

The Nile Delta

This is the first volume on the history of the Nile Delta to cover the ca. 7000 years from the Predynastic period to the twentieth century. It offers a multi-disciplinary approach engaging with varied aspects of the region's long, complex, yet still underappreciated history. Readers will learn of the history of settlement, agriculture and the management of water resources at different periods and in different places, as well as the naming and mapping of the Delta and the roles played by tourism and archaeology. The wide range of backgrounds of the contributors and the broad panoply of methodological and conceptual practices deployed enable new spaces to be opened up for conversations and cross-fertilization across disciplinary and chronological boundaries. The result is a potent tribute to the historical significance of this region and the instrumental role it has played in the shaping of past, present and future Afro-Eurasian worlds.

KATHERINE BLOUIN is Associate Professor of Ancient History and Classics at the University of Toronto and a co-founder of *Everyday Orientalism*. Her publications include *Le conflit judéo-alexandrin de 38-41* (2005), *Triangular Landscapes: Environment, Society and the State in the Nile Delta under Roman Rule* (2014) and the *Routledge Handbook of Classics, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Theory* (forthcoming, with Ben Akrigg).

The Nile Delta

Histories from Antiquity to the Modern Period

Edited by

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For Mona Abaza

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May her *ba* live forever. May it rejuvenate for eternity.
Excerpt from Papyrus Louvre N 3258, first to
second century CE, Foy Scalf transl.

Contents

List of Figures [page ix]

List of Maps [xii]

List of Tables [xv]

Notes on Contributors [xvi]

Acknowledgements [xxii]

List of Abbreviations [xxvi]

1 Introduction: The Nile Delta, Real and Imagined [1]

KATHERINE BLOUIN

2 Call Me by My Names: Naming the Delta through Time and Space [68]

KATHERINE BLOUIN

3 The Nile Delta before the Pharaohs [105]

FRÉDÉRIC GUYOT

4 The *Khetem*-Border-Posts in the Delta during the New Kingdom [158]

CLAIRE SOMAGLINO

5 New Land amongst New Rivers? Reconstructing the Ancient Waterscape and Settlement History in the Central Northwestern Delta [185]

ROBERT SCHIESTL

6 The Mareotis Area: Integration of a Marginal Territory into Egypt through Wine Production [219]

MARIE-FRANÇOISE BOUSSAC AND BÉRANGÈRE REDON

7 From Memphis to Alexandria: The Delta within the Persian and Macedonian Empires (End of the Sixth to the First Century BCE) [249]

DAMIEN AGUT-LABORDÈRE

- 8 Growing with the Empire? From Village to Town: Kom About Bellou and Its Urban Development [275]
SYLVAIN DHENNIN
- 9 Mapping the Cult of Christian Saints in the Nile Delta from the Fifth to the Ninth Century CE [298]
RAMEZ BOUTROS
- 10 Alexandria: A Brief Overview of the Major Hydraulics of the City, from Its Foundation to the Arab Conquest [362]
ISABELLE HAIRY
- 11 Imperial Power, Tribal Settlement and Fiscal Revolts in the Early Islamic Delta (Seventh to Ninth Century CE) [397]
SOBHI BOUDERBALA
- 12 The Nile as Nexus: The Nilometer at al-Rawda Island between Veneration and Mediation in Medieval Islamic Egypt [421]
HEBA MOSTAFA
- 13 Water and Prices: A View of the Nile from the Cairo Genizah [453]
BEN OUTHWAITE
- 14 Water Development in the Medieval Western Delta [466]
WAKAKO KUMAKURA
- 15 The Nile Delta in European Cartography, 1200–1800 [492]
LUCILE HAGUET
- 16 Just Passing Through? The Nile Delta, Colonial Modernity and the Egyptian Tourist Economy (ca. 1870–1914) [569]
RACHEL MAIRS
- 17 Reclaiming the Archive: The Contribution of Egyptian Women to the Archaeologies of the Delta (1880–1924) [595]
HEBA ABD EL GAWAD
- 18 Short Commentary on Accounting Documents from a Vanishing Cotton Estate (*Izba*) in the Nile Delta [611]
MONA ABAZA
- Index* [635]

