

The Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods in Marathon

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To the south of the Marathon plain, in the little marsh known as Mikro Elos or Brexiza, between the Agrielikí mountain and the sea, and at the borders between the modern villages of Marathon and Nea Makri, lies the so-called Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods. The sanctuary has the form of a precinct and consists of two connected courtyards built in a marshy area with manmade canals. The main court consists of the temple enclosed by an almost quadrilateral peribolos. In the middle of each side, oriented to the four cardinal points, there is an entrance in the form of an Egyptian pylon. Each doorway is framed by four statues – two male and two female – on high bases. The four statues that decorated each entrance pylon, two internally and two externally, represent Isis and Osiris. This combination of male and female creates an arrangement that emphasizes the Egyptian origins of the cult, reminiscent of the reliefs in the pylons of the Egyptian temples. These entrances lead through a paved walkway to the central construction of the sanctuary, a terrace with a cryptoporticus and an upper structure probably in the shape of a pyramid, perhaps alluding to the formation of an Egyptian landscape. Herodes Atticus was the man that commissioned the building of the sanctuary in the mid-second century CE and, according to Philostratus, facilitated his teaching and philosophical activities in the area. The sanctuary preserves representations of Isis, Osiris, Horus as a falcon, sphinxes but also busts of the emperors Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius. In addition, the presence of large ritual lamps attests to processions and rituals in order to honor the deities.



Date Range: 150 CE - 200 CE

Region: Marathon

Region tags: Europe, Southeastern Europe, Greece, Marathon

The valley of Marathon, meaning overgrown with fennel, is situated in the northeast part of Attica from which low mountains separated, no more than 500 m high. The mountains of Agrielikí, Aforismos, Kotroni, Parnitha, Penteli, and Stavrokoraki are the natural boundaries that segregate Marathon from west Attica. All these steep mountains create the borders of a small fertile zone whose southeast part ends with the sea. To the south of the Marathon plain, in the little marsh known as Mikro Elos or Brexiza, between the Agrielikí mountain and the sea, and at the borders between the modern villages of Marathon and Nea Makri, lies the so-called Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods. The sanctuary is situated 1500 m south of the Tomb of the Athenians and its eastern part borders the coastline.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Dekoulakou, I. 2001. “Νέα στοιχεία από την ανασκαφή του Ιερού των Αιγυπτίων Θεών.” Αρχαιολογικά Ανάλεκτα εξ Αθηνών 32–34: 113–126.
- Source 2: Dekoulakou, I. 2010. “Statues of Isis from the sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods at Marathon.” In Marathon, the battle and the deme, edited by Kostas Buraselis and Katerina Meidani, 109–133. Αθήνα: Α. Καρδαμίτσα.
- Source 3: Dekoulakou, I. 2011. “Le sanctuaire des dieux Egyptiens a Marathon.” In Bibliotheca Isiaca II, edited by Richard Bricault, Laurent; Veymiers, 23–46. Bordeaux: Ausonius.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/gh351.jsp?obj_id=19842
- Source 1 Description: Official website of the Ministry of Culture on the Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods in Marathon
- Source 2 URL: <https://www.lifo.gr/culture/arxaiologia/sto-mallon-agnosto-iero-ton-aigyption-theon-tis-neas-makris>
- Source 2 Description: Interview with one of the excavators of the sanctuary
- Source 3 URL: <https://www.archetai.gr/index.php?p=exchavations&lang=>
- Source 3 Description: History and information on the excavation by the Archaeological Society at Athens

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes



Type of excavation:

- Scientific



Years of excavation:

- Year range: 1789, 1926, 1968 and 2001-present

Notes: The first documentation of the site as an archaeological place dates at the end of the 18th century by L.S. Fauvel who, whilst working in the French embassy at Athens, conducted archaeological research in the Peloponnese, the islands of the Aegean and Attica. He visited Marathon in 1789 to identify the tombs of the Athenians from the battle of Marathon. When he found the ancient ruins of the sanctuary, he decided to excavate the site. Small excavations

were held both in 1926 and in 1968. The systematic excavation of the sanctuary began in 2001 and is still ongoing.



