

# 1 | Introduction

## The Nile Delta, Real and Imagined\*

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### I Prelude

Because the past is already in debt to the mismanaged present. And besides, contrary to what you may have heard or learned, the past is not done and it is not over, it's still in process, which is another way of saying that when it's critiqued, analyzed, it yields new information about itself. The past is already changing as it is being reexamined, as it is being listened to for deeper resonances. Actually, it can be more liberating than any imagined future if you are willing to identify its evasions, its distortions, its lies, and are willing to unleash its secrets.

Toni Morrison 2004

If you fly to Egypt from the west, north or east and are lucky enough to have a window view, chances are you will be able to see the indigo waters of the Mediterranean turn turquoise and foamy, before quickly giving way to the dark green tapestry of the Nile Delta. As your plane starts its descent towards Cairo, you might spot a meandering river and notice the sharp edges of the patchworked greenery where it meets the ochre cliffs of the Western Desert. About half an hour later, you'll approach Cairo's international airport, which sits close to the apex of the Delta and next to the ancient city and modern neighbourhood of Heliopolis. By that time, you'll be flying at low altitude. You might see islands ensconced within the city centre. A crew member might announce that the pyramids of Giza are visible through one side of the plane. You might be struck by the sheer number of manmade structures – houses, roads, canals, mosques, churches, military, governmental and commercial buildings – that fill up your window view, and notice the sandy, smoggy veneer that hovers between you and the land below. As your plane touches the ground and the pilot energetically pushes the break, you'll find yourself standing on Umm el-Dunia (the 'Mother of the World', that is

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Cairo), at the convergence between Maṣr and el Sa'id, better known to English speakers as Lower and Upper Egypt.

Fast forward an hour or so, past the Duty Free; past the Bank of Alexandria money exchange counter, where you might get some Egyptian pounds and – should you be a short-term visitor – a visa; past the baggage claim area; past the arrival hall with its café and Vodafone shop; past the crowd waiting outside and the handshake or hug shared with whoever is giving you a ride to your destination. There, you'll be sitting in a car and peeking through the window. Maybe you'll be jet-lagged. Maybe your mind will wander. You might be overwhelmed with emotions, call someone, chat with the driver or doze off. Or maybe you'll think back to your aerial journey between the shoreline and Cairo. If you do so, you might remind yourself that your flight followed one of the main routes through which, for millennia, peoples, goods and ideas have transited through Egypt. You might also think about how, as quick as the descending portion of the flight was, it carried you over Egypt's and North Africa's largest agricultural zone, where over forty million people now live, and whose width you could not fully grasp from the sky. You might realise how many people you know who own farmland or identify as coming from the Delta. You might remind yourself how most of the region's ancient sites are now built over, farmed, under the sea, covered with several metres of silt or soaked with underground water. You might remember the recent sea flooding of Alexandria, and how climate change is threatening the city. This might make you think of how the disappearance of the yearly flood that accompanied the building of the Aswan Dams has been accelerating the erosion and gradual destruction of the Delta's coastline. And as you get to your destination and open the car door, you might be struck by how intricate, entangled, busy and incredibly alive this land is when seen at ground level.

## II (Dis)ordered Discourses: Why the Delta? And Why Now?

The Nile Delta fans out through northern Egypt, from the northern vicinity of Cairo to the Mediterranean shore. Standing astride marshes and desert edges, the Nile River, the Mediterranean and the nearby Red Sea, it forms the largest fertile area of Egypt. It is little wonder, then, that for over five millennia it has acted as a dynamic crossroad between the Mediterranean, West Asia, East Africa and, by extension, Asia and the Indian Ocean world.

Although the region is less richly (and spectacularly) documented than the Nile Valley, Fayyum and other oases, or eastern and western deserts,

the increasing amount of evidence at our disposal does document many aspects of its environmental, socio-economic and cultural history. Available data also sheds light on the Delta's interactions with the wider world in the *longue durée*. The growing number of studies on the ancient Delta published over the past three decades<sup>1</sup> indicates that the area was part of Mediterranean and West Asian connectivity networks as early as the Predynastic period.<sup>2</sup> The Delta was also integrated into a succession of local and foreign imperial powers that ruled over the eastern Mediterranean and West Asian, from the Pharaonic to the British, and even hosted several provincial and imperial capitals: Memphis, Avaris, Pi-Ramesses, Tanis, Bubastis and Sais in the Pharaonic period; Alexandria in the Hellenistic and Roman periods; Fustat and Cairo in the Arab, Ottoman and modern periods.