Figures

- 2.1 Schematic rendering of Strabo's three Deltas [page 83]
- 2.2 Schematic rendering of Egypt's 'shapes of deltas' according to Achilles Tatius [92]
- 5.1 The *tell* of Buto (Tell el-Fara^cin) seen from the northeast [197]
- 5.2 Auger core G 37, near Kom el-Sheikh Ibrahim, showing the levee of an ancient Nile branch [204]
- 6.1 The Merytaton stamp [225]
- 6.2a The New Kingdom grape grinder of the Nathkt tomb at Thebes (TT52) [228]
- 6.2b The Saite grape grinder of Sector 6 of Kom el-Nugus [229]
- 6.3 The Saite grape grinder of Sector 6 of Kom el-Nugus, after its complete excavation, from the entrance [230]
- 6.4 The Ptolemaic winery and its grape grinder, near the necropolis of Plinthine [238]
- 6.5 Detail of the Ptolemaic grape grinder of Plinthine [239]
- 8.1 Tomb models of the pharaonic period [279]
- 8.2 The area of the sanctuary as identified since 2013 [281]
- 8.3 Local ceramic productions [285]
- 8.4 Part of the Roman and Byzantine town, with streets crossing at right angles [288]
- 8.5 An offering table used for several tombs [290]
- 8.6 A pit dug in the masonry of Tomb 17 [291]
- 8.7 General view of the settlement [293]
- 8.8 First cleaning of the Byzantine baths [294]
- 10.1 Hydraulic plant formed of *hyponomoi* and cisterns unearthed at the beginning of the twentieth century on a parcel of land in the city centre of Alexandria [367]
- 10.2 Consulate site: multi-storey canals from a Greek neighbourhood excavated in downtown Alexandria [368]
- 10.3 Terra Santa site: view of the Greco-Roman *saqiyah* catchment canal [370]
- 10.4 The draining canals of the Marsa Bagoush site, the old Zygrs [371]
- 10.5 Urban nilometer of Alexandria located east of Sarapeion [382]

- 10.6 Engraving of Cornelius Le Bruyn showing the baths [387]
- 12.1 Locations of Islamic nilometers [432]
- 12.2 Abbasid nilometer composite views showing section view and ground floor plan with Fatimid mosque precinct [435]
- 12.3 Interior view of Abbasid nilometer showing column marked in cubits [437]
- 12.4 Sectional view of Abbasid nilometer [438]
- 12.5 Interior view of Abbasid nilometer showing Kufic inscriptions encircling upper level of well [440]
- 12.6 Interior view of nilometer well showing eastern tiered water conduits [442]
- 12.7 Star interlace motif above lowest water conduit [445]
- 16.1 ‘The City of Damietta on the Nile’ from Sladen’s *Queer Things About Egypt* [587]
- 16.2 ‘Zagazig – La Station du Chemin de fer’, ca. 1911 [588]
- 16.3 ‘Mansourah – Bureau du Service des Irrigations’, 1908 [589]
- 16.4 ‘Mansourah. Vue Générale de la Moudirieh et du Tribunal Mixte’, 1910 [589]
- 17.1 San el Hagar (Tanis) girl (left), named as Mohammed Hassan in Petrie’s 1884 Tanis archive, and Mohammed Hefnawi (right) [598]
- 17.2 Fatima, Ali Sueifi’s first wife [599]
- 17.3 Sara, Ali Sueifi’s second wife [600]
- 17.4 Girls and women in the excavation of Tell el-Amarna by the Egypt Exploration Society in 1926–27 [601]
- 17.5 Girls and women in the excavation of Tell el-Amarna by the Egypt Exploration Society in 1926–27 [601]
- 17.6 San el Hagar (Tanis) girl, Mohammed Hassan panel for ‘Listen to Her!’ exhibition, 2018 [605]
- 17.7 San el Hagar (Tanis) girl, Mohammed Hassan, as featured at the entrance galleries of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology since 2020 [607]
- 18.1 Cotton tree model showcasing the different varieties of cotton known in Egypt [612]
- 18.2 The Balamun *da’era*’s account book showing the cultivation and harvesting schedule for cotton in the *’izba* during the winter of 1950–51 [619]
- 18.3 The Balamun *da’era*’s account book showing the workers’ names and wages in January 1939 [621]

