-Egyptian buildings and religious projects developed by the Ptolemies in Egypt at this time, such as that at Al-Fayyum.

Additionally and fortunately for this method, the cult of Alexander the Great was not the only one that the new Greco-Macedonian rulers instituted in the conquered territory of Egypt. Serapis was a deity also mostly developed during early Ptolemaic Egypt, and as such was very prominently built up and promoted by the dynasty's first ruler Ptolemy I Soter and his two successors, Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Ptolemy III Euergetes - the same rulers who were responsible for the burial and early veneration of Alexander. The god was a fusion of some of the most powerful gods of both the Greek and Egyptian pantheons and was often associated with the goddess Isis (who herself was frequently understood as the most powerful goddess of the Egyptian pantheon).<sup>5</sup> Isis and Serapis were the bedrocks around which a cult was also developed, and the two deities embodied much of the cultural and monarchical fusion between the Egyptians and the Greeks that the Ptolemies sought and actively supported in order to

---

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, published by University of Chicago, pp. 27-31.

legitimize their own reign over the Nile valley.

Due to the fact that both the Isis-Serapis and the Alexander-the-Great cults developed during the same time and with a kindred political purpose, there arose an undeniable set of similarities between the two, the details of which will be discussed in the later comparative analytical section of this paper. The similarities of the cults arise from having a similar goal of building a common ground upon which Egyptians and Greeks could coexist. As such, the temples to Serapis and Isis can be used to further the research on Alexander's own cult, as well as his main temple (where his body is likely located) in Alexandria. The existence of these similarities serves as one of the crucial supporting pillars of my entire theory.

As mentioned previously, one of the consequences of the lack of communication between the sites at Al-Fayyum and Alexandria is that no official academic comparison has been made between the findings in the great city and those in the desert to the south, nor anywhere else between the Greco-Egyptian cults of Serapis/Isis and Alexander the Great. With the likeness of these two cults in mind, one can fairly easily imagine that there would be a resemblance between the buildings of the cults too, since they both emerged around the same time, were most developed by the same dynasty, and were most actively used in the same historical period. Due to the greater cultural and traditional background behind the Serapis/Isis cult which was based on pre-existing deities (as opposed to the newly emergent cult to Alexander), the sites of worship are much more numerous and present in the historical and archaeological records. The greater presence of the buildings associated with the Serapis/Isis Greco-Egyptian cult can thus be utilized in the definition, recognition, and ultimately discovery of the grand temple and tomb of Alexander by the use of a comparative method between the buildings and practices associated

with each respective belief system.

For this purpose, a smaller temple to Isis and Serapis found in the same area of the Fayyum region at Medinet Madi can be analyzed via the use of primary written and artifact sources and compared to the smaller temple to Alexander. With the results of that comparison, a degree of similarity can be drawn up and applied at a greater scale to one of the main temples to the Serapis cult also found at Alexandria (called the Serapeum). Then, finally, these conclusions can be applied towards gaining theoretical information about the yet-to-be-discovered tomb of Alexander the Great. The geographical similarity of the two smaller and two larger temples, as well as their cultural links, are selected deliberately in order to increase the maximum amount of possible resemblance and consequently decrease the margin of error of the intended data collation as much as possible. With that, the hope of this research paper is to use the comparison to theorize what the main temple to Alexander at Alexandria could look like, and thus help the effort to find and identify it, as well as prevent future geographical, or architectural/stylistic mistakes in the identification of the great conqueror's sanctuary and resting place in the Nile delta, in the city that bears his name.

For the specific purpose of my research, a combination of archaeological and historical evidence must be used in order to arrive at as much of an objective picture as possible, that can then serve the comparison well. In terms of historical sources, I plan to employ strictly sources that were either contemporary with Alexander III's lifetime, or ones that were compiled based on these sources, as more often than not, the originals are lost to us. The former is mostly constituted in the collection of fragmentary pieces of information from around Alexander's lifetime, compiled in Heckel & Yardley's *Alexander the Great: Historical Sources in*

*Translation*, whereas the latter comes mostly from ancient historians who wrote under the Roman Empire. Arrian's *The Campaigns of Alexander* (120s CE), Diodorus' *The Library* (1st century BCE), Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (150s-170s CE), Plutarch's *Moralia* and *Lives* (early 2nd century CE), and Rufus' *The History of Alexander* (1st century CE) influence my writing most prominently, though the list of primary source authors consists of over a dozen separate writers. As is evident, there is quite a magnitude of sources surrounding Alexander, which allows for a selection of those writers who display at least some amount of historical critical thinking and effort to tell the truth, rather than to tell a good story, as was the goal of much of written history during this time. These sources provide the majority of information I use about Alexander, his life, his death, and the immediate consequences of it, including his burial and deification. In terms of sources about the Serapis cult and temples, I sometimes use the already mentioned sources, but as with the other temples, I rely a lot on archeology. However, the Serapis/Isis cult is a smaller section of this paper that serves only the purpose of comparison and so the analysis of these sources is much more limited. Finally, in the case of both cults, I will use and consider modern scholars' interpretations of some archaeological evidence (e.g., Medinet Madi), but will also include sites whose interpretation is solely my own (e.g., Al-Fayyum, and parts of the relevant sites in Alexandria). The final significant category of sources consists of maps, shown or described, of the various sites, temple layouts, grids, etc.

### **The Background & Burial of the Conqueror**

The circumstances surrounding the burial of Alexander III of Macedon are crucial to form an understanding of the dynamics that developed after his death and bore influence on his

funeral, mummification, the building of his mausoleum, and the eventual deification of his body and start of his cult. Ever since his passing in Babylon in 323 BCE,<sup>6</sup> the young empire he suddenly left behind was in turmoil. The circumstances of his death are still a mystery and the finding of his body, especially if it remained mummified and well preserved, could help determine the exact cause of death, as historians are unsure whether it was illness or poison. Regardless of that, several ancient historians claim that upon being questioned about who the empire he had conquered should pass to, he reportedly said “to the strongest,”<sup>7</sup> as he lay on his deathbed. Whether this truly was the case or not, the effect was the same – his most influential generals started fighting among themselves almost immediately and Alexander’s only son, born after his father’s death, was eventually murdered by Kassandros,<sup>8</sup> one of Alexander’s generals and one of the Diadochi (Greek for successors) who took control of and governed over the Macedonian parts of Alexander’s kingdom until his own death years later.<sup>9</sup> Similarly to Kassandros, other Diadochi did not hesitate and set up their rule over various successor states that carved up Alexander’s empire in its entirety. With Alexander’s only descendant gone, each of the Diadochi attempted to build himself up as the rightful heir to Alexander III’s legacy through a variety of means, including the possession and burial of his body.

---

<sup>6</sup> Arrian, edited by J. Romm (2010) *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, published by Pantheon Books, pp. xi.

<sup>7</sup> Arrian, edited by J. Romm (2010) *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, published by Pantheon Books, Book Seven, 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Diodorus of Sicily, translated & edited by R. Waterfield (2019) *The Library*, published by Oxford World’s Classics, pp. 469-471.

<sup>9</sup> Green P. (2013) *Alexander of Macedon: 356-323 B.C.*, published by University of California Berkeley Press, pp. 41-44.