Until the late twentieth century, our sources on the Delta were mostly literary and, in some cases, archaeological, and they were essentially produced by and for the commercial, military or religious interests of the state and élite.<sup>3</sup> Such is the case with 'Classical' texts, remains of temples and monastic settlements, inscriptions, administrative papyri, registers, manuscripts, the Cairo Geniza, itineraries and maps. The result has been a patchy, oftentimes 'top-down' history, whose broad strokes have tended to obfuscate other potential narratives, local voices and socio-environmental entanglements. This supposed 'lack' of evidence became a handy excuse for attributing these scholarly oversights to the land itself. If not much could be written about the Delta beyond Cairo and Alexandria, it was because the land didn't give us much. And if the land didn't give us much, it was because few things judged *noteworthy* were happening there. Time is proving this narrative wrong.

*The Nile Delta* proposes a multidisciplinary set of contributions pertaining to varied aspects of the region's long, complex, yet still

<sup>1</sup> The archaeological bibliography on the Nile Delta is too large to be accounted for here. See notably Bagnall and Rathbone 2004; Ballet, Béguin, Lecuyot and Schmitt 2019; Ballet et al. 2011; Blouin 2014: ch. 1; Kenawi 2014; 2019; Leclère 2008; Meister, Lange-Athinodorou and Ullmann (eds) 2021; Trampier 2014; van den Brink (ed.) 1988; Wilson 2014. See also the Egypt Exploration Society's *Delta Survey*, publications from the IFAO's Deltaic sites and the Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CÉAlex)'s work in Alexandria and the Mareotide. Notable papyrological documents pertaining to Lower Egypt's religious landscape are Meeks 2006 and *P.Oxy.* 11 1380 (Blouin 2022). Two carbonised archives of documents have been found in the Delta: one in Thmuis, the other in Bubastis; Blouin 2014; Frösén and Hagedorn 1989; Hagedorn and Maresch 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Guyot (this volume, Chapter 3).

<sup>3</sup> These three categories are of course characterised by a substantial amount of overlap.

underappreciated history. The chapters included in this volume were written by scholars who come from different disciplinary horizons (archaeology, Classics, Egyptology, ancient and modern history, art history, geography, reception studies) and, thus, engage with their respective corpora through a range of methodological and conceptual practices. The heterogeneous nature of the approaches, scopes and *façons de faire* gathered here is the result of a deliberate choice; one that aims to open up new spaces for conversations and cross-fertilisation across disciplinary and chronological boundaries, while also acknowledging the legitimacy, and richness, brought to the table by each particular discipline. Hence the presence of case studies, broader historical overviews and site-based and thematic analyses, all of which offer different vantage points onto the ancient realities and modern entailments of Lower Egypt, its landscapes and (a)biotic actors.

This introduction is meant to both set the tone for the broad, multifaceted set of conversations proposed in this volume and serve as a primer on the environmental and discursive history of the ancient to modern Nile Delta. As such, it goes beyond what a traditional, compact introduction is typically expected to look like. In what follows, I tell two stories about the Nile Delta. The first one is a hydrographical history. In this section, I approach the Delta's landscape, including the Nile itself, as a historical agent, and provide a thorough overview of its shifting history over the past seven millennia – that is, from the Predynastic period to today. The second story I tell is that of the ways in which the Nile Delta has been imagined. I'll do so by exploring three enduring narratives associated with the region's landscapes, from Antiquity to the modern period. In the concluding section, I say a few words on the threads which the contributions gathered in this volume weave, and provide a short summary of each contribution. Before we dive into these stories, let us first situate this volume within the broader disciplinary and historiographical landscape.

*The Nile Delta* is the first volume dedicated to the history of the ancient to modern Nile Delta. It might come as a surprise to some readers that such a book does not exist yet. After all, several archaeological sites in the Delta have been excavated or surveyed, intermittently or continuously, for over a century,<sup>4</sup> and modern archives do contain a substantial number of documents from the region. One potential explanation is that ancient historians started only relatively recently to seriously engage with the region. If one excludes Alexandria and Cairo, as well as (geo)archaeological case studies and surveys,

<sup>4</sup> See EES Delta Survey for full site list and relevant bibliography.

only a few scholars have produced historical narratives focusing on the region.<sup>5</sup> Why is that so? The typical answer to this question is that we lack evidence. But this argument is unsatisfactory because there *is* evidence. I believe that this oversight is best understood as the result of three historiographical phenomena: the status of deltaic studies within scholarship about Egypt; the status of Egypt within historical disciplines at large; and the chronological disciplinary divide between Antiquity-related fields on the one hand, and medieval to modern history on the other.