- 18.4 *Daftar hisabat jam' al-qutn*. The 'harvest of cotton account' notebook, which included all types of cotton produced. This page details the operation of farming pertaining to the brand Giza 68 [623]
- 18.5 Notebook of 'Existing Effects and Records of Agrarian Schedules 1948/1949' [624]
- 18.6 Contents of notebook of 'Existing Effects and Records of Agrarian Schedule 1948/1949' [625]
- 18.7 Statement of the various plots planted in cotton, Karnak brand, for 1952 in Balamun village [626]
- 18.8 Daily loose sheet, 22 August 1935 [627]
- 18.9 Daily loose sheet, 2 February 1966 [628]
- 18.10 Notebook *yawmiyya* (daily recording where the loose sheets were found) [631]
- 18.11 1939 notebook, list of payments to *ghafirs* (guards) and *kallaftin* (responsible for livestock), listed by names [632]
- 18.12 The same 1939 notebook, list of payments of *ghafirs*, *kallaftin*, the mechanics and *tulumbagi* workers responsible for the water pumps [633]

Maps

- 1.1 The hydrography of the Nile Delta according to Herodotus, Strabo, Ptolemy, Sirapion and El-Idris [page 13]
- 2.1 The apex of the Nile Delta, with the island of Warraq [84]
- 2.2 Slanted view of the apex of the Nile Delta, with the island of Warraq at the forefront [85]
- 2.3 The hydrography of the Nile Delta according to Ptolemy [89]
- 2.4 Egypt's three 'deltas' according to Ptolemy [92]
- 3.1 The Nile Delta before the Pharaohs [107]
- 4.1 The Delta [164]
- 4.2 The Wadi Tumilat and the north of the Suez Gulf with a plan of the site of Tell el-Retaba [166]
- 4.3 The north-eastern fringe of the Delta and the *khetem* of Tjaru: plan of the site of Hebwa I and representation on the north exterior wall of the great hypostyle hall in the temple of Amun in Karnak [170]
- 5.1 The Nile Delta [187]
- 5.2 Reconstructed ancient landscape in central northwestern Nile Delta [200]
- 6.1 Satellite view of the Mareotis region of the north-west Delta [220]
- 6.2 Map of the Kom el-Nugus/Plinthine and its vicinity, with the find spots of remains connected with wine production [224]
- 7.1 The Nile Delta under Persian and Macedonian rule [251]
- 8.1 Localisation map of Kom Abou Bellou [276]
- 8.2 General satellite view of Kom Abou Bellou and Kom Beltous [277]
- 8.3 General map of the site [287]
- 10.1 Map of Greco-Roman Alexandria (fourth century BCE to fourth century CE), with the network of large navigable canals, the ancient coast line, the core drillings carried out in 2001 and in 2016 and the excavations carried out by the CEAlex – on the maps of the *Description de l'Égypte* [364]
- 10.2 Canopic branch and canal of Alexandria in three states: Ptolemaic era; Augustinian era, Strabo's journey; and Roman era [373]
- 11.1 The Islamic Delta (seventh to ninth century CE) [398]
- 12.1 Map of Cairo [422]

- 14.1 The Alexandria-bound canal in the medieval period [468]
- 14.2 Productivity in Buḥayra province in the latter half of the fifteenth century [473]
- 14.3 Villages carrying responsibility for the maintenance of the Ashrafi Canal [475]
- 14.4 The Ashrafi Canal as shown in the map in *Description de l'Égypte* [476]
- 14.5 The villages that benefitted from the canal in the first half of the sixteenth century [477]
- 14.6 The area of the eastern section of the Nāṣirī Canal in the map in *Description de l'Égypte* overlaid with the circles in Map 14.4 [479]
- 14.7 The irrigation zones in the first half of the sixteenth century, showing villages that benefitted from each *sulṭānī jizr* and villages that took charge of the maintenance work [480]
- 14.8 The Zāhirī Canal in the sixteenth century overlaid with Maps 14.3 and 14.6, showing villages that benefitted from the Zāhirī Canal and the possible route of the Zāhirī Canal in the first half of the sixteenth century [482]
- 14.9 The area of the Zāhirī Canal in the map in *Description de l'Égypte* [484]
- 14.10 The villages irrigated by the new Ṭayrīya Canal, showing the villages that took charge of the construction work [486]
- 14.11 The new canal in the map in *Description de l'Égypte* [487]
- 15.1 Paulinus Venetus, *Chronologia magna*, 1328–1329 [513]
- 15.2 Bernhard von Breydenbach, detail from the map of the Holy Land in *Die Heylighe Bevarden tot dat heylighe grafft in Iherusalem*, 1488 [517]
- 15.3 Claudius Ptolemy, *Descriptio tertiae tabulae Africae*, in *Cosmographia* [520]
- 15.4a Sebastien Münster, *Aegyptum*, list of toponyms, in *Geographia universalis, vetus et nova* [523]
- 15.4b Sebastien Münster, *Tabula Africae III*, in *Geographia universalis, vetus et nova* [524]
- 15.5 Gerard Mercator, *Magnum delta vocat(ur) Ptol(omaei)*, in *Cl. Ptolemaei Alexandrini Geographiae* [525]
- 15.6 Abraham Ortelius, *Aegyptus illa omnium regionum vetustissima* [527]
- 15.7 Paolo Forlani, *Nuova et copiosa descrizione di tutto l'Egitto*, 1566 [530]

