

## **Paraitonion, the Ancient City and Harbor during the Graeco-Roman Period According to Ancient Sources**

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### **Abstract**

Marsa Matrouh today is well known as a tourist resort, but few historical facts are known about it. According to ancient sources, it once acted as a fishing village, and afterward a resupply harbor for ships trading in the Mediterranean. During early Egyptian times the area was known as *Thehenu* then, it was called Ammonia. **During** the Greco-Roman period it became Paraitonion or Paraetonium which are several forms of Baretion. It was of considerable importance in the Greco-Roman era because of its port, not easy to access, but fairly large and well protected. Strategically it was, like Pelousion in the east. The history of the city gained some global reputation when it was occupied by Marc Antony and Cleopatra. Justinian renewed and fortified it. Partial excavations have brought to light a Roman-era inscription

with hints of work done in a public building, the remains of a church, of baths, and a statue of the Good Shepherd. Through the Byzantine period, the city is supposed to have considerable regional importance as it laid within the “Eparchy of Lower Libya” and was the seat of both the “Dux Limitis Libyci” and a “Christian bishop”. But prior to this era, classical sources about the history of the region are rare and flawed by their lack of clarity or the presence of some variations regarding the demographic and geographical characteristics of the area. So, this study aims to analyze and evaluate those sources in order to find out similarities or differences between them or to interpret a new image about the importance of the city and its ancient harbor and the role it once played during the Greco-Roman Era.

**Keywords:** Marsa Matrouh, Paraetonium, Ammonia, Graeco-Roman Era, Ancient cities.

## Introduction

PARETONIUM (Παραίτωνιον, Paraetionium, today el-Barāṭūn, Marsa Matrouh), small city of Marmarica, lies on Egypt's Western Mediterranean coast, 290 km to the west of Alexandria. It is the capital of Matrouh Governorate, which is the last Egyptian governorate before the Libyan border, the last bulwark of the Berber people and its traditions. This Governorate extends from km 41 in the west of Alexandria up to the Egyptian- Libyan borders on the northern coast of Egypt, and deep into the western desert of Egypt to include Siwa Oasis (Egyptian Tourism Authority - Marsa Matrouh, 2020), (Fig. 2). Matrouh acted, from ancient times up until now, as the western gate of Egypt, a transit for travelers from East to West and the connective point between the countries of northern Africa and Asia continent.

Alexander the Great certainly stopped there, because from Paraetionium the road leading south to the Oasis of Ammon (Siwa) from which the city also had the designation of Ammonia. It was of considerable importance in the Greco-Roman age because of its port, not easy to access, but fairly large and well protected. Strategically it was, like Pelusium in the east, the real key to Egypt in the west. Antonio and Cleopatra after Actium headed towards Paraetionium, with the remains of the fleet, and there Antonio rushed a little later, to

try to prevent the further advance, regaining them, of the four legions that, passed to Octavianus. Later on, Justinian renewed and fortified the city. Partial excavations have brought to light a Roman-era inscription with hints of work done in a public building, the remains of a church, of baths, and a statue of the Good Shepherd (White, 2002).

The existing knowledge about the history of the city is often confined to its ancient name, being a station during the journey of Alexander the Great to Siwa or from its fame as a place that witnessed the love story of Cleopatra and Antonio. Depending on these facts most of the literature contained their sanctuaries. However, some aspects concerning its establishment as a settlement and trading port, its relation with the neighboring areas, characteristics of the inhabitants, its resources, being a privileged gateway for trade between Rome and Egypt, etc., are sometimes missed.

## Aim of the study

Brief details about the ancient city and its harbor are known. However, much information about the city is available in handbooks of sailors and in the texts of Classical writers and geographers such as Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, Diodorus, etc., From here came the aim of this study which is to gather and evaluate in one place the most important ancient accounts of Marsa Matrouh

to develop a solid starting point for other researchers interested in studying the area to identify the gaps in knowledge that the previous literature ignored.

## Methodology of the Study

### *Qualitative analysis methods*

Since the aim of the study is to analyze and evaluate the historical tendency to develop the existing knowledge about the city of Marsa Matrouh and its History during the Greco-Roman Era, the study adapts the Qualitative analysis method to understand and interpret the collected secondary data from the literatures related to the research topic.