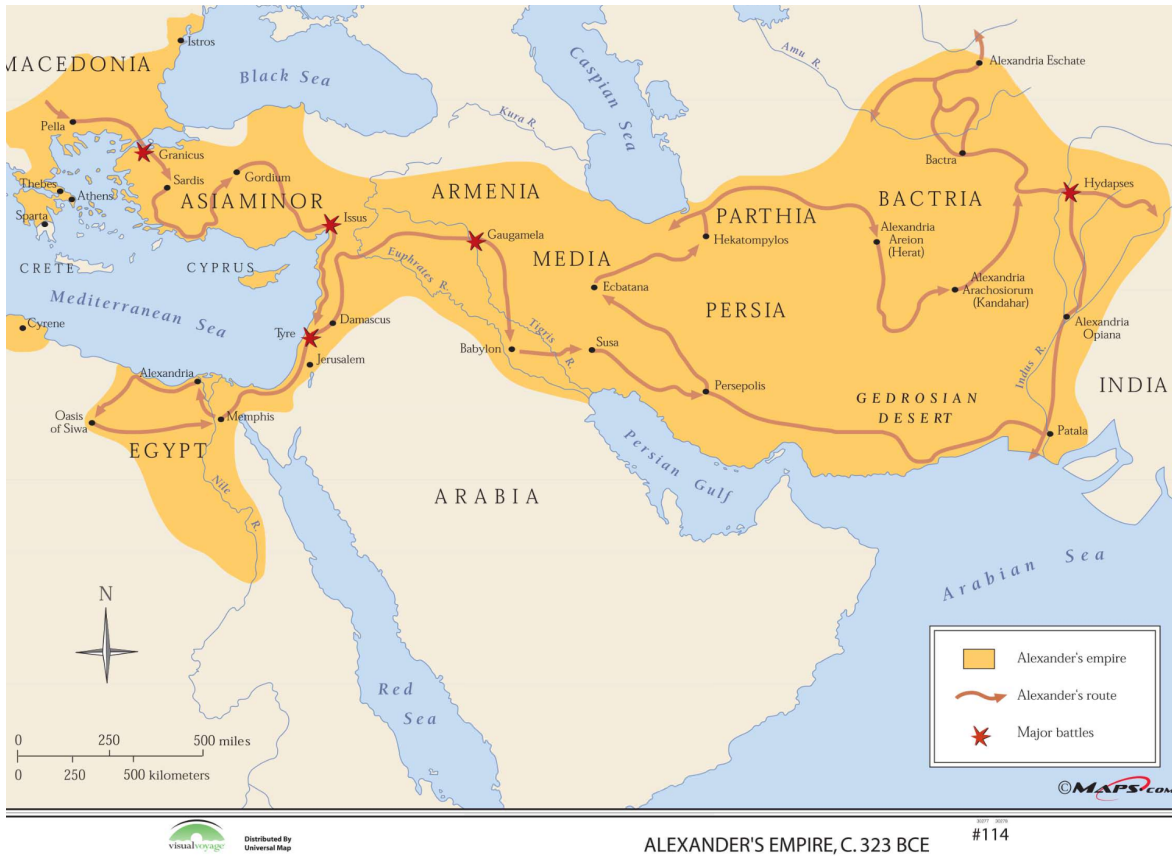


Figure 1 - Empire of Alexander the Great upon his death in 323 BCE.<sup>10</sup>

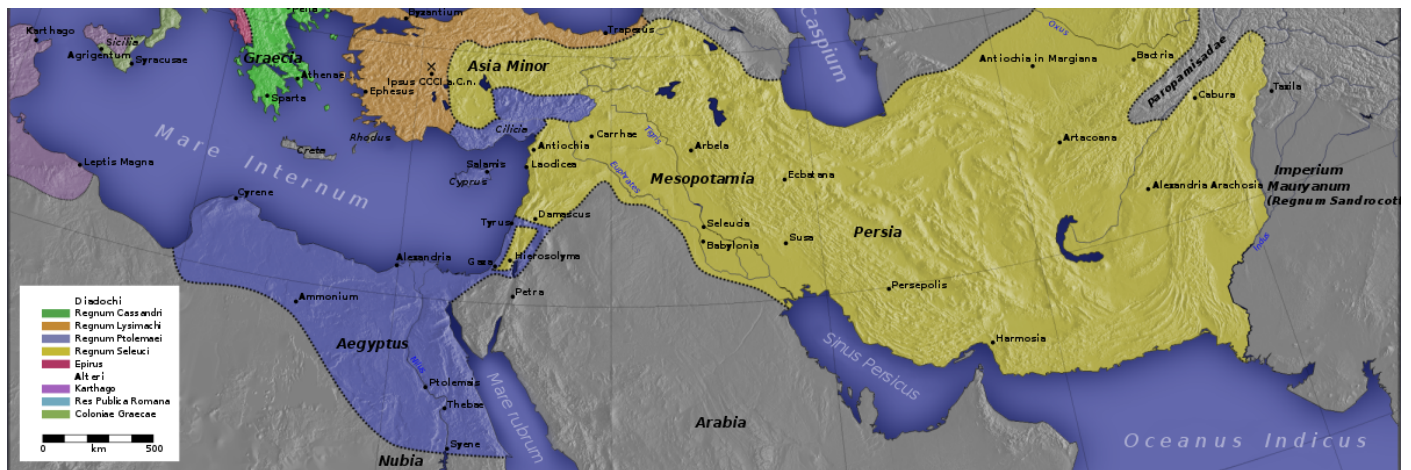


Figure 2 - Diadochi States of Kassandros (green), Lysimachus (orange), Seleucus (yellow), and Ptolemaios (blue) established shortly after Alexander III's death.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Alexander's Empire, C. 323 BCE. 1:25,000,000. Published by KAPPA, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> William R. Shepherd. Regna Diadochorum anno 301 a.C.n. 1:1,000,000. Published by Velhagen & Klafing, 1911.

The body seems to have been initially prepared for a journey from Babylon back to Pella, the capital of the old kingdom of Macedonia. It was assumed by most of those involved in the planning of the transportation of the body and the following ceremony that his old home would be where Alexander the Great would have wanted to be buried, along with the remains of his father and other members of the Argead dynasty that ruled over Macedon for centuries. Strabo describes a lavish procession which included as many as 20,000 participants, together with golden chariots, thousands of animals of both decorative and transportation purposes, entire contingents of foot soldiers and cavalry and by some accounts, even Alexander's wife Roxana and their son, Alexander IV.<sup>12</sup> When the group got close to the Mediterranean coast near the land of Judea, where it was supposed to turn north and continue on through Syria and Anatolia back into Europe, it was ambushed and seized by another one of the Diadochi, Ptolemaios. Ptolemaios carved the entirety of Egypt, along with parts of Asia Minor, out of Alexander's empire and was already establishing himself as its sovereign ruler. This land was some of the richest and most potent in the entire Mediterranean and the ancient Middle-East and together with the body of the famed conqueror, Ptolemaios saw that he could establish a dynasty with a firm footing that would last for generations.

With the body came a great sense of legitimacy, for not only did Alexander already claim a divine origin at a point before his death,<sup>13</sup> but with the eventual murder of his wife and only surviving son, the ownership of his body was the closest physical connection to the conqueror that anyone could claim to possess. By the time of the snatching of the body, the initial Diadochi battles and wars were concluded and Alexander's empire was divided among four of

---

<sup>12</sup> Erskine, A. (2002), *Life after Death: Alexandria and the Body of Alexander*, pp. 163-179.

<sup>13</sup> Arrian, edited by J. Romm (2010) *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, published by Pantheon Books, pp. 290-291.

his most successful successors who managed to establish a state in the midst of the bloodshed that followed the general's death (see figure 2). Seleukos took control of large parts of the heartland of Persia centered on the Iranian plateau, as well as northern India; Kassandros and after him Antigonos founded a dynasty that would rule the old kingdom of Macedonia on the Balkan peninsula; Lysimachus was in charge of Thrace and the greater part of Asia Minor, and Ptolemaios now stood strong guard over Egypt and parts of Anatolia, as well as some Greek islands.<sup>14</sup> These states hung in an uneasy balance in the eastern Mediterranean and whenever one started becoming too powerful, it would usually see a coalition of the other states form against it and so it became continuously more difficult to become the successor to Alexander via reuniting his empire. As such, all sought to find other links between their dynasties and territories and the deceased Alexander III; and it was these exact links that would become the founding principles of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which would eventually outlast all the other Diadochi (with the arguable exception of Bactria, which however did not participate in the wars of the Diadochi nearly as much as the greater states). The ownership of the body of Alexander III falling to the Ptolemaic kingdom was seemingly inevitable, as within the now-fractured empire, the Egyptian successor state and the ruling Ptolemaic dynasty already exercised great control. With the help of the body and the cults of Alexander and Serapis that the Ptolemies established, their kingdom saw the most stability, prosperity and success in deriving legitimacy from the conquests of Alexander III.

Upon taking control of the body in the Levant, Ptolemaios quickly transported it to Egypt and though there was a response from the other Diadochi who sent out an army to try and

---

<sup>14</sup> William R. Shepherd. *Regna Diadochorum anno 301 a.C.n.* 1:1,000,000. Published by Velhagen & Klafing, 1911.

regain control of the corpse, it was too late and the army was annihilated by Ptolemaios on the Sinai Peninsula, while the body was already safe at Memphis. Though the project to build a tomb for Alexander at the location of the new seat of the Ptolemaic government on the Egyptian coast in Alexandria was commissioned during Ptolemy I's reign, it was of such grandeur that it took decades to finish. According to Plutarch and Pausanias, the body had to be temporarily buried in the city of Memphis, where it stayed until 280 BCE when the mausoleum in Alexandria was finally constructed during the reign of Ptolemaios's son, Ptolemaios II Philadelphus; after which the body was transferred there during the same year.

### **The Ptolemaic Projects in Medinet Madi and the Fayyum**

At the time of the burial of Alexander the Great in the city that would become his last known resting place, the cult surrounding his personal legend could start to develop now that there was a worshiping place established. With the establishment of the temple and mausoleum at Alexandria, the cult was further centralized and more closely tied to the court of the Ptolemaic dynasty, though it was already present in the hearts and minds of many in Egypt, especially the population infusions from Greece initiated and paid for by the Ptolemies with the goal of establishing outposts of their own culture and language, as well as rewarding those veterans who have fought for them by these land grants. This claim derives evidence primarily from the fact that the smaller temple to Alexander found at Al-Fayyum is dated to somewhere in the 3rd century BCE, since that is when the area was heavily colonized by Greco-Macedonian veterans as a part of the Ptolemaic projects.<sup>15</sup> As such, whether it was slightly before or right after the

---

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, D.J. (1999) Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum, published by The British Academy, whole article.

final rest of Alexander's body at Alexandria, his cult was active enough to facilitate worship even in places where his body was not physically present. This speaks not only to the furthering of his deification, but also to the disassociation of the idea of Alexander's conquests and successes from his actual body – itself a core step towards divinity. His figure, as appears clear from the temple art (discussed in a later section) joins the pantheon of Greek heroes and becomes celebrated, worshiped and associated with a certain spiritual realm in which, if mortals pray to him, he will provide some of the success and fortune that he clearly demonstrated during his lifetime. The events that followed his death such as the building of his temples and the mausoleum were instituted by generations of Ptolemaic rulers who took care to further develop his divine status to help their own needs as monarchs of foreign peoples.

