



Marsa Nakari: an ancient port on the Red Sea

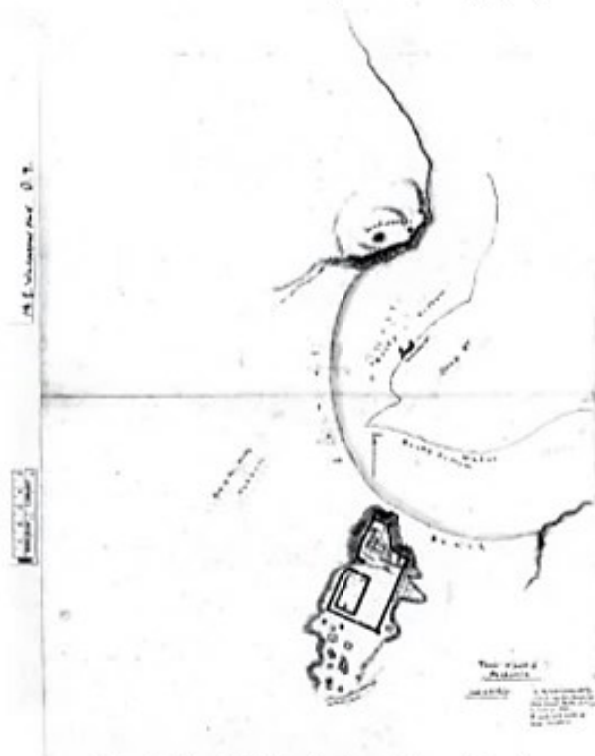
The ruins at Marsa Nakari on the Red Sea have long been known and it has been suggested that they might be associated with the ancient port of Nechesia, noted by the geographer Ptolemy.

John Seeger and Steven Sidebotham describe their investigation of the site.



View of Marsa Nakari looking southwest. (Photograph: John Seeger)

The ancient remains at Marsa Nakari lie atop a limestone bluff about 7m above sea level on the south side of Wadi el-Nakari, approximately 20km south of the modern town of Marsa Alam. John Gardner Wilkinson visited Marsa Nakari and drew a plan of the site in the 1820s, and several travellers and non-visiting scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggested that the remains might be associated with the ancient port of Nechesia, possibly of Ptolemaic foundation, noted by the second century AD writer Claudius Ptolemy in his *Geography* 4.5.8.



John Gardner Wilkinson's plan of Marsa Nakari. (Ms. G. Wilkinson XLV D.9. Gardner Wilkinson papers from Calke Abbey, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Courtesy of the National Trust)

The core of the site, on the southern side of Wadi el-Nakari, covers an area approximately 177-191m north to south by 55m east to west. A scuba diving resort camp dominates the northern side of the wadi but the remnants of several minor ancient structures including some graves also lie on high ground on the wadi's north side. On the south side of Wadi el-Nakari just below and north of the site, our surveying recorded the walls of several structures of unknown, but possibly ancient, date. Whether the ancient harbour was here in Wadi el-Nakari and the scant architectural remains were part of the port facilities, or the harbour lay south of the site, remains to be determined. It is possible, of course, that there were anchorages in wadis both north and south of the site, used at different periods in the port's history. Farther to the west on a rise in Wadi el-Nakari, as well as on a hill immediately west of the modern Marsa Alam-Hamata highway, are the remains of ancient graves; all have been heavily robbed.

Excavations at Marsa Nakari have been ongoing since 1999 and have documented ample evidence of both early and late Roman occupation. There is some, though scanty, evidence of Ptolemaic activity here; excavations recovered a Hellenistic lamp and the saddle portions of two grinding stones, apparently for gold, that stylistically appear to be Hellenistic. Examination of finds