The Qualitative Data Analysis was conducted through the following steps:

- **Scanning the Sources:** ancient classical sources were scanned to gather the word PARETONIUM repetitions, in its different forms.
- **Secondary Data Comparisons:** comparing the findings of the collected data from the literatures to evaluate or discuss the similarities or differences between them.
- **Search for new or accurate information:** discussions about which point of view of the issue was not specified by the historians or unanimously confirmed.

- **Lastly the data was summarized:** to link the findings to the study main objectives.

## Literature Review

Literature review shows that previous studies are primarily focused on giving a general view about the history of Marsa Matrouh (Bard, 2005, Redford, 2005). Even the several archaeological excavations of the ancient city have been hampered due to the vast expansion in Marsa Matrouh as a major tourist destination. Consequently, little was known about the history and characteristics of the ancient city and its harbor. What is missing from the past studies is a comprehensive and structured approach in interpreting the historical, cultural and economic values of the city. This picture could be changed due to the Greek and Roman writers who classified the ancient city and its harbor (Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, Cassius, etc.). In terms of scanning and evaluating their texts, various approaches will be revealed.

### **The founding of Paratone, Paraetionium**

According to different sources, the Oxyrhynchus Chronicle (P. Oxy. 1 12, col V.1-5) dates to the first or second century A.D., Heironymus (124, ed), the Alexander Romance (1.31, ed. Kroll) and St. Jerome, Alexander the Great founded this city during his way to visit the oracle of Ammon at Siwa. Besides, Alexander Romance preserves a

story which explain the place name. Alexander saw a numerous deer and called on one of his archers to shoot the beast. The archer drew his bow but he missed, then Alexander said “Fellow, that was a miss, Paratonon”. As a result, the city was called Paratone (Cohen, 1995). He ordered to build a small town and invites good local class people to live there and ordered to give them houses (Hansen, ed. 1998).

Another source mentioned that before visiting the Temple of Ammun, Alexander went as far along the coast and from Paraetionium he turned into the desert (Arrian 3.3). Arriandidn’t say anything about the founding of the settlement by Alexander the Great. Strabo in his story about this part talked about the dangers of the journey that Alexander and his soldiers faced after setting out from Paraetionium (Strabo 17.1.43). Strabo, like Arrian didn’t mention the founding of the city.

During the era of the early Ptolemies, it sounds that the city had a special affair. It had role in the struggle between Magas, the Greek Macedonian King of Cyrenaica and his half-brother Ptolemy Philadelphus. Magas opened threats against Ptolemy II in 274 BC, he attacked Egypt from the west and made himself master of Paraetionium. He ordershis guards to kindle a friendly fire signals in the light-house both in the evening, and early in the morning, as if he was there by this

deception he penetrated into the country. (Polyaenus, 2.28.2). Depending on this situation Paraetionium appeared as a key strategic town and the indication of Polyaenus to the presence of a lighthouse in it confirms its navigation role. Diodorus also said (Diodorus, 1.31.2) that Paraitonion and Alexandria were the only two good harbors on the Egyptian coast.

### **Story of Cleopatra and Mark Antony**

Marsa Matrouh once had a vital role in the Story of Cleopatra and March Antony. It was the place which witnessed part of their love story as well as its tragically end.

After the battler of ActiumAntony and Cleopatra sailed south to Egypt, when they arrived at Paraetionium, Cleopatra moved forward to Alexandria. Antony decided to stay. He remained several weeks hiding in the most entire solitude, wandering on the beach with only two friends (Plutarch, 69). Dio Cassius told us that Antony then left Paraetionium and went to meet Octavian in front of Alexandria (Cassius, 51.10.1). Based on the accounts of Plutarch and Cassius it can be concluded that Cleopatra and Antony appear to had refortified the port to be a base for their fleet, otherwise why it was chosen as a return and departure point?Florus, Epitome of Roman History proved the fortification of the port during the Cleopatra’s Reign. He confirmed that neither their arrangements for

fight into the Sea, nor their occupation of the two horns of Egypt, Paraetionium and Pelusium, with garrisons profited them, they were all nearly within Octavian's grasp (Epitome, 2, 21).