This is why the understanding of the cultural and political nature of the projects that the Ptolemaic dynasty undertook is important in analyzing the development of Alexander's cult and the circumstances of his burial. A part of the story about Alexander's deification, burial, and cult development are thus these irrigation and settlement projects developed by the Ptolemies since Alexander's death and for generations on. Especially important are the projects in the settlements of the Fayyum and Medinet Madi regions, which are the sites of the small Alexander temple and the Serapis/Isis temple respectively. Though there was a population of native Egyptians in those regions prior to the Ptolemaic projects,<sup>16</sup> both of these religious sites were built to the state in which I analyze them in the time of the Ptolemies. This fact is related to the kind of population that the Ptolemies sent to settle these regions – primarily Macedonian and Greek veterans, or fresh settlers coming from the poleis (city states) of the traditional Greek homeland. Because of

---

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, D.J. (1999) Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum, published by The British Academy, whole article.

the new demographic, the temples were styled into a character that would be relatable to both of the kinds of populations that now occupied the Fayyum and Medinet Madi – native Egyptians and Greco-Macedonian transplants.

Such a mixture of populations that had very differing religious histories, practices, and traditions would be hard to satisfy with a singular religious principle, or a unified temple design. This need thus produced what is obvious in the Fayyumic temple to Alexander. Not only is the entire complex based around a new deity, stylized both into the Greek heroic mold, and also into the pharaonic, semi-divine stature of the land's pharaohs; but the art within the temple is a blending of the two cultures.

However, since it took more than a shared religion to effectively unify and rule two populations that differed so greatly, there is a need for further inquiry into the projects and political moves of the new dynasty overall. Though religion bore great weight in the ancient world, and especially in Egypt, it could not be used on its own to foster a safe position for the Ptolemaic court. That is why the following analysis of the Greco-Macedonian colonization and its goals are important – it is evidence of the same political move that facilitated the gradual establishment of the cults of Alexander and Serapis and it thus provides a larger political and cultural context.

The Ptolemaic rulers, at least in terms of the first three (303–221 BCE), needed to gain control over and build legitimacy with the native population of Egypt. They elected to tackle this issue on two different fronts. First, they infused the population centers, as well as the food-producing provinces with people of their own culture and religion. Additionally, they did not only send these settlers to already-established areas, but along with engineers, they decided

on new potential regions for agricultural expansions.<sup>17</sup> Through the building of new irrigation channels and land reclamation in such places as the Fayyum, the Ptolemies managed to successfully fulfill another role of the Egyptian pharaoh – control of the Nile and subsequent agricultural prosperity. Ensuring good crop yield was one of the traditional roles of a divine pharaoh and so through these projects, the Ptolemies not only filled their granaries and built up their position as legitimate pharaohs.

With the blending of the two cultures in various regions, and the evident success of the Ptolemies as pharaohs the next assimilating step in the Fayyum was the building of the Alexander temple. This is why such areas as Medinet Madi and the Fayyum are good places to study the Ptolemaic cults and assimilation projects – they fulfill all three categories of cultural blending, legitimacy building through control of the Nile via irrigation, and establishment of a new, shared deity. It is also the reason why the temple to Alexander and its placement within the various Ptolemaic projects is the central focus of this paper – it reinforces these three principal categories which in turn reinforce one another. In this building, the goals of the new dynasty align almost perfectly and thus speak of the reach and the political complexity of the establishment of Greek rule over Egypt. A closer look at the art in the temple can give us an idea of to what degree this blend, now firmly established on legitimate political ground, was implemented.

By building religious buildings to new cults in cities and rural areas alike, the Ptolemies ensured the spreading of Greek culture and language in general, as well as Alexander's cult in particular, tying this spread of culture and religious beliefs not only back to Greece, but to

---

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, D.J. (1999) Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum, published by The British Academy, whole article.

their dynasty specifically, making sure to tie themselves to Alexander's success and divine, heroic status.

The Al-Fayyum region in which the Kom Madi temple (Alexander temple) is found is, as mentioned before, one such Ptolemaic colony that has, due to its preservation, proven to be a key piece of evidence in understanding the cultural assimilation, as well as the degree to which the cult to Alexander was developed by the time of his body's burial in Alexandria. Though the scholarship on the settlement is limited, the evidence that is there is substantial in terms of the temple and its surroundings which I intend to analyze. This smaller temple almost certainly belongs to the cult and worship of Alexander but before I can engage in the evidence's application to the project overall, the site must be objectively analyzed to provide for a strong basis as there has been some scholarly criticism of the earlier suggestions about the temple's association with Alexander the Great. If the analysis is successful, it should provide a basis for a theory that would refute the criticisms raised within the field thus far.

First the addressing of the general features of the temple is necessary in order to establish whether it truly is a mixture of Hellenic and Egyptian spiritual features that have been found on the building's walls. The archaeologist E. Bresciani, who was in charge of the excavation of the temple has published some materials including pictures and analysis of the findings at the dig site that are crucial to my own analysis of the structure.

In figure 3 below, an Egyptian depiction of a person can be seen. The figure's eyes and chin are made in the typical fashion of older Egyptian temples and the face is rotated to the side, offering a profile view, itself characteristic of the Egyptian art style.<sup>18</sup> The figure is also wearing

---

<sup>18</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS.

eyeliner which is not only a feature of Egyptian art, but also of Egyptian life - both men and women would wear eyeliner, especially on celebratory occasions. Additionally, the top of the



Figure 3.<sup>19</sup>

head is either bald, or the hair is depicted as moved back which is another typical feature of Egyptian depictions of people. Figure 4 is another archetypal feature of Egyptian temple art —the tips of the wings visible as if pointing towards the ground are often associated with Isis, Ra, or other Egyptian gods and goddesses.<sup>20</sup> These two photographs together are some of the best

---

<sup>19</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS.

evidence there is in the temple of the strong Egyptian influence on its art. Such images would bear little to no significance to the Greeks and so this kind of artistic depiction must mean that the temple is trying to cater to Egyptian populations and culture, as well as, as I will now show, the Greek transplants of both, people and tradition.



Figure 4.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly to how well Egyptian culture is represented in the architecture and style of the building, many Hellenic features are present as well. In figure 5 below, there is a human depicted in the midst of performing a sacrifice. The style of the art remains mostly Egyptian, but the figures being depicted are clearly not Egyptians themselves. The figure's skin tone appears lighter than most of the other figures depicted, as seen in comparison with another Egyptian example in figure 6. Further, the color of the figure's hair is also light, almost appearing blonde

---

<sup>21</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 81a.



Figure 5.<sup>22</sup>

and he is wearing what appears to be a perizoma, a typical Greek garment worn especially by workers and athletes. The garment itself must be treated carefully as evidence, as it could be argued that the depiction is one of a folded Egyptian skirt, or another garment typical of the area.

---

<sup>22</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 97.



Figure 6.<sup>23</sup>

However, the other two points relating to the appearance of the character's body are clearly Greek. Additionally, the structure behind the character appears to be a sacrificial altar with a fire lit in the middle, likely about to receive the bull that the figure is preparing. Sacrifice burning is not necessarily unique to the Greek culture of the time and there are instances of it present in Egyptian religious rituals as well. However based on certain aspects of the image, such as the fact that the figure working on the bull is Greek in appearance and also that the bull already seems to be dead and the character is thus possibly working to separate the fat and the bones from the meat, as he is still touching the dead animal to prepare it for the next step in the sacrificial ritual, the whole scene could be much more safely said to be one of a Greek origin. The practice of the bone and fat separation is a part of the Greek mythological belief system and it is these parts that would usually be burned at the altar for the gods, to carry the sacrificial

---

<sup>23</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) *Kom Madi 1977 e 1978*, published by ETS, pp. 88.

goods through the smoke to the heavens and please the deities with the work of the human hunters/herders, while allowing these populations to keep the meat and feed on it themselves, thus satisfying both parties. Regardless of that, even if the ritual here is wrongly interpreted and is not Greek in origin, the evidence put forth via the analysis of the figure is hardly disputable. The 'Greekness' of the figure can thus be said to be in a reaffirming loop together with the seemingly Greek practices of sacrifice - a Greek would not likely be depicted as performing an Egyptian ritual, and an Egyptian would not be depicted as performing a Greek ritual. Seeing the temple art depict such a combination of the two cultures, it seems almost certain that the temple is built with both Greek and Egyptian religious principles in mind, as well as with the desire to depict both. Due to the destruction of some parts of the temple and a complete collapse of some of the walls, it is difficult to gauge a correct ratio of Greek to Egyptian depiction but from what remains visible, it seems that both cultures are represented in a respectable amount, with perhaps a slight tilt in favor of a higher representation of the Greek depictions (though drawn the Egyptian way).

