



# Zeus Helios (Megas) Serapis in the Eastern Desert

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Life in the Eastern Desert of Egypt

# Scope of the presentation

- Worship of the Cult of Alexandrian gods e.g., Zeus Helios (Megas) Serapis in a broader Egyptian context and specifically in relation to the geographical locations in the Eastern Desert.
- In what range of Eastern Desert contexts is ZHMS appearing?
- What types of evidence do we have of ZHMS? – material culture and epigraphic.
- Arguments about why do we see this syncretic development?

# Geographical scope of ZHMS evidence

- Alexandria – *the Serapeum* – numerous statutes and reliefs dedicated to the God.
- Luxor – start to see inscription by military directly dedicated to ZHMS.
- The part of the eastern desert we are considering stretches from the Nile to the Red Sea harbours. Strategic trade routes set-up by the Ptolemies and exploited by the Romans.
- The areas under focus for this presentation are:
  - Mons Claudianus
  - Berenike; and
  - Luxor

# Isis' transformation into a Hellenistic goddess

- Ambiguous timescale as took place without indigenous Egyptians and it happened using the Greek-Egyptian translation of Ancient Egyptian religion and culture.
- First step of *interpretatio Graeca*- Greeks to rename Egyptian gods with Greek names because rebranding the words to link to Greek phonetics, sounds similar to Greeks, or because they had similar roles as the Greek deities.
- It happened *Interpretatio Graeca* – a foreign deity with a member of the Greek pantheon-
- Herodotus' *Histories* – refers to *Demeter and Dionysus* as Greek gods instead of Isis and Osiris.
- As non-Greek deities (e.g., Isis in the first instance,) spreads to Greek speaking regions, they start to be shown wearing Greek clothing, making them become more universally recognized.

# *Interpretatio Aegyptiaca*

- Also, there is the interpretation of Greek mythology and deities as originating from Egyptian traditions. (Merkelbach, 2001: 231; Bommas, 2006: 234-8). Serapis then as an origin of Isis or Osiris/ Wasir or Amet is easier to fathom as an Egyptian.
- *Diodorus Siculus* (1.96- 7) and *Plutarch* (De Is, et Os. 10), wrote about this because by the end of the second century BCE, the cults of Egyptian gods had spread across the Mediterranean, explaining the need for regional (perhaps Greek), translations of foreign religious ideas/concepts.
- Blurred translations over time? – *Plutarch* “*De Iside et Osiride*” approx 120 BCE.
- Plutarch’s focus is on the Cult of Isis not Serapis. But, late epigraphic evidence and material culture suggests both were accommodated.



## Zeus Helios (Megas) Serapis at Luxor



- Temple surrounded by columns dedicated to ZHMS on Hadrian's birthday, 24 January 126- limestone statute that has been preserved shows Isis in her Hellenistic form.



Figure 7.3 Engraved stone imprint, second half of the first century CE

# A syncretic deity as a consort of Isis?

- Ptolemies think ZHMS the ideal source to create a dynastic god with genuine Greek origins. (Riggs, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, (2012), 25, *Isis, Osiris and Serapis*, p. 422)
- Making ZHMS the consort of Isis- to amalgamate both Greek and Egyptian religions.
- Expansion of the hellenised Isis-cults in the Thebaid under Trajan and Hadrian (F. Dunand) – After, the establishment of the Cult of Alexandrian gods, e.g., Isis and Osiris instead of Wasir and Amet (the original Egyptian versions).

# Mons Claudianus

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- A Roman quarry with bathhouse annexed, temple, and changing rooms. Water supply or *hydreamata*.
- A dedication to ZHMS made by *the Alexandrian Apollonios son of Ammonios*, earliest depiction found- under *Trajan*. (*I. Pan* 38).
- Military worshippers? – “*To Zeus Helios Great Serapis, Marcus Antonius Celer, engineer of the First Cohort of Lusitanians, made (this).*” - *in its translation*.
- *Cohors I Augusta Lusitanorum* – garisoned in Iudaea in 90, attested in Egypt in 105.