### **Paraetionium as source for lead carbonate mineral cerussite**

As mentioned before the area is famous for its richness in natural resources. From the Tehenu Palette, the tributes of the inhabitants reflect their pastoral dependent economic activity. The situation might be changed during the Roman Era. Paraetionium has gained a new reputation as a vital source of an expensive and high-quality raw material essential for the natural white color. Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder texts, during the 1st century BC, presented to us much about the techniques used during the Roman World. Vitruvius (Vitruvius, 7.7.3) gave us incomplete information about a natural color known as **Paraetionium** white which "*gets its name from the place where it is dug up*". On the other hand, Pliny (35.18.1) was more informative, as he presented in more details the value of this color for the Romans. He told us about the most expensive white which was the calcareous mud of Paraetionium, "*sea-foam hardened with mud*", and that it costed "*50 denarii per 6 lbs*". From Pliny account we know more about the quality of that color as it was the greasiest among all the white colors and "*makes the most tenacious for plasters*

*because of its smoothness*". It seems that because of its high quality and price this color was, sometimes, adulterated in Rome to produce more cheaper alternative. From Vitruvius and Pliny arise another importance of **Paraetionium** as it was not only a regular Roman harbor or a settlement but also a valuable source for the best raw material of the natural white color.

### **Historical sources for the dwellers**

Sources about the ethnic groups who made up the inhabitants of the region are rare and clouded by the regular issues of understanding their contents and evaluating the reliability (Burstein, 2008). The term "Libyans", for the ancient Egyptians, refers to people, "**Tjemehu**" or "**Tjehenu**", who lived in the Sahara land to the west of the Nile Valley, within the Egyptian boundaries. These two words were used to refer to two regions, "Tjehenu" refers to the northern part till El-Faiyoum, while "Tjemehu" represented the area stretched south into Nubia. The study will concentrate here on the "Tjehenu" who resembles the inhabitants of the studied area, whom according to the sources were related to the Egyptians of the Delta (Redford, 2005). El-Mosallamy, also stated that the name Tehenu was used by the Ancient Egyptians to denote the land and "the white-skinned" people "inhabitants of the countries of Thehenu", who lived to west of the Nile Valley (El-Mosallamy, 1986). The oldest

reference to Libyan name 'Thehenu' is found on a sign on King Scorpion's statue, from Abydos. It is concluded that Scorpion had some battles with those people during his war to unify Egypt (El-Mosallamy, 1986). The main source of the Libyans is the Libyan Palette or The Thehenu palette (Figure 1), now in the GEM Museum. At the end of the last row of the fourth register, there is a representation of a hieroglyphic sign of a throwing stick on a piece of land, which stands for t3-tmhw, Thnw, Tjehenw the name of the Libyan tribe. Olive trees are one of the main trees that had been grown in Libya. the hieroglyph of the throwing stick on an oval (which means 'region', 'place', 'island'), thus a toponym of Libya or Western Delta. From the scenes on this palette, one can see the tributes of the peoples of Libya to Egypt (bulls, donkeys, rams, olive trees).



Figure 1: Fragment of The Thehenu palette "Libyan Tribute" tablet End of the predynastic period (3000 BC CA) Source: [http://gem.gov.eg/index/Gallery%20-G1\\_5.htm](http://gem.gov.eg/index/Gallery%20-G1_5.htm)

In one of the four major expeditions of Harkhuf, the governor of Upper Egypt during the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, he travelled to a land known as "Iyam", which is according to some historians is the land of the Libyans, to increase trade and build alliances (Collins, et al, 2019). From the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty it seems that the inhabitants of the region are usually described as a threat for the Egyptians, they were included among the 'nine bows' or the enemies of the Egyptian Kings, which he had to defeat in rituals as well as in reality. Not surprisingly then, the existence of some military fortifications such as the westernmost fortress of Ramses II at Apis to protect the country from Libyans attack. Generally, they were depicted with bright skin and prominent tattoos (Egypt's relations to Lybia, 2020) (Figures 2-3).