Finally, there is the question of whether the temple actually depicts Alexander himself, either as a regular person, a socially elevated figure (i.e., a king, a general, a conqueror), or even as a deity. The argument for the general depiction of him in possibly any one of those positions is strong and the evidence on the temple walls seems indicative of that especially when compared with other imagery of Alexander III found elsewhere around the world. The argument for his rank is more difficult to make convincingly. The location of the Kom Madi temple that bears these images and the estimated time of its construction (3rd century BCE) both point to a possible association with Alexander the Great. When the imagery that is thought to be of him

was uncovered at the site, the facts were connected and thus the case seems to have evidence that is strong enough in order to be the basis of a theory, both in terms of the fact that it is Alexander the Great, as well as that he is being depicted as a figure to be worshiped. The main pieces of art from the temple upon which it was initially theorized by Bresciani that the temple was indeed one of Alexander are both shown below as figures 7 and 8.



Figure 7.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 107.



Figure 8.<sup>25</sup>

The next figure (9) is a photograph of a mosaic from the 2nd century BCE from Pompeii of one of Alexander III's battles which is placed here for the purpose of comparing the face of Alexander from the mosaic, where his identity is indisputable, with that found at the temple, shown previously. I draw this example in order to show that saying that the temple belongs to Alexander is more than guess work. The depictions of the conqueror at the Kom Madi temple are associated with Alexander and their production standardized to the point that they still look very similar even with more than a hundred years between the production dates of the fresco in Kom Madi and the picture from Pompeii. These comparisons serve well for the identification of Alexander the Great, but there still remains the question of his status in these depictions. The meaning of the temple's art would be very different if Alexander was simply meant to be depicted as a sponsor or an overseer, rather than a divine figure.

---

<sup>25</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 108.



Figure 9.<sup>26</sup>

Because of the timing of the construction, as well as the clear mix of depictions of Greek and Egyptian culture, an inference can be made about the status of Alexander in the depiction. Not only is he seen dressed in either luxurious or battle garments, but he is also depicted in charge of a Greek army in figure 8 and wearing a diadem in figure 7 (famously alluded to by Arrian in his recounting of Alexander's speech at Opis).<sup>27</sup> As such then, even if the depiction is not godly, it seems to definitively depict higher societal rank. A case for the portrayal of a deity is still somewhat difficult to make, as it is hard to gauge how deified and revered Alexander III was at this point. In addition there is another depiction at the temple which is theorized to be Alexander the Great as well but since this particular piece of art has lost its

---

<sup>26</sup> Philoxenus of Eretria. Alexander Mosaic. Mosaic. Pompeii, ~120-100 BCE.

<sup>27</sup> Arrian, edited by J. Romm (2010) *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, published by Pantheon Books, pp. 202-205.

upper half, it is difficult to say for sure. That being said though, in this next depiction of what scholars think to be him, it is visible that he is clearly depicted larger than the figure in the background which could denote a divine depiction.



Figure 10.<sup>28</sup>

These depictions that I have used for both facial recognition and status determination are just one strand of evidence, perhaps the simplest to make. I believe that the similarity of the images at Kom Madi to other depictions of Alexander such as the one at Pompeii is convincing enough to say it is Alexander. However a historical analysis should not be based purely on art forms and in fact, the faces alone have not been enough in the past to convince everyone in the field that we are truly dealing with a temple to Alexander the Great at Kom Madi. For that reason, a greater collection of arguments supporting the claim that it is Alexander will now be presented in refutation of the criticisms raised against the claim.

---

<sup>28</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 95.

## **Analysis & Criticisms of the Alexander Temple in the Fayyum**

The most basic criticism about the art is that while it may look similar to Pompeii, it looks nothing like Alexander's statues which, for their grandeur, would have likely been the main medium of his depiction in his mausoleum. However, there were two main traditions of the depictions of Alexander III of Macedon in the ancient world. One, founded by the king's contemporary Lysippos, is almost always sculptural and the other later variant is most often seen in mosaics and paintings, but its origin in terms of either the author or chronology is murky at best. It could thus be argued that the sculptures of Alexander are likely more similar to what he actually looked like, since the first instance of that type of art comes from around his lifetime and though the sculptural tradition of the ancient Greeks was also idealized, it was usually the facial features that were used to preserve the character's real appearance. Meaning a statue could be a better medium for conveying Alexander's actual appearance. However, the focus on the face as the bearer of identification seems naturally intuitive and a consistency in its depiction is also matched in the mosaic/painting art styles, even if there are differences in how exactly the face is portrayed between the two main streams. Either way, since there are no sculptures that survived in the temple in a good-enough condition, the analysis must focus on the paintings regardless, even if they could be argued to be less reliable than statues. Considering the uniqueness of the find at Fayyum though, these depictions still deserve attention and full-scale analysis to see if they can do the same for the theory, what a statue of Alexander at the site could.

Other criticisms of the Kom Madi temple venerating Alexander theory attack different points than just the art. The first is that the pieces of art upon which this theory stands, even if permitted for assessment, are too unrecognizable to facilitate a strong argument. While the state

of the site could be better, it is the only one of such kind that is currently available and so a dismissal of it on such a basis seems wasteful. The other two critiques are more substantial and related to each other. The primary is that while work on the analysis of the depictions is important, they are not clear enough in conveying that it is Alexander himself who is depicted there. The features previously identified as the king's are, according to this argument, disputable and likely idealized anyway. The secondary related argument is that some of the features that are being disputed could in fact indicate the presence of someone other than Alexander. Considering the chronological and contextual aspects, the two main candidates have traditionally been Alexander's father Philip II of Macedon, or the founder of the Greek dynasty of Egypt, Ptolemy I Soter.

For these reasons, the question about whether or not we are truly seeing Alexander depicted at the temple in Fayyum has been asked many times. And though there continues to be some debate based around the main points mentioned, the evidence supporting the Alexander identification is, in my opinion, strong. As discussed previously, the head with an Alexander-like face shown in Bresciani's photos (figure 7) is an important piece of that evidence, even if its meaning has been fairly questioned. The criticism in essence claims that the parts of the face that remain are not as whole as would be ideal and though the face is similar to other mosaic or painting depictions of the Macedonian king, the actual appearance could just be the product of creative liberty and the association of a certain artistic style of face with the king, rather than an indication of what Alexander himself actually looked like. In fact, if we examine the statuary which is chronologically the closest to the life of Alexander the Great, the marble faces have little in common with either the depiction at Fayyum, or at Pompeii. On the other hand though,

as mentioned before it does appear that the figure is shown wearing a diadem which was famously one of the two things that Arrian reports Alexander reserved for himself (along with the purple cloak) and it would thus make sense that it would be a defining feature in his portrayals if that was how he distinguished himself from others during his lifetime. Moreover, the character in figure 7 does still appear to be somewhat larger in the zoomed-out soldier scene in figure 8 which further underlines its importance in the composition.

That being said, I believe this section of the temple's decoration to be the weakest strand of evidence for identifying the building as an Alexander temple. One of the more significant pieces of evidence is the Macedonian-type funeral bier under the Osiris depiction, shown in figure 11. This could theoretically be a ritual representation of Alexander's own funeral bier, or perhaps of that of his father who catapulted his career into the subjugation war with the other Greek states first and then his campaigns in Persia, based on the plans that Philip II concocted long before his own demise. Either way, the bier is very likely meant for a Macedonian person and due to the other depictions and associations with Alexander, it is bound to be him or his father.



Figure 11.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Bresciani E. (2003) Kom Madi 1977 e 1978, published by ETS, pp. 117.

The latter possibility is only minimal, though it is still worth inspecting, as the temple art as a whole could be recounting Alexander's life overall, in celebration of it. However, since elsewhere on the walls and within the Egyptian traditions of his cult Alexander is often depicted with Egyptian motifs and as a pharaoh, it is unlikely that there would be a scene depicting the death of his father from Macedonia. In the Egyptian tradition of royal depictions and descriptions, the rulers are associated with the gods both in terms of their origin, as well as their place after death and so a depiction of an earthly father figure for the ruler would not make sense. Philip was never deified and was in fact even renounced by Alexander, so that he himself could claim a divine origin (from either Zeus or Ammon, or sometimes both). The picture is then evidently more likely to be of Alexander, due to the disassociation that he himself started between himself and his Macedonian homeland and ancestors, which he later replaced with a claim to divinity – a disassociation that was necessary in order not to harm his claim to rule over Egypt.

The only other candidates who would want to be depicted as closely to Alexander's own style as seems apparent in this temple would be the Ptolemies, but there is a strong chronological argument that severely hinders such a narrative. From Bresciani's analysis of the materials at the site and further research done by other scholars,<sup>30</sup> the temple is roughly dated to about 260-285 BCE, which aligns with several important points. Alexander died in 323, but his body was not buried in Alexandria for many years. After it was hijacked by Ptolemy I in the Levant, it was brought to Memphis, where it was embalmed, mummified and put in a temporary room, awaiting its burial which Pausanias and some other ancient historians attest to, as

---

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, D.J. (1999) *Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum*, published by The British Academy, whole article.

discussed in the introduction. Those same sources claim the construction of his tomb in Alexandria began in the later part of Soter I's reign and was only finished at the cusp between Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III's respective rulerships, between 240-250 BCE. These facts present two main supporting strands of evidence that point to an Alexander depiction in the Fayyum.