Name of excavation

– Official or descriptive name: Excavation at Mprexiza by the Archaeological Society at Athens

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

– Water source

– Marsh or bog

Notes: The water element is strong in the sanctuary for several reasons and not only due to the affinity with the sea: the sanctuary of Marathon was built on a marsh surrounded by manmade canals.

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– Yes



Type of feature

– Other [specify]: Manmade canals

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

– No

Notes: The sanctuary is situated 1500 m south of the Tomb of the Athenians and its eastern part borders the coastline. Also, a Roman bath is situated 40 m southeast of the sanctuary dating to the same period as the Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods.

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

– Yes



Are there settlements in close proximity to the place:

– Yes



Are there routes of travel in close proximity to the place:

– Yes

Notes: Excavations conducted along the nearby coastline in the 1930s and suggested the existence of the ancient port of Marathon.

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

– Field doesn't know

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

– Yes

↳ A single structure

– No

Notes: The Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods was surrounded by quadrilateral peribolos whose dimensions did not create an exact square. At the outer part of the east pylon, in the direction of the sea, the excavation revealed a rectangular court with a portico running around the three of the four sides. Also, 40 m south of the Sanctuary of the Egyptian Gods, lies a large building complex, a Roman bathhouse (balneum).

↳ One single feature

– Other [specify]: A complex of buildings

↳ A group of structures:

– Yes

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– Yes

↳ A group of features:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– No

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Communal

↳ Is the structure/feature finished:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:

– No

↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:

– Yes

↳ How was the structure/feature destroyed

– Collapsed

↳ Was it destroyed deliberately:

– Other [specify]: Field doesn't know

↳ Was it destroyed by accident/natural phenomena:

– Other [specify]: Field doesn't know

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:

– No

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Dedicated to a supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: Isis, Osiris, Serapis, Horus

↳ Dedicated to more than one supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: The material evidence suggests that the cult would include many members of the Isiac family. This evidence includes Isis (perhaps as Isis-Demeter and Isis-Aphrodite), Osiris, Serapis, Horus (in the form of a falcon) and perhaps also other divine figures related to them which have not yet been brought to light.

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– No

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– Yes



Specify

– Private individual

Notes: The sanctuary was built by Herodes Atticus, who hailed from Marathon, born between 101 and 103 CE, where his landholdings covered a vast area.

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– No

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– No

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– No

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– No

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

– Expression of devotion with no expectation of favor in return

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– No

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– Yes

↳ Are any of the structures attached to or associated with a landscape feature:

– Yes

Notes: It was probably close to the port of Marathon

↳ Are any of the structures attached to other structures:

– Yes

Notes: Close to the structure and the periboloi of the sanctuary and in relation to it, there is also a luxurious construction of Roman baths.

↳ Is there a hierarchy among the structures:

– Field doesn't know

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– Yes

↳ In the average place, what percentage of area is taken up by built monuments:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Footprint of largest single religious monument, square meters:

Please add dimensions in the comments, if known.

– Field doesn't know

↳ Height of largest single religious monument, meters:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Size of average monument, square meters:

– Square meters: 4500

- ↳ Height of average monument, meters:
 - Field doesn't know

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes

- ↳ Earth
 - Yes

- ↳ Is this material sourced locally:
 - Yes

- ↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:
 - No

- ↳ Sand
 - Yes

- ↳ Is this material sourced locally:
 - Yes

- ↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:
 - No

- ↳ Clay
 - Yes

- ↳ Is this material sourced locally:
 - Field doesn't know

- ↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:
 - No

- ↳ Plaster
 - Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Wood

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Grass

– No

↳ Stone

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

Notes: The location of the ancient quarry of the Penteli marble was in the southwest part of Mount Penteli and thus, the ancient road that connected the quarry of Penteli to the Marathon plain and the marsh of Brexiza would not have a distance of more than 30 km

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: no

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials

– No

Decoration

Is decoration present:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):

– Yes

↳ On the outside:

– Yes

Notes: The outer face of the lintels of the thresholds was decorated in relief. One of them still preserves a solar disk surrounded by two cobras.