During the late period the situation changed, the Libyans entered the delta and became an important group, members from this group could claim the throne of Egypt during the 24<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> Dynasties (Rieger, et al, 2012). Generally, early Egyptian sources used to present the Libyans either as rebels or enemies to be defeated or as bearer of taxes and tributes, but later on they were represented as kings of Egypt.

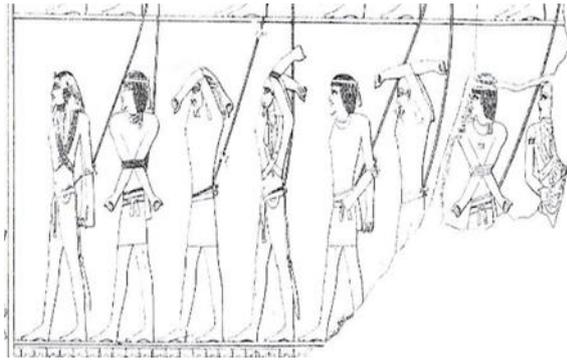


Figure 2 foreigners in Sahure's mortuary temple.  
Source: Borchardt, 1913, Bl. 6

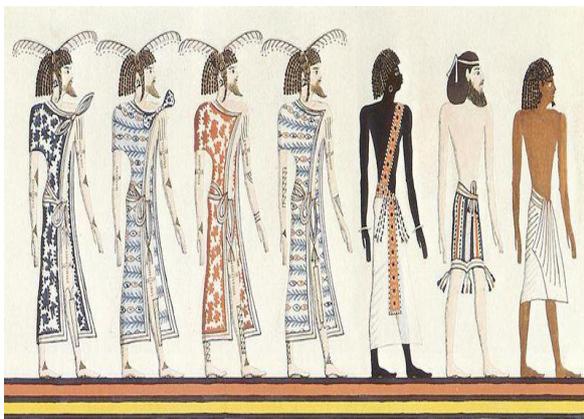


Figure 3 Modern Recreation of an Ancient Egyptian Relief Depicting the Races of Man Known to the Egyptians – From Right to Left: Egyptian, Canaanite/Asiatic, Nubian, and Four Different Libyan Chieftains.

Source: [https://dailyhistory.org/How\\_Did\\_the\\_Libyans\\_Impact\\_Ancient\\_Egypt%3F](https://dailyhistory.org/How_Did_the_Libyans_Impact_Ancient_Egypt%3F)

An ancient pilot Greek manuscript, *periplus* c.350 BC, documented the sea ports and landmarks around the Mediterranean, referred to Libya which began at the canopic mouth of the Nile and its nation the Adyrmachidai, then named several ports along the coast from east to west in order, among them is Paraitonion, followed by Apis, at which Egyptian sovereignty ends.

Classical sources from Herodotus onward recognize name of tribes and other groups, but provide no clear culturally characteristic categories and descriptions (Figure 4). Cultural diversity is almost probable due to the topographical range of the area of the Libyan tribes in the historical records is immense and varies ecologically.



Figure 4: The land of the Temehu tribe in ancient Libya extends all the way to the Nile. According to Herodotus Libya began west of the Nile.

The nomadic inhabitants of the region were mentioned by Pliny who referred to “the Marmaridae” and the “Adyrmachidae” (Pliny the Elder, 5.6.1). The Marmaridae was a name common to all the Libyans of Marmarica, but what about the Adyrmachidae? Herodotus lists thirteen tribes to the west among which were a tribe known as the Adyrmachidai. He (Herodotus, 4.168) told us that The Adyrmachidae strongly resembled the Egyptians and differed considerably from

other nomadic Libyan tribes. Rowe presented clear description about the Adyrmachidae, he determines the Greek tribe name “Adyrmachidae” had replaced the earlier Egyptian name “Thehenu” (Rowe, 1953). Another proof of Adyrmachidae similarities to the Egyptians is their worship of Isis. In the book of Transformations Ovid (Ovid, 9.764) connected Paraetionium with the cult of Isis. It seems that she worshiped there along with the Mareotic fields and Pharos as Isis Pharia or Pelagia.