The first and more directly related to refutation of the criticism is that the temple is barely young enough to depict Ptolemy I, let alone any of his dynastic successors. Additionally, the development of the ruler cult of the Ptolemies had just been founded at this point in time, and did not have the numbers, legitimacy, or resources to build temples. Meanwhile, the Alexander cult was clearly already strong enough that despite this being a time just before the final resting place of Alexander was finished and his body stowed there, there were already temples to him springing up in rural, less accessible areas of Egypt. The structure is thus likely proven to be too old to be able to depict any major strands of the Ptolemaic dynasty's own propaganda that only appear later in their rule. Because of that, the only other way it could be effectively associated with one of its rulers would be if it was a major site of either one of their achievements, or their death.

As for the former, the Fayyum is very much removed from the political centers of Ptolemaic Egypt and it seems unlikely that the Ptolemies would focus on commemorating their agrarian policies. For the latter, there is no body and very few tomblike features within the structure which makes it an unlikely tomb. Such a building in an area like the Fayyum is much more likely the place for gods and heroes that the people of those parts of the country recognize, such as the legendary Alexander, who would have been venerated by the Ptolemy's veterans settled in the area. The temple, clearly retaining much of the uniquely Greek features of its

characters, yet borrowing from the artistic traditions of the Egyptians, is meant to serve two kinds of populations. The native Egyptian population is seeing a new god shown in ways they are used to and the incoming Greco-Macedonian settlers are seeing their hero and demigod depicted in a new environment, of which they are becoming a part. The use of Alexander's image in such a way makes sense for the kinds of purposes of assimilation and integration that the Ptolemies who built the temple likely had in mind. The actual physical features of the site then are not to be prioritized over correct chronological contextualization and logical placing within the historical record. As shown in this section, these analyses are the bedrock for the defense of the theory that the temple is truly associated with the character of Alexander the Great.

Another example that derives its credibility from its contextual value is the sacrificial scene discussed in the section above and the question it poses about the rank of Alexander in this particular scene, as well as overall within the temple. What is imperative to understand about this particular depiction of sacrifice that has been associated with Alexander and Hellenic religious practices in general is its possible relation to the conqueror. Though the study of the material has not been conclusive enough to facilitate an exact determination about whether this specific sacrificial depiction is done in the name or honor of Alexander the Great, it can still provide much information and context. If the sacrificial scene is not necessarily related to the conqueror directly (as in, done to please him or invoke his blessing for example), but the analysis of the figure as Alexander is correct, he is still depicted larger than life. It is a Hellenic depiction of a sacrifice, done by Hellenic characters in an Egyptian-like piece of art, with a frontal character that is given importance. In combination with the chronological argument, the options on what it

could be depicting if not Alexander are very limited.

The most crucial point of the depiction is thus that it is in some way clearly associated with Alexander. As such, it can be implied that similar images, whether they mean the worship of his figure, or just his association with the mixed religious practices of the Greek-ruled Ptolemaic Egypt, are ones that would be akin to those found at Alexandria. The compilation of all these various pieces of evidence adds to Bresciani's theory that this is truly a temple of Alexander the Great. For the purpose of this research paper then, the usefulness of the analysis of this depiction and its comparison to others like it where either Alexander is present, or where the Greco-Egyptian worship of Serapis and Isis is practiced remains useful.

## The Serapis-Isis Cult

Moving onto the evidence for another Greco-Egyptian cult of Serapis and Isis, one whose architecture, depictions, art, and locations are just as important for this paper as Alexander's needs context as well. The Serapean cult, started under Ptolemy I, whose temples flourished until the end of the pagan Roman rule in Egypt in the 5th century CE, is another excellent example of the religious blending of Hellenic and Egyptian practices that I have described previously with the example of Alexander the Great's cult. The inspection of its features and evidence for its similarity to the religious practices surrounding Alexander is useful in order to establish a firm ground upon which the comparison can be drawn. Once its origins and traditions are understood, one can begin to see the shared features of the temples built to these two cults and thus get to the ultimate goal of this paper — the theory of the appearance, use, and mixed cultural nature of the great temple to Alexander in the Ptolemaic capital of Alexandria.

The Serapen cult originated almost immediately after the Ptolemies took over Egypt and the lower Canaan during the wars of the Diadochi following Alexander's death. The figure of Serapis arose from the combination of two existing Egyptian deities — Osiris, and the Apis bull.<sup>31</sup> Osiris was one of the most important deities in the Egyptian pantheon, being closely tied to the pharaohs, their living roles, as well as their reincarnations in the afterlife. The afterlife itself was understood as the domain of primarily Osiris and since the ancient Egyptian system of religious traditions and beliefs put so much weight on what happens after death, Osiris rose to dominate much of active worship time. The Apis bull was itself an ancient deity reaching as far

---

<sup>31</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. Serapis. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Serapis>.

back as the traditions of the Old Kingdom in the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BCE. Most often, the animal god was associated with fertility, bounty, and plenty, though some versions of the deity connect it with the god Ptah, a creator god and the patron of craftsmen.<sup>32</sup> In this way, via the combination of the two, the Ptolemies managed to incorporate farmers, craftsmen, the afterlife, fertility, and prosperity into a single deity, one whose roots have been established in Egyptian society for around 3,000 years at that point. The use of such powerful and long-established figures was implemented to help reach as many Egyptian subjects as possible by its universal appeal. With that though, the deity seems purely Egyptian, which is what reveals the need to discuss the Hellenic aspects of Serapis.

Firstly it is important to understand that while the origin of the name and the divine nature of Serapis does seem completely Egyptian, even these parts of the deity are already Hellenized. Both of the gods' names are their Hellenized versions - Apis's name in actual Egyptian was closer to Api or Hapi, and Osiris's has been transliterated in a variety of ways such as Wasir, Ausare, or Owasirid. Additionally, in the matter of the divine nature of Serapis, though the origin is indeed almost entirely Egyptian, the deity would soon be equated with ones from the Hellenic pantheon, most prominently Zeus. That brings the focus onto the almost entirely Hellenic side of Serapis - the god's appearance. It was largely modeled on the visage of Zeus, which in turn supported the almost immediate link of Serapis to the Hellenic pantheon. The domains of Serapis were then also extended into the Greek world and the god became associated with Hades (Roman Pluto), god of the underworld, the afterlife and wealth.

Below is an image of a statue of Serapis made in the 3rd century BCE in Italy, that

---

<sup>32</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. Serapis. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Serapis>.

carries evidence for the association with both Hellenic deities. It is thought to have been modeled on the statue of Serapis found at the Serapeum in Alexandria (figure 12a). The god is seen seated there on a regal throne, holding a staff, with Cerberus, the three-headed guardian dog of Hades at his feet. He is clothed in the Greco-Roman manner, his hair and beard resemble that of Zeus, and the dog is the link to Hades.

If it is compared to the statue of Seated Zeus (figure 12b), also produced by the Romans at a later date (1st century CE), the face resemblance is striking. Almost all of the visage features are thus quite clearly Greek in origin, except for a single property that I have so far neglected to mention. The headpiece that the statue of Serapis can be seen wearing is called the modius and its first link was to the lotus plant which was used to indicate fertility and the power of nature in Egyptian mythology, though later iterations of the headpiece shifted to a more universal ‘crown of nature-like’ which was likely meant to convey Serapis’ source of power.



Figure 12a.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Blundell Henry, World Museum. Published by National Museums Liverpool, 2018.

