

# Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt

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## Antinoopolis

Antinoopolis is an ancient city on the east bank of the Nile in Middle Egypt (27°49' N,

30°53' E), founded by the Roman Emperor Hadrian on 30 October AD 130. The site, now called Sheikh 'Ibada, is completely destroyed. It was called Antinoë, Antenon, Adrianopolis and Besantinopolis. Medieval Arabic sources refer to it by the name Besa, or Tisa, sometimes as Atsa or Itsa, but most commonly it is referred to by the name Ansina. The geographer Idrisi (d. 1165) relates that during the lifetime of the Prophet Moses, Ansina was the city from whence Pharaoh's magicians came. Hence, it was named in Arabic Medinet el-Sahharah (City of the Magicians).

During his visit to Egypt, the Roman emperor Hadrian was accompanied by his favorite friend, the athlete Antinous of Bithynia. On the journey up the Nile, learning that some great catastrophe threatened his master the emperor, Antinous sacrificed his life and drowned himself in the river as an offering. However, the details of his death are obscure. Hadrian, being overwhelmed with grief over the loss of Antinous, decided to commemorate him by building a great city in his name. Thus, Antinoopolis was founded. The location of the new city was close to where Antinous had drowned. This was south of the then deserted ancient Egyptian town of Besa, almost opposite Hermopolis Magna (the modern village of el-Ashmunein).

The city of Antinoopolis was inhabited mainly by Greeks, who were encouraged to move to the new city; the first settlers called themselves the "New Greeks." At Antinoopolis, the citizens enjoyed certain privileges that they did not have in their native towns; these included the right to intermarry with Egyptians. Newborn children could become citizens of the new city. They were also exempted from a 10 percent sales tax on property and slaves and on imported goods, as well as being exempt from payment of the poll tax. These privileges were intended to encourage people to settle in the city. Later, the emperor Antoninus Pius encouraged veteran settlement through a system of land allotment. The emperor Severus Alexander undertook great architectural projects and developed the entire northern district of the city.



Antinoopolis soon became an important commercial center, especially because of its location along the Via Hadriana, the road which lead to the port of Berenike (the modern Baranis) on the Red Sea. It continued to flourish as an urban complex until at least the tenth century AD, for the nineteenth-century historian 'Ali Mubarak states that the historian Eusebius (d. 912) wrote that the inhabitants of Antinoopolis were associated with the clergymen of Jerusalem. However, by the twelfth century the site was described as extensive ruins. In that respect, the traveler Ibn Jubayr states that the city's great enclosure wall was completely destroyed by Sultan Salah al-Din (Saladin), some time in the period or during AD 1176–83. He adds that orders were given to every sailing boat on the Nile to transfer at least one block of stone downstream to Cairo.

Edmé François Jomard, who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt in 1798, provided an excellent survey of the site in the monumental volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte*. In 1822, Gardner Wilkinson said that all the good marble, limestone and granite that were used in the buildings of Antinoopolis had then been removed to build a bridge at the town of Reramoon. However, other sources mention that this systematic destruction was intended to build sugar factories in that region of Egypt. This must have left the city in an even more devastated state of ruin because only a decade later, the Italian antiquarian Giovanni Belzoni visited the site and wrote that the ruins of Antinoopolis did not surprise or impress him at all.

Between 1896 and 1912, the archaeologist Albert Jean Gayet undertook excavations at the site, which led to the discovery of an ancient Egyptian temple of Ramesses II as well as a number of cemeteries outside the city. In 1914, other excavations were undertaken by Johnson, who was mainly searching for papyri. In the 1930s the Italian archaeologist Evaristo Breccia directed excavations at Antinoopolis, to be followed in the 1960s by further Italian excavations by the Institute of Papyrology of Florence in collaboration with the University of Rome.

Our knowledge of the physical layout of

Antinoopolis is based on Jomard's survey in the *Description de l'Égypte*. The site was trapezoidal in plan. A double enclosure wall surrounded the city on three sides, only leaving the river side open. A natural valley of extraordinary size ran across the city along its east–west axis; this was created by torrential waters flowing down from the desert hills into the Nile. The city was laid out on a grid plan, with orthogonal streets intersecting at right angles to each other. The two major streets, the *cardo* and *decumanus major*, were adorned by many Doric columns of medium height, and statues. The *cardo* started near a theater on the south and ended by a shrine on the north, and was adorned by 772 columns along its length (1622 m). The *decumanus major* (1014 m) led from a triumphal arch on the west to a gate on the east. It too was adorned by columns, 572 in number. Archaeological evidence shows that the *decumanus minor* was never colonnaded.