↳ On the inside:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– Yes

Notes: Each of the four entrance pylons had four statues on high bases framing the doorways, two on the inside and two on the outer part. Each side had a male and a female statue representing Isis and Osiris. In addition, other statues have been found representing Horus as a falcon, a sphinx, and a priest. We should imagine that the sanctuary would host also reliefs and other kind of objects that would decorate it.

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– Yes

↳ Are there gods depicted:

– Yes

Notes: Isis and Osiris as humans and Horus as a falcon.

↳ Are there other supernatural beings depicted:

– Yes

Notes: The statue of a sphinx

↳ Are there humans depicted:

– Yes

Notes: There is a statue of a priest and busts of Herodes Atticus, Polydeuces, and the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.

↳ Are there animals depicted:

– Yes

Notes: There are four statues of a falcon, representing the god Horus.

↳ Are there animal-human hybrids depicted:

– Yes

Notes: There is a statue of a sphinx.

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Yes

↳ Is it geometric/abstract

– Field doesn't know

↳ Floral motifs

– No

↳ Is it writing/caligraphy

– Yes

Notes: There are three inscriptions.

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: Field doesn't know

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– Yes

↳ Cult statues:

– Yes

Notes: Probably yes but the excavations have not brought to light the cult statue.

↳ Statues of gods/supernatural beings:

– Yes

Notes: Representations of Isis, Osiris, Horus.

↳ Statues of humans:

– Yes

Notes: A statue of a priest, of Herodes Atticus, Polydeuces and the emperors Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius.

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: No

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief as opposed to sculpture carved on the round is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– Yes

Notes: The excavations so far have not brought to light any relief representing the venerated gods. Nonetheless, considering the analogous cases in other sanctuaries of Roman Greece it is highly likely that reliefs would also decorate the sanctuary. Reliefs would decorate the architectural elements such as the outer face of the lintels of the thresholds which preserve a solar disk surrounded by two cobras.

↳ Reliefs representing the god(s) worshipped at the place:

– No

↳ Reliefs representing mythological narratives:

– No

↳ Reliefs representing human/historical narratives:

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: Reliefs as decoration of the architectural elements such as the solar disk surrounded by two cobras at the outer face of the lintels of the thresholds.

↳ Are there paintings present:

– No

↳ Are there mosaics present:

– No

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:

– Yes

↳ Are the inscriptions ornamental:

– No

↳ Are the inscriptions informative/declarative
[e.g. historical narratives, calendars, donor lists etc...]

– Yes

Notes: Two out of three inscriptions are preserved fragmented and offer only scattered information. It is not certain what kind of text they would have engraved.

↳ Are the inscription a formal dedication:

– Yes

Notes: One of the inscriptions is a dedication from Polydeuces, one of the favorite pupils of Herodes Atticus.

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: no

↳ Other type of decoration:

–Yes [specify]: Ritual lamps in large quantities

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– Yes

↳ Eyes (stylized or not)

– No

↳ Supernatural beings (zoomorphic)

– Yes

Notes: A sphinx and the god Horus as a falcon

↳ Supernatural beings (geomorphic)

– No

↳ Supernatural beings (anthropomorphic)

– Yes

Notes: The gods Isis and Osiris. Osiris is represented as a god reminiscent of Egyptian prototypes while Isis bears features that can identify her with Greek goddesses as well (such as Demeter with the ears of wheat and Aphrodite with the roses).

↳ Supernatural beings (abstract)

– No

↳ Portrayals of afterlife

– No

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols)

– No

↳ Humans

– Yes

Notes: A priest, Herodes Atticus, his pupil Polydeuces and the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus

↳ Supernatural narratives

– No

↳ Human narratives

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: No

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

– No

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– No

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Are formal burials present:

– No

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– No

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are previously human spirits present:

– No

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are nonhuman supernatural beings present:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

– No

↳ Human spirits can be physically felt:

– No

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– No

↳ In dreams:

– No

↳ In trance possession:

– No

↳ Through divination practices:

– No

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– Yes

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: No

Are mixed human-divine beings present:

– No

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):

– Yes

↳ Is the cult statue visible:

– Yes

Notes: it would be visible in the past, even though it has not been found in the excavations.

↳ Is the cult statue hidden:

– No

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural monitoring of norm adherence:

– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect offerings:

– Yes

Notes: Generally yes, although there is not such archaeological evidence from this sanctuary.