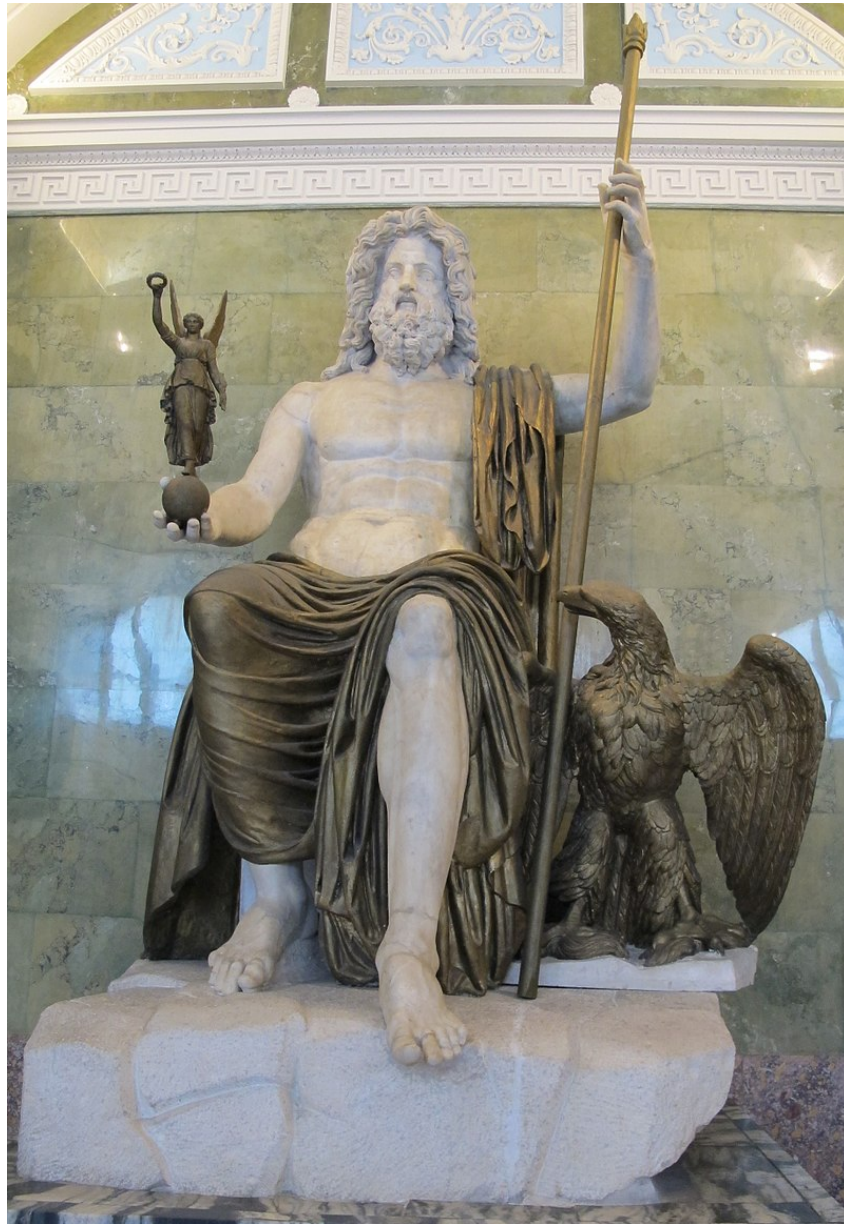


Figure 12b.<sup>34</sup>

The later association of Serapis and Isis as two deities who would be worshiped side by side is less relevant to the purpose of this paper, but a brief explanation of it is also needed in

---

<sup>34</sup> Bossi, Andrew. Hermitage Replica of the Statue of Zeus at Olympia. Published by World History Encyclopedia, 2018.

order to understand the architectural nature of the temple at Medinet Madi which was shared between Serapis and Isis. The match came from two main sources. The first was a logical supplanting of Osiris as Isis's brother-husband, since Serapis assumed many of the roles that Osiris held. This dynamic was hijacked by the Ptolemaic dynasty whose rulers started depicting themselves as the godly duo from the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus on. Though Isis would be very rarely compared to some Greek deities, her introduction into the Greek religious world came earlier and continued to flourish in its Egyptian form as the cult of Isis became widely popular in the entire Mediterranean and not just in Egypt. As such, she was already seen as a somewhat universal goddess and her pairing with Serapis was likely primarily used for the previously discussed dynastic purposes in the Greco-Macedonian rule over Egypt.

With those features of the cult around Serapis and Isis established, the work on analyzing their temples and their likeness to the cult and temples of Alexander can commence. The smaller temple at Medinet Madi will be treated first as it originated as an Isis temple and was then appropriated for the joint worship of both Isis and Serapis. The second analysis will focus on the Serapeum of Alexandria which remained the primary temple to Serapis for the entire period of his worship and which was likely located close to Alexander's own temple and tomb. Like the temple at Al-Fayyum, the one at Medinet Madi bears more of the native Egyptian influence in its art and overall architecture, whereas the Serapeum and Alexander's Mausoleum, centered in the Ptolemaic capital, were both more Hellenic in both categories. The hope is thus that the Medinet Madi temple will differ in similar ways from the Serapeum as the Alexander temple in the Fayyum region would from the conqueror Mausoleum and main temple at Alexandria.

## **The Temple at Medinet Madi**

The temple at Medinet Madi originated long before the Ptolemies ever set foot into Egypt, between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. It was however greatly expanded and utilized during the Ptolemaic era as a part of the continuing development of the Serapis-Isis cult. The temple at Medinet Madi was one of the bastions of a specific version of Isis that was created by the Greeks called Isis-Thermouthis. Nowadays, the structure is split into three distinct sections: temple A, B and C from oldest to youngest. Temple A, the original from Egypt's past was modified by the Ptolemies and sections B and C were both built by the Greco-Macedonian dynasty and later worked on during the Roman period as well. The original temple was dedicated to a few deities, though Renenutet was the most dominant one. It would be on the foundation of this particular goddess that the Ptolemies would make the link to Isis and by extension to Serapis. Considering that the A section of the temple saw the least building activity during the Ptolemaic era, consisting mostly of a paved colonnade between its pillars, its evidence is not as important as the two latter sections. Its main contribution to this paper can be covered briefly in the already-mentioned fact that the goddess it was dedicated to originally was the basis for the later association with Isis. Sections B and C however bear the art and architecture that can be compared to the temple of Alexander in the Fayyum, less than a hundred miles away.

Temple B's construction was mostly finished, but its art was left undone. Some of the figures depicted on its walls were destroyed over time, but it is clear that the majority of them were not brought to completion at all. From the inscriptions however, it appears that this section was dedicated to Isis-Thermouthis (the Greek name for Renenutet). Thermouthis, like Renenutet, was a cobra deity that was linked to fertility due to the snake's protection of grain and other

farmed goods from rodents. This connects back to the continually increasing role of both Isis and Serapis as gods of fertility and thus to the Ptolemies' role in assuming one of the most important roles of Egyptian pharaohs – the ensuring of a good crop yield. Altogether, this serves as the first definitive piece of evidence of the linking of the two deities of Isis and Thermouthis, as well as of the fact that it was the Greeks who made the connection.

Section C is the most potent in terms of Ptolemaic evidence. The surviving depictions themselves do not include Serapis, but they do show the image of Isis in several different places and almost always in combination with Thermouthis, in the role of fertility and grain protection, that they so often shared with Serapis. Importantly, this is also one of the many realms that Serapis is given rulership over in the Serapeum in Alexandria. Conversely to the temple of Alexander, all the figures depicted at Medinet Madi are Egyptian, at least in terms of their origin. What is meant by that is that both Isis and Thermouthis are Egyptian (if Hellenized) deities, as is the role of a pharaoh, but in practice the figures are depicted in a Hellenic way and some of the pharaohs could be depictions of the Ptolemies themselves. It is worth mentioning that the evidence for the latter is only theoretical, due to the fact that there are indeed pharaonic figures depicted along with the images of the gods in both B and C, but they are either unfinished or too decrepit to facilitate an accurate identification of a specific ruler. As such, the chronology of the temples' B and C construction (Ptolemies VII-IX) is the main link between the pharaonic figures depicted and the Ptolemies themselves. In terms of the depictions of Isis herself though, Hellenic influence is clear.

Very uncharacteristically, Isis-Thermouthis is depicted in the temple from the front, which is not only unusual for any kind of Egyptian temple art, but in that way, it differs even

from the Fayyumic temple to Alexander, which seems to bear only profile depictions.

Unfortunately, due to the ongoing work at Medinet Madi, many of the publications are only available to scholars who work on the projects there directly. As such, Mazzuca's written work is the source of the evidence for Medinet Madi's temple depictions. In Greek religious depictions of gods and heroes, frontal depictions are at least just as common as any other depiction, the  $\frac{3}{4}$  style, or profile. The frontal style is somewhat less common in temples and pottery, though quite common on shields. Instead of Greek characters being depicted in the Egyptian way then (as is the case in the Alexander temple), we are dealing with Egyptian characters being depicted the Greek way. From that it seems that the Ptolemies are always striving for a sort of balance between the two cultures— when one's characters are depicted, it is done so in the art style of the other and vice versa.

As far as the architecture of temples B and C is concerned, they very closely resemble the layout of the original A section and the B section even seems to be fully modeled after the oldest part of the sanctuary. The architecture is influenced by the native Egyptian culture. However the building itself included many statues and art, some of which have Greek features. One example of this are the statues of lions at Medinet Madi. In the first image below (figure 13), a fairly typical ancient Egyptian sculpture of a lion can be seen, originating from a couple hundred years before the building of temple A. This specific example was selected in order to retain physical proximity and thus decrease variation between the various sites studied. It comes from Herakleopolis Magna, south of the border of the Fayyum governorate. When compared to the second picture of the lion statues at Medinet Madi (figure 14) that were added to the structure during the Ptolemaic construction, several differences can be observed almost immediately.



Figure 13.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 14.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Met Museum. Recumbent Lion. Published by TheMet, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Alchetron. Medinet Madi Collection. Published by alchetron.com, 2018.

First of all, the Egyptian depiction looks much closer to an actual lion, whereas the Greek statue bears evidence of the art style of Greek depictions of animal or mythical creatures. Their faces were often bizarre and seem to be impacted by the fact that the culture that produced them has been removed from the animals physically for a long time. For comparison, figure 15 below originating from the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries from Athens is thought to bear a depiction of either a lion head or a gorgon head on the shield in the center of the scene. It is possible to see that the faces from the shield and from Medinet Madi are similarly bizarre and so whether it was the influence of how mythical creatures were depicted, or of misconceptions about what lions look like (or artistic choice), it can be concluded that the art style at Medinet Madi is influenced by the Greek style either way. Moreover, the profiled depiction of the lion statue's body as opposed to the frontal depiction of its face relative to where the observer would be looking at the statue from also differs from the Egyptian lion depiction statue from Herakleopolis Magna. Between the Greek influence in the styles of art, and the Egyptian character of the architectural layout there arise many similarities to the temple of Alexander which is also structurally based on the temples from this area of Egypt.