### 1 *Egypt as a 'Special' Case*

There is a tendency among scholars of the ancient Mediterranean – and especially among Classicists – to categorise Egypt as a somewhat ‘special’ case that is not exactly ‘representative’ of the Mediterranean world. As James Keenan wrote regarding the status of Egypt within Roman history, ‘Egypt has not simply been shortchanged: it has been ignored.’<sup>6</sup> As a result, the ground-breaking, paradigm-shifting results of recent studies remain to be properly acknowledged and integrated within larger historical and public-facing narratives about the long-term history of Africa and Eurasia. One can think of the spectacular discoveries made on the sites of Mersa/Wadi Gawasis, Ayn Soukhna and Wadi el-Jarf, which show that Egypt was already involved in trade networks on the Red Sea between the Nile Valley and Delta, the Sinai and the horn of Africa (ancient Punt) from the Old Kingdom on (ca. 2649–2150 BCE),<sup>7</sup> as well as several missions documenting the long-standing occupation of the Mareotid region and its links to the Aegean and West Asia.<sup>8</sup> While Egyptologists have engaged with this work, the same cannot be said of most colleagues working on other regions or periods.

As I’ve shown elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> this phenomenon is linked to the Nile, whose alluvial valley and delta are conceptualised as strikingly distinct from the rest of the ‘Mediterranean’ (whatever that may mean).<sup>10</sup> According to this

<sup>5</sup> See n.1 above and, for later periods, Abaza 2013; Bruning 2018; Cooper 2012; 2014; Kumamura 2014; Michel 2001; 2002; 2005; Mikhail 2011a; Piaton (ed.) 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Keenan 2009: 179.

<sup>7</sup> Bard and Fattovitch 2007; Sayed 1977; Tallet 2014; 2021; Tallet and Mahfouz 2012; Tallet and Marouard 2014; and the webpage of the Paris-based *Laboratoire Orient et Méditerranée UMR 8167*'s Wadi al-Jarf mission: [www.orient-mediterranee.com/spip.php?article3017](http://www.orient-mediterranee.com/spip.php?article3017).

<sup>8</sup> Blouin 2017; Boussac and Redon (this volume, Chapter 6); Empereur 2018; Goddio 2007; Goddio et al. 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Blouin 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Horden and Purcell 2000.

Nilocentric model, the ancient Egyptians lived in abundance thanks to the river and avoided contact with the ‘outside world’, until enterprising Greeks ‘opened’ it up to the Mediterranean. While the role of the Nile in Egyptian history cannot be understated, such a dichotomy and deterministic narrative says more about the mindset and identity politics of its proponents than about ancient to modern patterns of connectivity and socio-environmental opportunism and resilience.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of Egypt’s belated inclusion in the Mediterranean world is a story that legitimises modern European and North American imperial investments in the region. Its epistemological influence among scholars is as pervasive as it is enduring. Indeed, it remains frequent, and almost conventional, for historians working on ancient Egyptian material that dates from the Hellenistic and Roman periods to *not* be considered or consider themselves Egyptologists. Likewise, material from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt often finds itself marginalised, and at times disconnected from earlier material, in (Egyptian and international) museums. This also explains why multilingual documents from a particular period, and at times archaeological context, end up in different archival departments.<sup>12</sup> This imaginary wall, between ‘Oriental’ (Egyptian, Hyksos, Nubian, Assyrian, Persian and, for later periods, Arab and Ottoman) and ‘European’ (Macedonian, Roman, Byzantine and, much later, French and British) rules, languages, scripts and archives more generally has historically caused, on both sides, a delayed, if not absence of, engagement with new work that does not – linguistically, chronologically or thematically – belong to one’s canonical body of evidence. A similar imbalance pertains to the historiographical status of Lower Egypt.