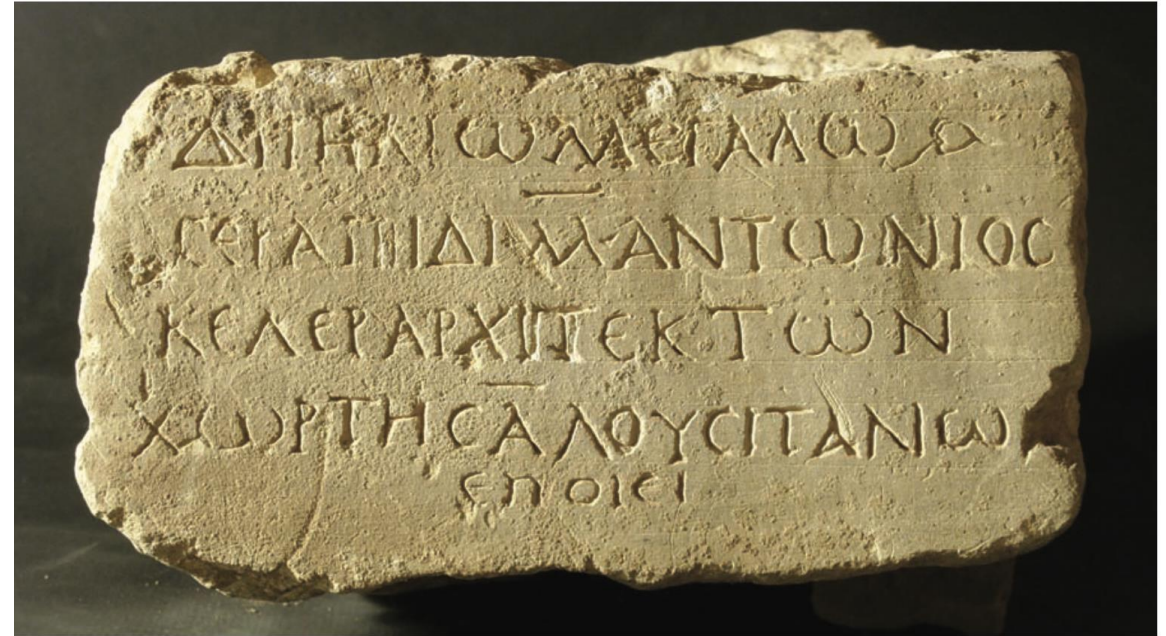


Figure 111. 2. © A. Bülow-Jacobsen

# Imperial slave Epaphroditos' dedication

- Possibly another temple in Mons Claudianus.
- ideological control in the Graeco-Roman world?
- Earlier literary sources of ZHMS found in Thebes and Ombos- suggests a movement from there to Upper Egypt.
- G. Tallet, thinks that Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis was created in Alexandria. His spread in Upper Egypt was helped by the Roman army coming into the region.

Here the mention of Serapis is in the center of the inscription...



Figure 7.1 Dedication of Apollonius, son of Ammônios, the Alexandrian, from a drawing by Samuel Sharpe

# Shrine in the Praesidium of Dios

- Three broken steatite statues discovered in layers near Berenike. One depicts a seated figure on a throne, likely to be ZHMS, (wielding a scepter/ spear) (Cuvigny 2010), and steatite, with which a clay Cerberus head is to be associated.
- Another part is standing statue in the Egyptian Style- the other in Graeco-Roman- possibly linked to the ZHMS overall but unsure.



# Is it a Tyche to Isis or ZHMS?

- The description mentions that blocks 11 and 12 are likely the bases of pillars supporting a baldachin sheltering an altar and podiums.
- The black rhombus in front of the podium makes it seem more important. This, with religious objects discovered in Dios, confirms that ZHMS was worshipped in Roman settlements, in Eastern Desert from Trajan onwards.
- When was it? Too difficult to tell for certain as don't have dates anywhere on material. But the floor is repaired well telling us... army did it? – again would link well to it being ZHMS not a different deity.