- 15.8 Richard Pococke, *Hanc Tabulam Aegypti*, 1743 [533]
- 15.9 Paul Lucas, *Carte de la Basse Égypte et du cours du Nil depuis le Caire jusqu'à ses embouchures* [537]
- 15.10 Richard Pococke, *Hanc Tabulam Aegypti*, 1743 [539]
- 15.11 Carsten Niebuhr, *Nili Brachia*, in *Voyage en Arabie et en d'autres pays circonvoisins*, 1776–1780 [540]
- 15.12 Guillaume Delisle, map of Egypt copied by Guillaume Delisle in 1726 based on a map by Father Sicard from 1722 [544]
- 15.13 Claude Sicard copied by Jean-Baptiste d'Anville, *Carte de l'Égypte ancienne, divisée en ses 58 nomes ou gouvernements*, 1722 [545]
- 15.14a Jean-Baptiste d'Anville, *Aegyptus antiqua*, 1765 [550]
- 15.14b Jean-Baptiste d'Anville, *Aegyptus inferior*, eighteenth century [551]

Tables

- 1.1 Stereotypical compartmentalisation of Egypt-related scholarly disciplines [page 10]
- 2.1 Ancient toponyms used to refer to the Nile Delta according to TM Geo [70]
- 2.2 The Nile Delta in ancient and medieval toponymic evidence [79]
- 2.3 Ancient toponyms used to refer to the Nile Delta with updated equivalences [80]
- 9.1 List of Alexandrian ‘churches’, ἐκκλησίαι (*basilicae*) built for the celebration of the *synaxis* [315]
- 9.2 List of Alexandrian *martyria* [325]
- 9.3 Early martyrs of faith venerated in the Delta [330]
- 9.4 List of monks and anchorites venerated in monastic sites of the western Delta (Nitria, Kellia and Scetis) [343]
- 15.1 List of works and authors used by Ortelius for his map of Egypt from his *Aegyptus*, 1595 [500]
- 15.2 Identifications between ancient and modern cities of the Delta, by Claude Sicard and Jean-Baptiste d’Anville, showing similarities (a) and differences (b) [546]
- 17.1 Girls and women in Petrie’s Delta excavations 1884–1914 [608]

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the co-director of the Franco–Egyptian archaeological mission of Ayn Soukhna, a Pharaonic harbour in the Red Sea (north of the Gulf of Suez). She is a specialist in questions of management and perception of space in ancient Egypt (particularly border and margin areas) and cultural geography (toponymy studies), bringing geographical issues and tools into her research. She is co-author of *L'Égypte pharaonique, histoire, société, culture* (2019, Armand Colin) and author of *Atlas de l'Égypte ancienne* (2020, Autrement).

Acknowledgements

This volume was born thanks to a failure. In June 2013, I led the first and only season of the Canadian archaeological project in Thmuis (Tell Timai). Together with the nearby site of Mendes (Tell el Rub'a), the site was the Roman capital of the Mendesian Nome, whose environmental history my 2014 monograph focuses on. This project, though, was not meant to last: The archaeologist colleague who was co-leading the project had to withdraw one month before the start of the season, which meant we also lost their institution's support. I did manage to make things work, and am grateful to all the members of the team, as well as to the Supreme Council of Antiquities offices in Cairo and Mansurah for granting me the authorization to excavate that year. As we started working on the area we had identified as the potential site of a Late Antique bath, it quickly became clear that it was not a bath and, most importantly, that it had previously been excavated. Our team dug more than 3 metres deep, all the way to the foundation level. There, after three weeks of work, we found . . . a piece of plastic. As one of the members of the team put it, this project was unique: For the first time in their career as an archaeologist, they had participated in a dig where no object had been registered! That being said, we did gather some data (including the survey of a nearby zone), and kept our team spirit up despite this absurd situation.¹ When the season came to an end, I received good news: Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) had granted me a substantial grant, enough to finance three more seasons of excavation. Yet given the multiple red flags encountered, as well as differences with the colleagues the concession had been granted to, I decided that it was wiser to move on. I never regretted taking this decision, because it turned out to be the starting point of this book.