## 2 *The Delta within Egypt*

When compared to the narrow Nile valley and oases, deltaic landscapes have traditionally appeared, in the eyes of European scholars, to be cognitively and practically less easy to ‘enframe’.<sup>13</sup> The inability of the Delta’s silty, moist soil to provide as bountiful and pristine a harvest of documents, artefacts and monuments as the ones found in the more arid sites upstream or in the desert makes it a much less attractive archaeological playground. The same goes for its position within the geopolitical history of Egypt. Take

<sup>11</sup> Haug 2017b; 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Blouin 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell 1991.

for instance this passage from French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero's 1912 *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient*:

For a long time, the cities of the Delta, despite their antiquity and wealth, only had a limited influence on Egypt's destinies. Of the first twenty dynasties, they provided only one, the fourteenth, from Xoïs: And besides it is an insignificant one. Around the eleventh century, they arrived to political life and predominance, only to preside over the country's decadence, and speed it up through their spiritual rivalries. The foundation of Naucratis and, mostly, that of Alexandria ruined them so completely that most of them were reduced to the condition of simple villages by the first century of our era.<sup>14</sup>

The dynasties Maspero refers to in this passage ruled during the Second Intermediate Period as well as the Third Intermediate and Late Periods respectively – that is, when Egypt was at times divided into more than one state, and often ruled by non-Indigenous Pharaohs. The limited presence of ruins did, in a way, testify to the validity of this narrative that echoes the Enlightened, botanical model of civilizations best articulated by Volney.<sup>15</sup> To Maspero, as to a great number of his contemporaries and successors, Egypt was 'great' not only *when*, but also *because* it was ruled from the south, by 'real' Egyptians, and its demise, accelerated by foreign rulers, came to a definitive end when the 'Greeks' took over the civilizational torch. Yet as Frédéric Guyot shows in this volume, this narrative, which has traditionally been invoked to support the idea of a colonisation of Lower Egypt from the south, does not fit with archaeological evidence. Indeed, we now know that the early anthropisation of the Delta involved particularly substantial connections with the Levant, and that 'the Neolithic farming that spread along the Nile Valley by the middle of the fifth millennium BCE stems essentially from Lower Egypt, and from the Nile Delta in particular'.<sup>16</sup>

Another concomitant factor to consider is the fact that, as Lucile Haguët shows in her contribution to this volume, (pre-)modern European travellers to Egypt – including a substantial contingent of scholars – showed little interest in the Nile Delta by and for itself. To them, the region was a gateway to and from the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. They therefore 'read' it through the grid of Classical authors, and conceptualised it as a strategic piece within their imperial or commercial *œcumène*. Rachel Mairs' chapter documents how this phenomenon also characterises the

<sup>14</sup> Maspero 1921 (1878): 31, my translation.

<sup>15</sup> Volney 1791, on which see Blouin 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Guyot (this volume, Chapter 3).

relationship of non-scholarly travellers with the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet despite their obvious historical value, Classical writers' testimonies tend to replicate a Hellenocentric or Romanocentric gaze, which does not account for local socio-economic histories.

To Maspero as to most of his contemporaries, the scientific interest of Egypt resided in its ability to be both the ancestor of the Classical world's civilisational greatness and a Biblical Holy Land. Little within the interior of the Delta lent itself to such hegemonic narratives. Yet that is not to say that evidence is lacking. Indeed, since 1997, the Delta Survey has painstakingly documented a large number of ancient settlements whose traces have been observed over the past two centuries.<sup>17</sup> In many cases, the sites have since been overbuilt or transformed into fields. Such a phenomenon should not come as a surprise, since contrary to other sites upstream that were gradually abandoned due to the shifting bed of the Nile, the Delta has remained uninterruptedly settled despite its shifting hydrography.

These intertwined subjectivities and structural challenges certainly explain why, beyond their interest in Biblical and monastic sites (and even there, as Ramez Boutros' contribution shows regarding the cult of saints in the Delta, much remains to be done), archaeologists have historically tended to prefer to move south. Indeed, in addition to being detrimental to the preservation of many sites, the Delta's wetter climatic and environmental conditions can also make for unsettling archaeological environments, especially for archaeologists who are accustomed to digging along the Nile Valley or in Egypt's deserts and oases. Meanwhile, apart from Alexandria and its vicinity, historians (including papyrologists) working on Hellenistic and Roman Egypt have overall dedicated very limited attention to Lower Egypt. Archaeological evidence such as that discussed in this volume by Frédéric Guyot, Claire Somaglino, Robert Schiestl, Sylvain Dhennin, Damien Agut-Labordère, Marie-Françoise Boussac and Bérangère Redon is slowly but surely disrupting this trend, but their work remains to be properly integrated within broader historical overviews, as I noted above, all the more so by scholars who are not specialists on Egypt. In contrast, as the chapters of Isabelle Hairy, Sobhi Bouderbala, Heba Mostafa, Ben Outhwaite, Wakako Kumamura, Mona Abaza, Heba Abd el-Gawad and Rachel Mairs demonstrate, historians of later periods deal with a broader range of locally produced material (including archives). As a result, the history of medieval to modern Egypt finds itself more geographically balanced.