# A bit more about provenance and purpose

- The inscription starts with "Imperator" – unclear words to the right of it.
- Solution proposed is to read and restore "Se[uer--]" suggesting a titulature (possible in the dative) of either Caracalla or Severus Alexander (Imperator Caesar M. Aurelius Seuerus Antonius/Alexander).
- Seuerus not erased but Imperator and Caesar have.
- Both Caracalla and Severus Antonius/Alexander faced *domnatio memoriae*.
- *Potential Oracle's temple... (Cuvigny, 2010).*

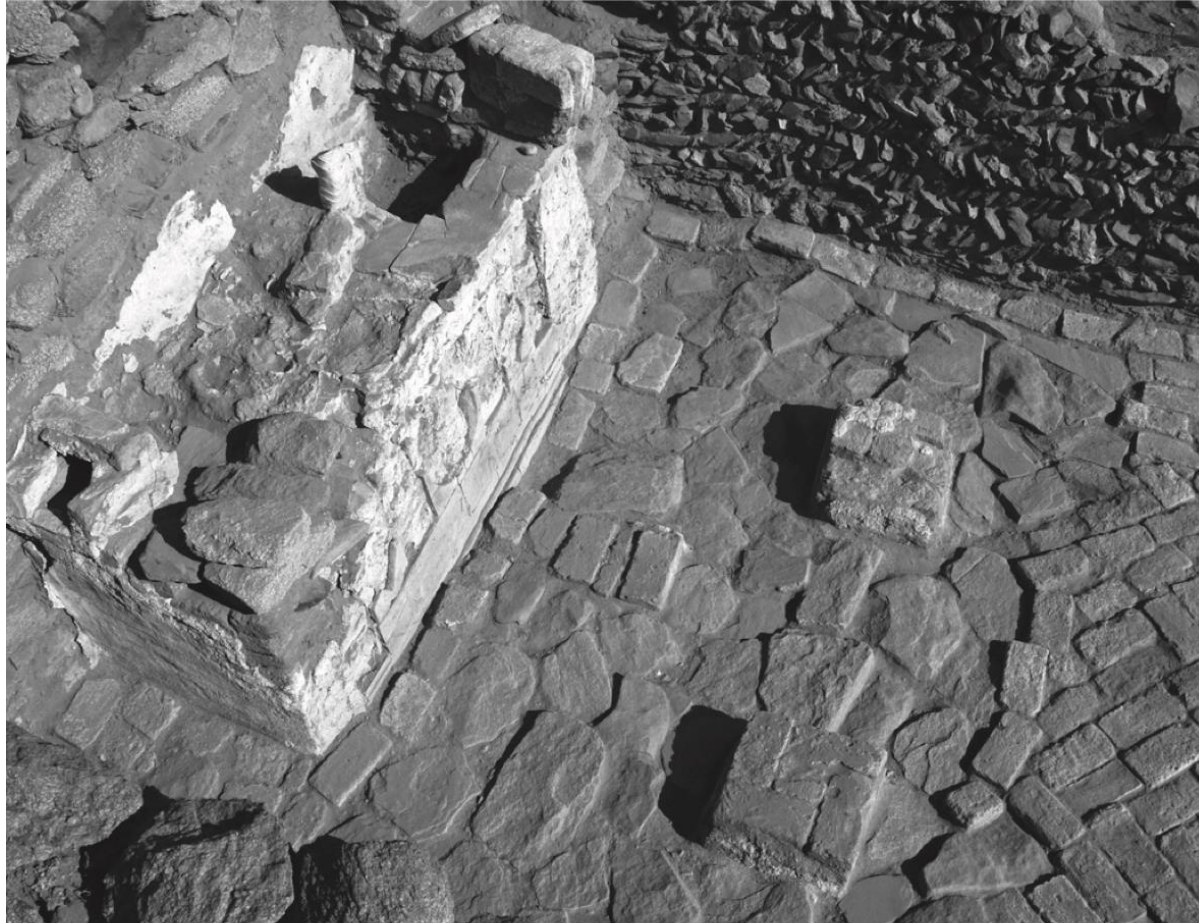


fig. 4. View of the final state of the *aedes*. Notice the tabernacle at the southern end of the podium (phot. by M. Reddé)

fig. 4. Vue du dernier état de l'*aedes*. On observera le tabernacle à l'extrémité sud du podium (phot. par M. Reddé)

