I speak of Romans, and Galatians, and Cilicians, people from Asia too, Island-dwellers and Phoenicians, Byzantines and Bithynians and Ethiopians, Thracians and Medes and Arabs, Palestinians and Syrians and Elamites, in fact all the races that exist under heaven...

[Sophronius, Miracles of SS Cyrus and John 51 (PG 87,3: 3612)]

I. Introduction

The healing shrine of the martyrs SS Cyrus and John at Menouthis (modern Abuqir) about twelve miles east of Alexandria, was one of the two principal Late Antique pilgrimage centres in Egypt. Along with the shrine of St Menas at Mareotis (modern Abu Mena), it apparently reached an apogee of international fame and popularity in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, as the epigraph to this essay suggests. Given the proximity of Menouthis and Mareotis to each other and to important pilgrimage routes, pilgrims travelling to or returning from the Holy Land may well have visited both centres in the same journey. In striking contrast to the cult of St Menas, however, that of SS Cyrus and John at Menouthis has left behind practically nothing artefactual or archaeological.¹ Also, the cult seems...
to have made little impact on the Coptic language sources, and the only substantial accounts of the shrine and its pilgrims are preserved in Greek, in the various works of Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem (c. 560–638 CE). As I shall go on to discuss, the historiographic problems presented by the sources for the cult of SS Cyrus and John are major, and are amplified because the site of Menouthis itself has such a complex status in the religious history of Roman and early Christian Egypt.

In Roman times Menouthis was a widely renowned cult centre of Isis, who functioned there as an oracular, healing and generally soterial divinity for pilgrims from Egypt and further afield. The famous Isiac arctology found at Oxyrhynchus (P.Oxy. XI 1380.63) gives Isis of Menouthis the epithet “truthful” (ἀληθεύω), perhaps because of the reliability of her oracles. The remains of high-quality monumental sculpture from the site, now in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, may point to the architectural splendour of pre-Christian Menouthis, as some literary sources also suggest. In the late fourth century CE, the sanctuary of Isis seems to have escaped the destruction meted out to the local shrines of Sarapis, at Alexandria and neighbouring Canopus; and while a Christian presence was probably established at Menouthis by the 420s, it is also probable that the cult of Isis continued to function there into the last decade of the fifth century CE. When the shrine of SS Cyrus and John became fully established, Menouthis still maintained its function as a place of healing and pilgrimage, and just as before cures were brought about by incubation—sleeping close to the enshrined bodies of the martyrs. The saints of Menouthis usually appeared in dreams to the sick and suggested curative treatments, often homely items such as baths or applications of substances rendered potent by contact with the martyrs’ bodies, especially the oil and wax from the shrine’s

seem never to have been published, and the recorded finds consisted mostly of pre-Christian monumental sculpture: see Breccia, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*, 138. Other archaeological evidence from the site is collected by E. Breccia, *Monuments de l’Égypte gréco-romaine publiés par la Société archéologique d’Alexandrie sous les auspices de Sa Majesté Fouad Ier Roi d’Égypte, tome I* (Bergamo 1926), 25–30, 47–67, with plate XX, including some monastic gravestones and a fine seventh-century CE column capital.

1 For the epigraphic evidence for Isis of Menouthis, see L. Vidman, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Religionis Isiacae et Sarapicae* (Berlin 1969), nos. 403, 556a (both from Rome) and no. 406 (all apparently late second-early third century).

2 Rufinus IX 27. For the actual sculptures, see Breccia, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*, 138, 165–6.