The matter of the difference in how art is done and who is depicted in it, though, is just as crucial for constructing the parallel to the two greater temples to Serapis and Alexander in Alexandria, as is their likeness. The mentioned matter of a seemingly prevalent seeking of balance between the two cultures is a crucial point when reconstructing the theoretical appearance of the mausoleum of Alexander in Alexandria. The things that differ between Medinat Madi and the Alexander temple at Fayyum are thus a crucial point to keep in mind

when applying this comparison to the Serapeum at Alexandria and then using its evidence to reconstruct what the main temple and mausoleum to Alexander would look like.



Figure 15.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Group E Potter. Attic Black Figure. Published by Louvre Museum.

## Serapeum

Keeping the features of both the Fayyumic and Medinet Madi temples in mind and comparing them to the Serapeum can yield a few different kinds of results. Firstly, if there are shared features between all three, it would be highly likely that they would be found in the fourth, i.e. Alexander's mausoleum. Secondly, if the Serapeum strives for a similar cultural balance like the two smaller temples, seeing what it looks like at a greater scale might indicate what it would look like in the greater temple to Alexander. Finally, depending on the degree of presence and use of Egyptian culture, imagery and style of art at the Serapeum, one can get an idea of to what extent this culture would be represented in Alexander's temple. Because of the more Egyptian nature of the Serapis-Isis match and subsequent cult, the Serapeum is bound to have a greater or at the least equal amount of Egyptian influence as would the temple to the conqueror. Not only would it be difficult to facilitate a large amount of Egyptian imagery in relation to Alexander, but the desire to depict his figure in a somewhat Greco-Macedonian manner is further evidenced by the scene depictions from the Fayyumic temple discussed previously.

To address the first point, there are indeed similarities shared between the Serapeum, the Medinet Madi temple and the one in the Fayyum. Though the temple to Serapis is decrepit and has been looted many times, parts of it still survive and those that do not are fairly well documented in primary sources describing the magnificent sanctuary. The things that are shared between the two smaller temples and the Serapeum are Hellenic by a great majority. The Serapeum, despite its connection to the goddess Isis and Serapis' supposed Egyptian origin, is clearly a Greek structure, a central temple in a Greek city, ruled by Greek rulers. The thought that

the art at Serapeum might have been more Egyptian is not fully unreasonable though.. From what remains, such as the pillars, and the temple's layout, the building's Greek character is almost indisputable, but some of the few preserved statues are characteristically Egyptian. In the figure directly below (16) is a sphinx that likely stood in front of the temple to Serapis and while this particular mythical creature is shared between the two cultures, this depiction is clearly Egyptian, quite close in appearance to the more famous sphinx at Giza. Additionally, a few statues of what seems to be Egyptian deities (most likely Isis) that bear hieroglyphic inscriptions have been found at the site as well (figure 17).

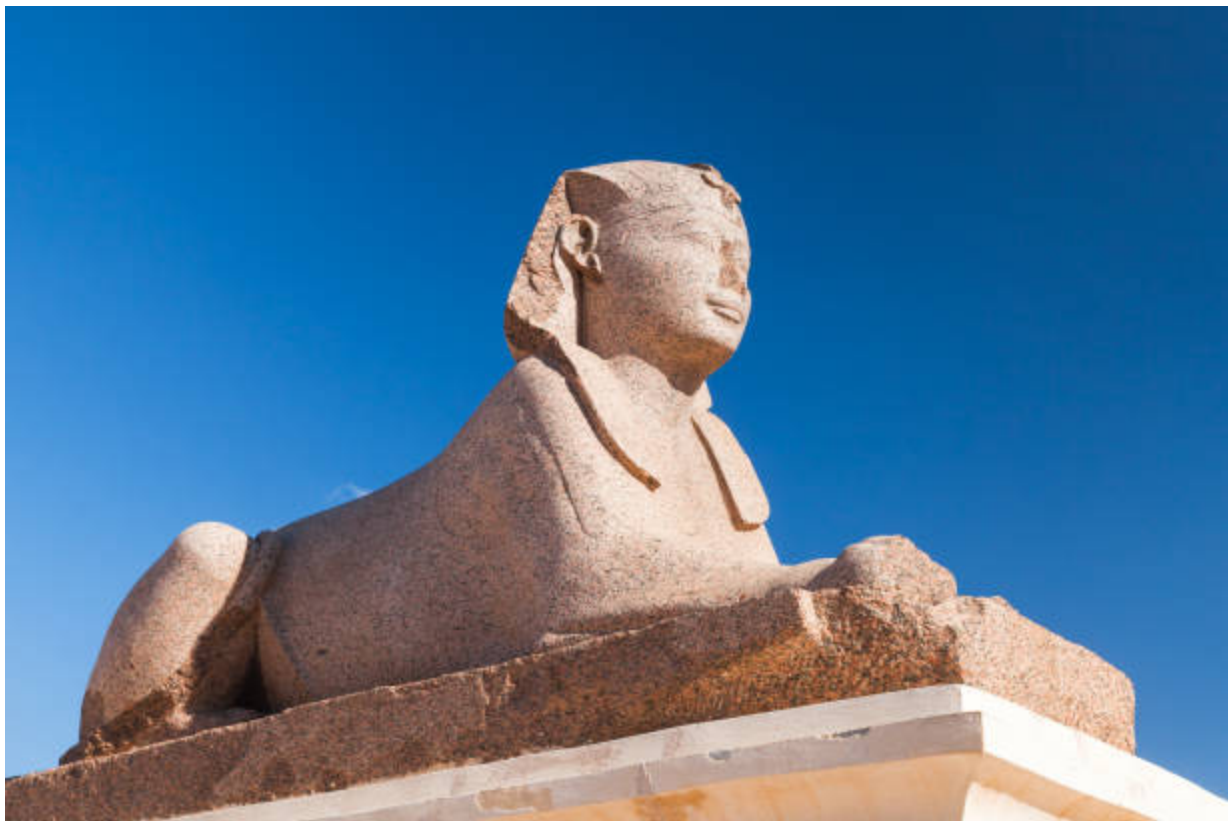


Figure 16.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Sphinx Statue. Published by istockphoto.com, 2019.



Figure 17.<sup>39</sup>

Outside of that limited evidence though, the structure truly is, as pointed out, Greek. Figure 18 below is a drawing based off of the excavation work done at the site. It is of the central temple and a few of its features. What is most important here is the overall architectural layout. Figure 19 just below it is a picture of a typical Greek temple layout. As is obvious, the Serapeum retained the rectangular shape as well as the column lining along the outer walls. Also similarly, the temple to Serapis has a few inside rooms and though these are less standard than in the Greek prototype, this difference can be explained by the temple's partial use as a library. Below are the layouts of the Medinet Madi and Fayyumic Alexander temples respectively.

---

<sup>39</sup> Pedestal Inscription. Published by istockphoto.com, 2019.

RECONSTRUCTING THE SERAPEUM IN ALEXANDRIA

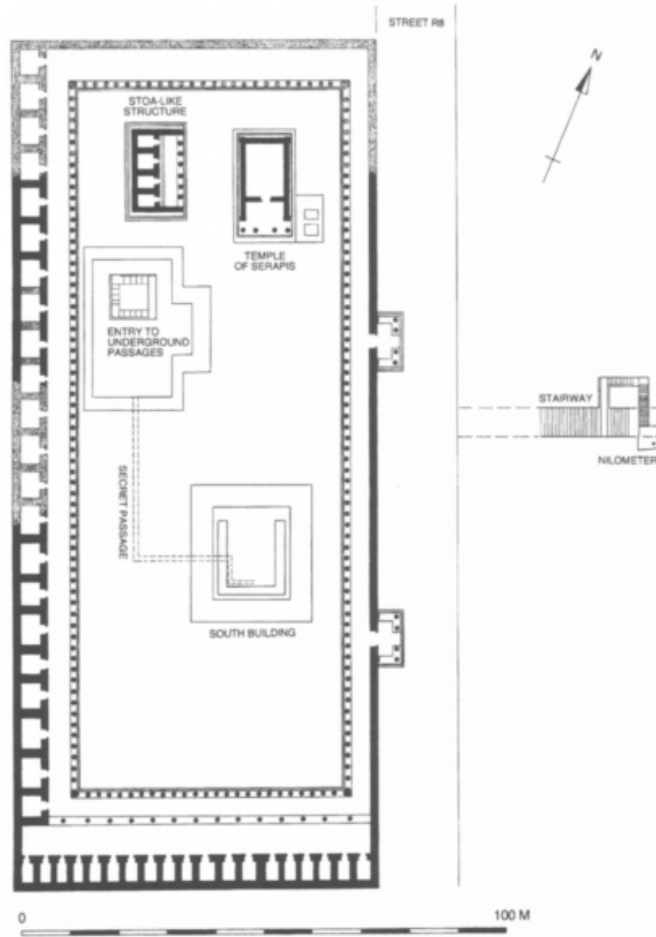


Figure 18.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> McKenzie, J. *Reconstructing the Serapeum in Alexandria*. Published by jstor.org, 2004.