The streets formed two main intersections. These were marked by four thick granite Corinthian columns that were raised on high platforms and were surmounted by statues. The intersection formed by the *cardo* and the *decumanus major* bore statues of Antinous above its columns. The intersection formed by the *cardo* and the *decumanus minor* had statues of the Roman Emperor Alexander Severus surmounting its columns; these were added in AD 233, commemorating his victory over the Persians.

The main streets of Antinoopolis were 16 m wide. The columns adorning them formed shaded walkways, 2 m wide, on both sides of the street. A triumphal arch, intended to be viewed from the Nile, acted as the principal portal of Antinoopolis. It was composed of a triple-arched passageway of two stories, which was divided by tall Doric pilasters and had a decorated entablature with triglyphs. In front of the arch stood two large pedestals which probably supported monumental statues of Antinous. The area between the triumphal arch and the Nile was a vast open court which was formed by great hypostyle halls on both its north and south sides, each having forty columns with Corinthian capitals. The columns



displayed a variety of stones, such as granite, porphyry and limestone.

Along the *decumanus major* stood the main public bath of the city, which is the largest surviving building at Antinoopolis. Its façade on the main street consisted of eight pillars, four flanking each side of the entrance. It had a large circular basin made of marble. A wall ran along the central part of the interior of the bath, which according to Jomard was to separate the two sexes. At the eastern extremity of the *decumanus major* was an eastern portal. Further to the east was a path in the bed of a small wadi, or valley, which led outside the city walls into the desert plain toward the hippodrome, where chariot races were held. The hippodrome (307 m long and 77 m wide) was in the usual shape of a rectangle terminating at one end in a semicircle. The façade of the hippodrome had walls that inclined at an angle, which reminded Jomard of pylons of an ancient Egyptian temple.

A theater originally stood at the southern extremity of the *cardo*. It was semicircular in plan, and was built of white marble and had a very large orchestra, which was adorned by Ionic columns. The theater had two large monumental gates. On the south side was a simple wall with a passageway through it. A monumental portal was situated on the northern side of the theater. This portal was known by local people as *Abu'l Qurun*, meaning "the Father of Horns." Jomard explained that the capitals of its Corinthian columns had long protruding corners which were noticed at a far distance, and resembled horns. The whole portal gave the effect of a Roman temple front.

The principal buildings of Antinoopolis were oriented toward the main intersection, where the statues of Antinous were located. The triumphal arch, the hippodrome and the theater were all focused toward the intersection of the *cardo* and the *decumanus major*, which must have been a great social center. There would have been a constant awareness of Antinous in the city. In addition to the central intersection, Antinous was likely honored by a massive square monument at the northern end of the *cardo*.

Unfortunately, the severe destruction of Antinoopolis does not allow for much further analysis. The major monuments of theater, shrine, triumphal arch and hippodrome have been identified, as well as the public baths. However, we know almost nothing about the private houses and the administrative buildings. The excavations of the site did not help much in understanding the urban fabric, as they focused on retrieving objects, textiles, and most especially, papyri. Hadrian founded the city of Antinoopolis to be the only Roman city in Egypt, a memorial to Antinous, and a symbol of Hadrian's own power. Thus, Antinoopolis was a Roman foundation, governed by Greek culture, on Egyptian soil.

### See also

el-Ashmunein; Berenike Panchrysos; Roman period, overview

### Further reading

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TAREK SWELIM

## Apis

Apis, now the modern village of Zawiet Umm el-Rakham (31°34' N, 25°09' E), was known in pharaonic times as Hut-Ka (House of the Bull). It was a minor coastal settlement situated at the northeastern fringe of the Marmaric region, some 25 km west of Marsa Matruh (ancient Paraitonion). Despite inadequate anchorage beneath the lee of a projecting headland (Ras