**Spatial data about the harbor**

Strabo, Pliny, Claudius Ptolemy and Stadiasmus provide some geographical details about the distances, sailing directions and descriptions of the ancient port. In his book the Geography, Strabo presented some important geographical data about Paraetionium. He told us that he visited a city with a large harbor extended for about 40 stadia, he adds that the city was known as Paraetionium and for others it is known as Ammonia. It seems that the name Ammonia is related to the God Ammon of Siwa. Hence, we may conclude that the city name Ammonia may is given by the inhabitants of the area after the name of their God Ammon the Oracle. (Table. 1)

**Table 1:** Distance between Paraetionium and some other settlements on the coast, as mentioned in ancient sources compared to the actual distance.

Historic Text	In Stadia *		By converting Stadia to km	In Roman Miles **	By converting miles to km	The Distance according to GoogleMap
	Strabo	Stadiasmus		Pliny the Elder		
The distance from Catabathmus (Sallume), to Paraetionium	900 stadia for a vessel in a direct course.	-	90 Nautical Miles or 166.5 km	86 miles.	127 km	c. 255 km
Extent of the harbor	40 stadia	-	7.4 km	-	-	-
from Apis to Paraetionium	100 stadia	-	18.5 km	62 miles	91 km	c. 21 km
From Paraetionium to Alexandria	1300 stadia	1550 stadia	240.5 km according to Strabo 286.75 km according to Stadiasmus	200 miles	295 km	c. 297 km

Source: By the Author.

\* According to Beding, the stadium used by Strabo measures c. 185 m (Beding, 2016).

\*\* Roman miles is c. 1.6 km

From data tabulated in table 1, it is clear that the ancient port of Marsa Matrouh is located some kilometers to the west of the modern one. The ancient harbor was as large as the modern 7 km. long beach of Marsa Matrouh (Adel, 2011). The common text of Pliny makes Apis distance west of Paraetionium 62 Roman miles, which disagrees with the distance of 100 stadia in Strabo. The closest statement to the distance between Paraetionium and Alexandria is what was mentioned by Pliny.

It has long been noted that Ptolemy in his Geography (c. 150 AD), estimates of

longitudes are overestimated relative to modern values. This overestimation cumulatively accumulates, as a result of which the entire Ptolemy map is stretched from west to east relative to the modern map (Shcheglov, 2016). Ptolemy stated that Paraetionium lies on  $57^{\circ}00' . 31^{\circ}10'$ , by comparing his calculations with the longitude of modern Marsa Matrouh we can find an error with  $29,86^{\circ}$  difference between the two measurements (Table. 2).

**Table 2:** Comparison of the longitudes of the Ptolemy map and their corresponding modern values. By the Author.

longitude according to Ptolemy	longitude according to Google Maps	The Difference
57°00	27°14	29,86

## Findings

- Paraetionium was a significant maritime center from the Ptolemaic period.
- It was founded and called Paratonon by Alexander the Great.
- It seems that the name Ammonia is related to the God Ammon of Siwa. Hence, we may conclude that the city name Ammonia may be given by the inhabitants of the area after the name of their God Ammon the Oracle.
- Besides being a good harbor like Alexandria, Paraetionium was a key strategic town.

- Cleopatra and Antony appear to have refortified the port to be a base for their fleet.
- During the Roman period, the city was considered regionally critical. Paraetionion was primarily mentioned as a source for an oily, delicate and precious white mineral coloring agent called Paraetionium.
- The region was inhabited by a nomadic Libyan tribe known as the Adyrmachidae. They strongly resembled the Egyptians and differed considerably from other nomadic Libyan tribes.
- Paraetionium not only seemed more populated with nomadic, Egyptians and marines but obviously much of its land had been cultivated.

## Conclusion

Ammonia Paratonon, Paraitonion, Paraetionium are different names of Marsa Matrouh, which was founded by Alexander the Great. Since the early dynastic Period, may be earlier, the city was occupied by permanent inhabitants who were not only primarily curious about exploitation of natural resources or in long-distance trade, but also who utilized the parched districts as their territory and the source of their livelihood. Along its history it was a strategic spot that should be well fortified. Depending mostly on sources the city acted for a time as a privileged gateway for trade between Greece and Egypt or Rome and Egypt.

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