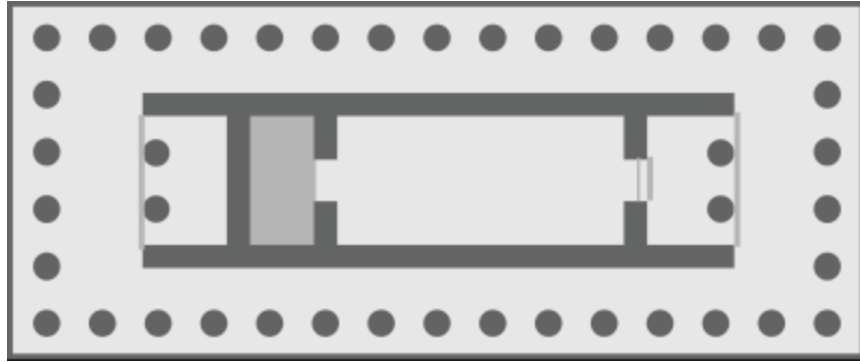


Figure 19.<sup>41</sup>

In both images, it is evident that though the shape of both of the smaller temples is somewhat rectangular, it is nowhere near as regular as the Greek type. If one looks within the outside wall which unlike the Greek type, was not technically a part of the temple, the shape of the buildings inside is even less regular. This feature is the first among other differences.

As already indicated, the major way that the two smaller temples differ from the Serapeum is architecture. Both smaller temples retained a more modest and native style of building, as is, for example, evident from the likeness of temple A and temple B in the Medinet Madi layout image (figure 20). This could be the result of their rural, less central location, rather than artistic choice. After all, the Ptolemies had to colonize and settle both locations of the smaller temples in order for there to be any Greek population at all. Within Alexandria, Greek settling was much easier as the big city life was a more lucrative and thus sought-for opportunity, Greek infrastructure was more easily developed and maintained and it was on the coast which made both arriving and maintaining contact with the homeland easier for Greek settlers.

---

<sup>41</sup> Bergmann, Roland. Adyton. Published by Wikipedia, 2012.

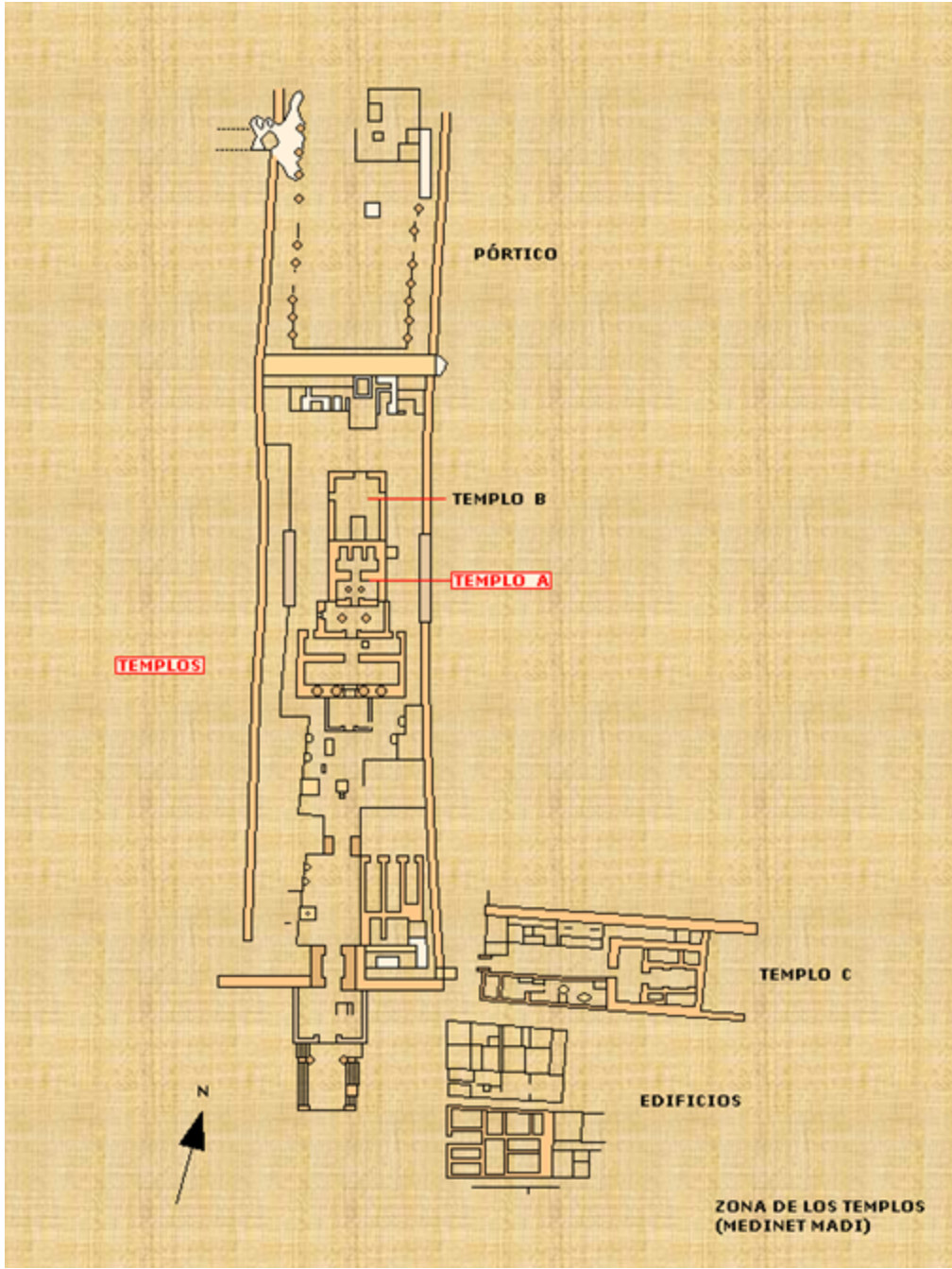


Figure 20.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Joerg, Reid. Medinet Madi Temples. Published by touregypt.net, 2015.

The higher degree of Hellenization thus makes sense within the context of the capital of the ruling dynasty, but the Egyptian influence clearly embedded even here, in the heart of the Ptolemaic Empire should not be understated. The cult of Alexander, like that of Serapis and Isis, was meant to be appealing to the entire population that the Ptolemies ruled over. The two smaller temples perhaps did not have as much choice due to the Greek to Egyptian ratio in those parts of Egypt, but in Alexandria, Greek influence and the power of the Ptolemies was strong enough to allow for whatever style of temples the rulers would choose. That then leads to the final question of what the temple to Alexander might have looked like and what kind of cultural mixture should archeologists expect to see upon its discovery.

The mausoleum and temple to Alexander is not entirely Greek. Due to Alexander's own and later the Ptolemies' attempts to fuse the various cultures of the vast empire, such a dream would die at the altar of Greek hubris if the places where the fusion was supposed to happen were culturally homogenic. As is evidenced with the Alexander temple in the Fayyum, the Isis-Thermouthis sanctuary at Medinet Madi and the Serapeum in Alexandria, this combination was undertaken in various ways and in differing ratios. But the one similarity that is the most important is the fact that they all do share in that fusion of Greek and Egyptian cultures, just as the ideas behind the deities of the respective cults.

## Bibliography

- Arrian, edited by J. Romm (2010) *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, published by Pantheon Books.
- Bresciani E. (2003) *Kom Madi 1977 e 1978*, published by ETS.
- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. Serapis. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 21, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Serapis>.
- Chugg, A. M. (2004), *The Lost Tomb of Alexander the Great*, London.
- Diodorus of Sicily, translated & edited by R. Waterfield (2019) *The Library, Books 16-20*, published by Oxford World's Classics.
- Erskine, Andrew. *Life after Death: Alexandria and the Body of Alexander*. *Greece & Rome* 49, no. 2 (2002): 163–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826904>.
- Green P. (2013) *Alexander of Macedon: 356-323 B.C.*, published by University of California Berkeley Press.
- Heckel W. & J.C. Yardley (2004) *Alexander the Great: Historical Sources in Translation*, published by Blackwell Publishing.
- Koenen L. (2002) *Apokalyptik und Ägypten: Eine kritische Analyse der relevanten Texte aus dem griechisch-römischen Ägypten* ed. A. Blasius and B. U. Schipper, published by Leuven.
- Pausanias, *Ptolemy the Great History*. Published by Harvard University. Sections 1.6.3, 1.7.1.
- Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, published by University of Chicago, pp. 27-31.
- Plutarch, translated by I. Scott-Kilvert (1973) *The Age of Alexander*, published by Penguin Classics.

Pseudo-Callisthenes, translated by R. Stoneman (1991) *The Greek Alexander Romance*,  
published by Penguins Classics.

Quintus Curtius Rufus, translated by J. Yardley (2004) *The History of Alexander*, published by  
Penguin Classics.

Ruzicka S. (2013) *Trouble in the West: Egypt and the Persian Empire, 525-332 BCE*, published  
by Oxford University Press.

Suetonius, translated by R. Graves (2007) *The Twelve Caesars*, published by Penguin Classics.

Thompson, D.J. (1999) *Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum*, published by  
The British Academy, whole article.