↳ Libations:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Offerings of food:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Animal sacrifice:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Human sacrifice:

– No

↳ Sacred objects:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Daily life objects:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Other:
–Other [specify]: No

↳ Supernatural beings care about sex:
– No

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect proper ritual observance:
– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect performance of rituals:
– Yes
Notes: The large number of ritual lamps, especially those oversized, suggest that nocturnal rituals would take place at the sanctuary.

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect maintenance of the place:
– Yes
Notes: One of the inscriptions perhaps suggests the presence of a ξυστάρχης and a νεωκόρος, offices that would help in some specific activities and maintenance of the site.

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect personal hygiene:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about honoring oaths:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Other:
–Other [specify]: No

Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:
– Yes

↳ Do visitors communicate with gods:
– Yes

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- ↳ Do visitors communicate with other supernatural beings:
 - Field doesn't know

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

- Field doesn't know

Are there self-sacrifices present:

- No

Are material offerings present:

- Yes

- ↳ Are material offerings mandatory:
 - No

- ↳ Are material offerings composed of valuable objects:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Perhaps

- ↳ Are material offerings composed of daily-life objects:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Perhaps

- ↳ Are material offerings interred at this place (in caches):
 - Yes

- ↳ Other
 - Other [specify]: No

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

- No

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Yes



Is it required:

– Field doesn't know



Is there cleansing (for the maintenance):

– Field doesn't know



Are there periodic repairs/reconstructions:

– No

Notes: All the buildings date to the same period. It is probable that after that period of use the sanctuary was gradually abandoned.



Is the maintenance performed by permanent staff:

– Field doesn't know



Other

– Other [specify]: No

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– No

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– Yes



Is feasting connected to the worship/sacrifices performed at this place:

– Yes

Notes: Probably



Is feasting sponsored by the same entity that built/maintains the place:

– Yes



Priests

– No

↳ Local elites

– Yes

Notes: Herodes Atticus would be the person in charge of all the activities taking place in the sanctuary.

↳ Private contributions

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: No

↳ Does feasting occur in a specific location within the place:

– Yes [specify]: The central room at the south side of the east portico, in which devotees entered through the southern side of the courtyard, would probably serve ritual meeting and dining purposes. To the east and west of this central room storage spaces for amphorae and cooking vessels were found.

Are festivals present:

– Yes

↳ Frequency of festivals

– specify: Probably yearly

↳ Do all members of the society participate in the festival(s):

– Only initiates

↳ Are festivals a defining element in the construction/decoration of the place:

– Field doesn't know

↳ On average, how many participants gather at this place:

– number: Field doesn't know

↳ Is feasting part of the festival(s):

– Field doesn't know

Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

– No

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

– No

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

Notes: There is a large number of ritual lamps found in the sanctuary, some of them of memorable dimensions: length 0,40 m; height 0,12 m; diameter 0,265m. The disk of all these lamps is decorated with the busts of Serapis and Isis facing each other. All these suggest the nocturnal, probably mystical rituals, would take place. The proximity of the sanctuary to the sea and, in general, the aquatic element enforce this theory.

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– No

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

↳ On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

– specify: Field doesn't know

↳ How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: Once or twice a year

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

– No

↳ Are there synchronic practices:

– No

↳ Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:

– No

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– Yes

Notes: Herodes Atticus was involved in many cults around Greece but it is not known if he was a religious specialist in regards to the Isiac cults. Except for that, the presence of a statue of a priest verifies the existence of other people with this role in the sanctuary.



Present full time

– Field doesn't know



Present part time

– Field doesn't know



Are the religious specialists of specific sex/gender:

– Field doesn't know



Are the religious specialists of specific ethnicity:

– Field doesn't know



Are the religious specialists of specific class/cast:

– Field doesn't know



Are religious specialists dedicated to the place for life:

– Field doesn't know



Are the religious specialists stratified in a hierarchical system:

– Field doesn't know

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– Yes

Notes: Probably one of the many rooms was dedicated for such purposes.

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:

– Field doesn't know

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– No

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– No

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– No

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– No

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

– No

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

– No

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