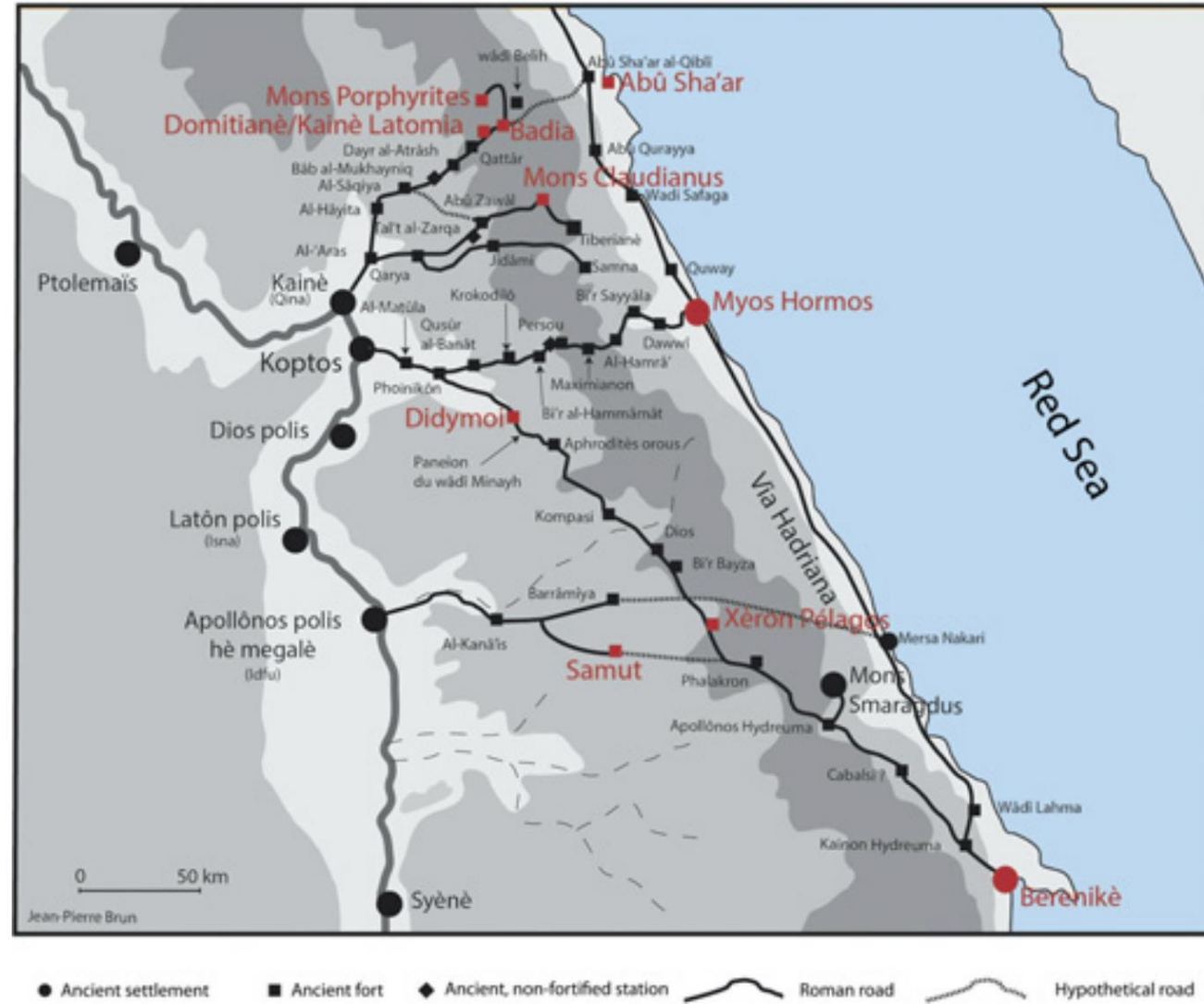


Figure 7.4 The roads of the Egyptian Eastern Desert

# ZHMS and the military areas in the Eastern Desert

- Makes sense that his iconography was popular here.
- Didymoi temple/ site in the Eastern Desert near Berenike.
- The presence of small votive offerings, like statuettes and terracotta figurines of Isis and Sarapis, along with Egyptian-style objects such as a sphinx and offering tables, suggests that worship of Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis was likely practiced at the Didymoi temple.(Redde, 2015, 305-8).
- Additionally, the dedication to a god with an epithet that suits Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis and inscriptions thanking Sarapis for a dream further indicate his worship at the site- but also worshipper scope of worship... tbc on the next slide.