<sup>17</sup> [www.ees.ac.uk/delta-survey](http://www.ees.ac.uk/delta-survey).



### 3 *The Arab Conquest as a Historiographical Watershed*

Despite some promising initiatives,<sup>18</sup> much work remains to be done in threading together corpora from ancient to modern Egypt. This structural oversight results from broader and ‘practical’ tendencies towards linguistic and technical specialisation and, therefore, compartmentalisation in most universities and museum settings. It is also a product of conventional boundaries within the fields of history in general, chief of which are the binary between Antiquity-related (geoarchaeology, Egyptology, Classics, papyrology, epigraphy) and later historical fields,<sup>19</sup> as well as the intersecting divide between Egypt before and after the 642 CE Arab conquest.

The stereotypical (and thus misleading) compartmentalisation of the pre-/post-642 divide as the central axis of Egyptian history (Table 1.1) is not only an Orientalist by-product of European imperialism, but also grossly misleading from a historical perspective.<sup>20</sup> A perfect case in point is the city of Alexandria, which contrary to what Eurocentric discourses – from Vivant Denon to Lawrence Durrell – have been claiming for centuries, did absolutely not experience a phase of prolonged decay and ruin after the Arab conquest. Not only does written evidence invalidate such claims, but archaeological data (such as that pertaining to the city’s water supply that Isabelle Hairy discusses in this volume) indicates that the harbour city remained a commercial and geostrategic nexus within medieval and pre-modern Egypt’s economy.

Writings about the territory speak to the particular archives that have come to us: the non-Indigenous, the élite, the literary, the administrative, the imperial. These far-reaching, authoritative voices have for centuries spoken louder than, and often over, less prominent voices, and made it almost impossible for scholars to write about the Delta without resorting to clichés. To a large extent, the three historiographical storylines discussed here are rooted in the reception of ancient Greek and Roman representations of, and *lieux communs*<sup>21</sup> about, Egypt and the Nile Delta. Before we turn to these, let’s see what stories the land itself tells us.

<sup>18</sup> Bagnall (ed.) 2011; Bowman and Rogan (eds) 1999; Fowden 2013; Hairy (ed.) 2009; Mikhail 2014; Sheehan 2010.

<sup>19</sup> This binary also partly overlaps with linguistic and religious divides, whose underpinnings are tightly linked to colonial and national discourses. Reid 1992; 2003; 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Fahmy 2004a; 2004b; Fahmy 2012a; 2012b; Fowden 2019; Halim 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Briant 2016.

Table 1.1 Stereotypical compartmentalisation of Egypt-related scholarly disciplines

Chronology	Discipline	Research languages	'Religion'
PRE 642	Predynastic archaeology	–	Polytheistic
	Egyptology	Egyptian (hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic)	Polytheistic
	Classics	Greek	Polytheistic
		Latin	Judaism
			Christianity
	Coptic studies	Coptic	Christianity
		Greek	
		Latin	
POST 642	Middle Eastern studies	Arabic	Islam
		Persian	Christianity
		Ottoman Turkish	Judaism

### III Flowing Lands, Shifting Waters: The Delta's Hydrographical Histories

Here is the river squatting,  
 untying the straps of its sandals  
 braided from marsh hemp  
 and softness of grass,  
 its cloak crisp like hay and braids  
 of wheat ears,  
 embroidered by safflower and buttercup;  
 from its loops hang bands of mulberry  
 and buds of pomegranate dropping  
 from the rose of the annual blood.  
 Here is the river changing itself  
 into a vegetal being teeming with bodies,  
 with water moss, lotus, the foam of verdure,  
 and odor of death.

Muhammad Afifi Matar 1997: 3

This section provides a synthetic introduction to the hydrographical history of the Nile Delta between the Predynastic period and modern times. An Antiquity-focused version of this survey was published in my 2014 book *Triangular Landscapes*. The same year my book came out, John Cooper published *The Medieval Nile*, whose chapters two to four are focused on the Nile Delta. Since then, Judith Bunbury has published two important books: *The Nile and Ancient Egypt* (2019) and *The Nile: Mobility and Management* (2021), which was co-written with Reim Rowe. In addition to these monographs, several geoarchaeological publications dedicated entirely or in part