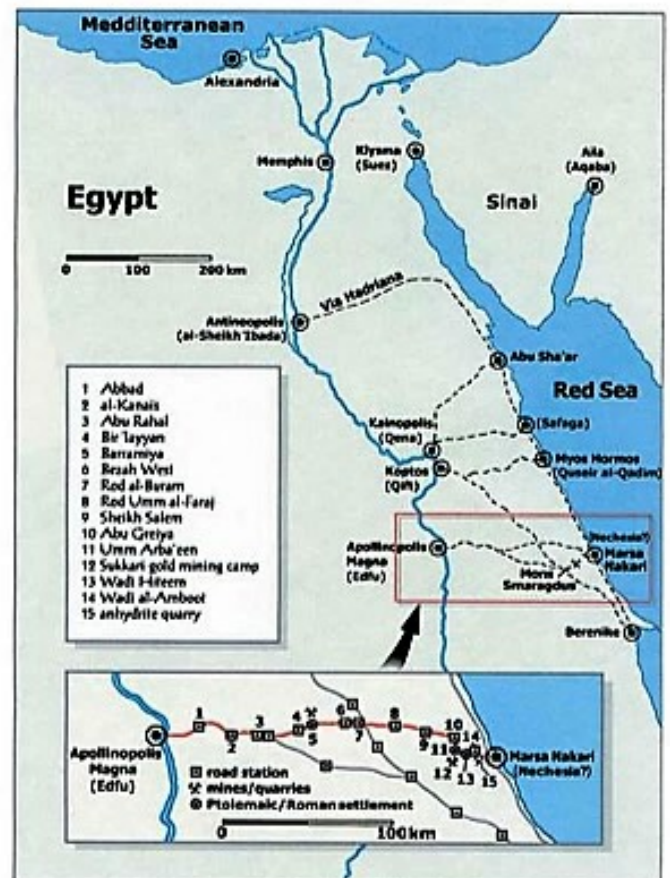
Some of the beads (photograph: Steven Sidebotham) and a Hellenistic lamp (photograph: John Seeger) from the excavations at Marsa Nakari



from eleven trenches recorded hundreds of beads, an abundance of pottery (predominantly amphorae, but also table and cooking wares, and a little fine ware), some terracotta oil lamps, glass, many copper alloy nails and tacks, and about a dozen Roman coins. Of the latter, the earliest identifiable issue was a billon tetradrachm (four drachma coin) from the Alexandria mint of Vespasian (AD 69–79) and the latest, in the fourth century AD, included coins of Constantine I, Valens and Theodosius I. Unidentifiable coins, possibly belonging to emperors from the fifth century, were also recovered. To date no recognisably Islamic artefacts have been documented.

The ancient road which linked Marsa Nakari to the Nile at Apollinopolis Magna (modern Edfu) preserves the remains of gold mines, nearby quarries, forts and watering points that date, according to study of the surface pottery and a few inscriptions, from Ptolemaic through to Islamic times. Towards its western end this highway was co-terminous with the Ptolemaic and early Roman route connecting Berenike and Edfu. Given these factors, one would expect that Marsa Nakari itself was originally a Ptolemaic foundation, perhaps one of many Ptolemy II Philadelphus established in the third century BC as part of a larger programme of canal, Red Sea port and Eastern Desert infrastructure enhancement.

Beginning in the second century AD the Romans constructed another major thoroughfare, the Via Hadriana (named after the emperor Hadrian, who ruled AD 117–138), which extended about 800km from the city of Antinoopolis (modern El-Sheikh Ibada) in Middle Egypt over to the Red Sea coast and then ran approximately parallel with the coast, terminating at Berenike. A survey of this desert thoroughfare directed by Sidebotham between 1996 and 2000 noted that some segments of it overlay earlier routes and



Map of the Red Sea and key sites and roads related to Marsa Nakari.
(Drawing: A M Hense)

that at least portions of it continued in use into the fifth or sixth centuries AD. Local Maaza and Ababda Bedouin still use portions of the road. The Via Hadriana survey traced all but about 40–50km of the ancient route and noted that it did not appear to run through Marsa Nakari, but perhaps passed 3–4km west of the port. This seems unusual as the Via Hadriana passes through the ancient emporium at Myos Hormos (modern Quseir el-Qadim) and terminates at Berenike. At present we can offer no explanation as to why this road seems to have bypassed Marsa Nakari.

Marsa Nakari had several possible *raison d'être* in the Roman Period. One purpose would have been as a way station between the larger ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike, about 150km north and south respectively from Marsa Nakari. In addition, there was probably commercial interaction between Marsa Nakari and the desert hinterland and with other emporia in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. The artefacts thus far recovered from surface surveying and excavations at Marsa Nakari indicate an understandably heavy reliance on imports from the Nile valley

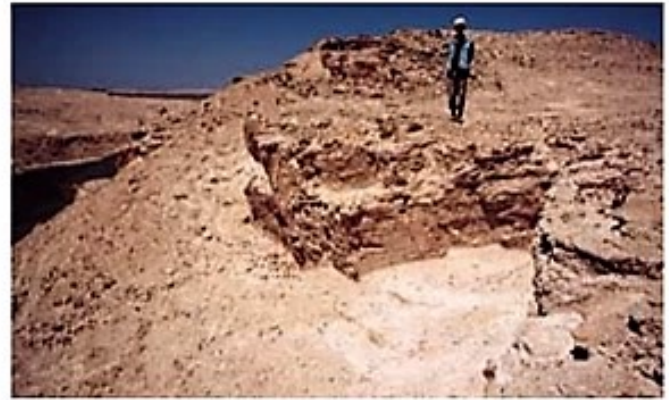


Satellite image of the Marsa Nakari area



Anhydrite walls of an early Roman structure looking south-east.
(Photograph: Steven Sidebotham)

but excavations have also documented commercial activities conducted at the ancient port, suggesting exports of wine and glassware, and imports of beads, some of the latter likely to have come from India and Sri Lanka. Additional excavation should eventually provide evidence that allows identification of other exports and imports and their provenances. Recovery of beryls and anhydrite architectural elements reflects interaction with mines and quarries in the Eastern Desert. Other artefacts documented from the excava-