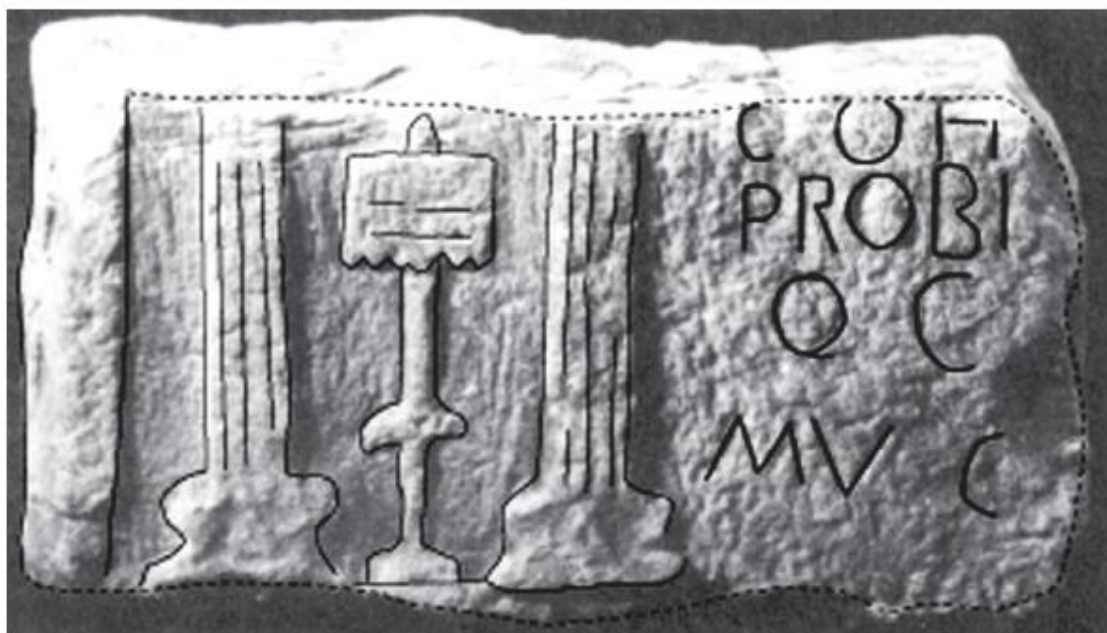


Fig. 5. The Chesterholm plaque (= RIB 1710) showing a *vexillum* standing between two columns (drawing by M. Reddé, after TÖPFER 2011: pl. 122, RE 21)

Fig. 5. La plaque de Chesterholm (= RIB 1710) montrant un *vexillum* fiché entre deux colonnes (dessin M. Reddé, d'après TÖPFER 2011: pl. 122, RE 21)

# The Scope of worship of ZHMS

- In the Roman desert settlements, the worship of Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis is often connected with other cults.

Table 31.2. The gods of the *praesidia* according to the written evidence and the archaeology

|                            | Dios                           | Didymoi  | Maximianon | Persou | Aphrodites | Xeron  | Mons Claudianus           | Porphyrites               |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|------------|--------|------------|--------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| chief god of the sanctuary | Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis      | ?        | ?          | ?      | ?          | Athena | Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis | Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis |
| eponymous                  | Zeus                           | Dioscuri | ∅          | ∅      | Aphrodite  | ∅      | ∅                         | ∅                         |
| epistolary <i>prosk.</i>   | Zeus                           | Dioscuri | Sarapis    | Athena | Aphrodite  | Athena | Tyche of the Claudianus   | Tyche of the Porphyrites  |
| <i>genius loci</i>         | Tyche of the <i>praesidium</i> |          |            |        |            |        | Tyche of the Claudianus   | Tyche of the Porphyrites  |

# Is Isis iconography possibly in the *praesidium* of *Dios*?

- A large female head found in the sand likely belongs to the standing statue originally placed on the podium. This statue would have been part of a group with a seated Zeus Helios Megas Sarapis, Cerberus, and a standing Tyche.
- But the Tyche in the past has been linked to Isis...
- So, the question remains is this, Isis?
- It would make sense for Egyptians, Greeks, Romans to turn to the dominant deities in society.
- Thank you for listening.

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