This volume started as a conference. In the fall of 2014, I met with Cambridge University Press's Michael Sharp in Toronto. During our

¹ The season's report is available here: www.academia.edu/4754581/2013_Blouin_K_et_al_Preliminary_Report_of_the_First_Canadian_Mission_at_Thmuis

meeting, Michael suggested I edit a volume dedicated to the ‘cultural, social and economic/ecological history of the Nile Delta’. I very much liked this idea. Given I had cancelled the Thmuis excavation project the year before, I decided that the best way I could use the money that had been allocated to me was to organize an international conference on this topic, which would act as a preliminary stage to a future volume. Fast-forward a pregnancy and a period of maternity leave, and I entitled the conference ‘Imperial Landscapes: Empires, Societies and Environments in the Ancient to Modern Nile Delta’. My aim was to bring together scholars working on the history of the Nile Delta in the *longue durée*, and to do so in a way that centres the region’s landscapes and their interconnectedness with imperial routes, from Antiquity to the modern period. The conference took place in March 2017 at the University of Toronto with the financial support of the SSHRC and the Department of Classics. It brought together fifteen scholars from North America, Europe and Africa, as well as a large crowd of colleagues and students, and was made all the better thanks to the labour of Warrena Wilkinson and the help of Zohra Faqiri, Chiara Graf and Drew Davis. Following the event, I started working on the volume. The idea was not to put together proceedings, but rather to curate a cohesive work that centres the long-term history of the region through the perspective of a multidisciplinary and transnational array of scholars. Accordingly, the final result is substantially different from the conference’s programme. Of the eighteen chapters that make up the volume, seven are based on papers given at the conference. The remaining ones were commissioned, and written, by different scholars. The result offers a wider chronological and disciplinary breadth and, as such, does more justice to the historical significance of the region.

This volume came together during a pandemic. As the planet was undergoing wave after wave of infections, suffering and death; as many of us were trying to cope with lockdowns, homeschooling, trauma and grief; as the utter inadequacy of our governing élites, and the resolve of neoliberalism to prevail over the bodies and lives of the most vulnerable members of our societies, were painfully exposed; as teachers were asked to teach and ‘perform’ online; as many academics – especially carers – were met with little support or care from their institutions; as the world witnessed Brexit, and the accelerating rise of fascism, far-right populism and overt anti-intellectualism worldwide; as anti-Black racism and the genocide of

Indigenous Peoples in North America became impossible for settlers to ignore; as hundreds of Black and Brown bodies were found drowned in Mediterranean waters; as the climate crisis was diagnosed to be beyond the point of no return; as Palestinians continued to be dispossessed, dehumanized and killed in contravention of international law; as the tragedy unfolding in Yemen went on amid quasi-global indifference; as an attempted coup in Washington DC was televised and tweeted live; as ‘freedom’ was used to justify the lawless occupation of Ottawa and several Canadian cities and border crossings for weeks on end; as Russia invaded Ukraine, razed Mariupol to the ground and deployed an Orwellian narrative to justify its war crimes; as all these things were happening, in addition to what each of them encountered in their personal lives, all the contributors to this volume found the time and energy to research, write, revise and submit a chapter. Writing a chapter takes a lot of time and mental energy. Writing a chapter in the context listed above, with all it can mean in terms of personal dislocation and suffering, is a tremendous feat. Without their trust in this project, without their patience and generosity, this book would not exist. To all the authors who make up this volume: Un immense merci.

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This volume is dedicated to Mona Abaza, who left us way too soon, and whose deep respect and love for the Nile Delta, its Land and its people, will live on for a long time. It was an absolute honour to work with you, even if only remotely. Thank you for your trust and for sending your piece to me so promptly. I am sorry the volume did not come out before you left this world. I hope you are pleased with the final result, and that you are at peace in Aaru.

Abbreviations

The system of abbreviations used for editions of papyrological texts is that of the web edition of the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets (J. F. Oates et al. ed., <https://papyri.info/docs/checklist>). Abbreviations used for ancient literary texts follow the system used in the third edition of the Oxford Classical Dictionary.