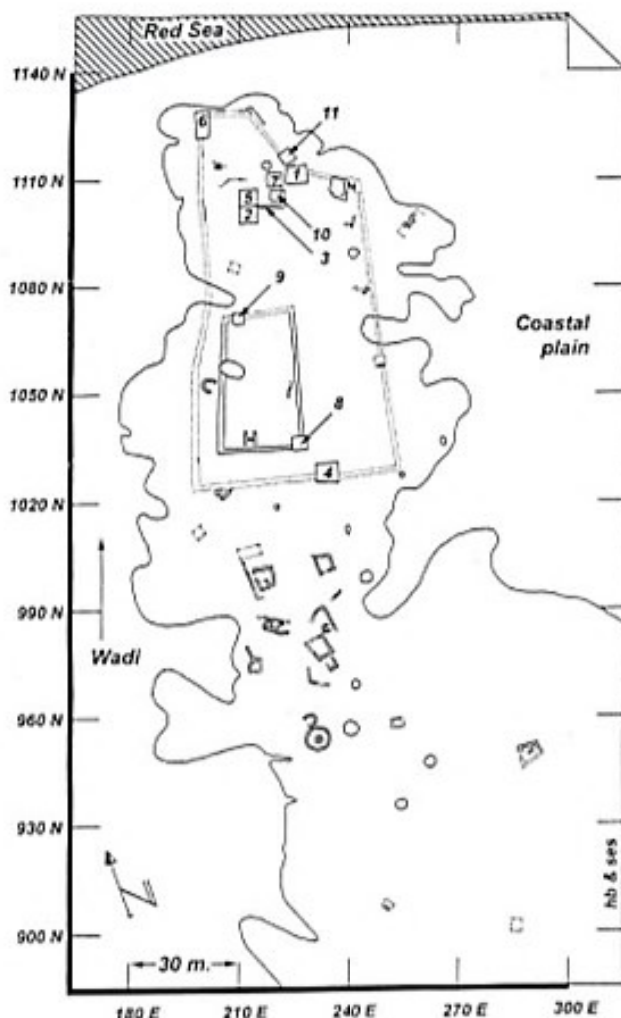
View of the anhydrite quarry in Wadi el-Amboot looking north-west.
(Photograph: Steven Sidebotham)

tions may have been made at Marsa Nakari, such as the numerous copper alloy nails and tacks, for local or regional consumption, and do not necessarily reflect any long distance commerce with regions beyond Egypt.

The settlement at Marsa Nakari appears to have been enclosed by a defensive wall made of pebbly sandstone and sandy conglomerate measuring about 108m north to south by 55m east to west. Such an enclosure makes it unusual, as other ancient Egyptian Red Sea ports that have been excavated (Klysma, near modern Suez, Myos Hormos and Berenike) seem to lack such defensive arrangements. Perhaps Marsa Nakari's small size required formal defences that the larger Red Sea ports noted above did not. Both Wilkinson's plan and our survey noted these walls. Excavations in 2002 unearthed the north-eastern corner of this fortification, complete with portions of a round corner tower. The tower may also have served as a signal platform or beacon for ships.

The most impressive structures on site excavated thus far, aside from portions of the defensive wall and tower, were built of brilliant white anhydrite ashlar in the first-second centuries AD. James Harrell, the project geologist, found the source of this friable building stone about 4km northwest of Marsa Nakari itself on the southern side of Wadi el-Amboot. The quarry, stretching about 43m across a hillside and with worked surfaces up to 3m high, is badly weathered and preserves no tool marks; Professor Harrell did, however, find fragments of iron tools used by the quarrymen. The pottery recovered from the quarry dated only to the early Roman Period and there is no evidence that it remained in operation after the second century AD.

Additional excavations at Marsa Nakari and continued surveying of its hinterland should document better the role the port played in Red Sea commerce and in the local and regional economy in 'classical' antiquity.



Plan of Marsa Nakari surveyed by Steven Sidebotham and Hans Barnard. (Drawn by Hans Barnard)

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