CHAPTER 10

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FAYUM

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The Fayum region lies in a natural depression in Egypt’s Western Desert, about 80 km southwest of Cairo (Fig. 10.1). Around 2,200 km², it is one of the country’s most fertile regions thanks to the abundance of water and of fertile soil of Nilotiv origin. It is unique in that it is not a true oasis but rather a pseudo-oasis, because it is connected to the Nile Valley by a natural channel, the Bahr Yusuf, which enters the depression via the el-Lahun corridor, or Hawara Canal. This corridor was formed during the phase known as the Prenil (Embabi 2004: 44), when the Nile waters turned the depression into a huge lake, about 44 metres above sea level. The lake levels have varied over time both because of natural causes and, from the Middle Kingdom onwards, through human intervention. The area itself has no other outlet, and the water is trapped inside without possibility of escaping, except through evaporation. The deepest point is located at the bottom of the present lake, the Birket Qarun, at 52.9 metres below sea level. The ancient lake has left its traces in the desert surrounding the fertile area in the form of beaches, or terraces, located at different heights, which testify to the continuous fluctuation of its levels. This riverine environment favoured the appearance and development of Palaeolithic and then Neolithic communities, as well as the presence of a rich fauna.

The present lake represents the last stage in the development of the ancient lake of Moeris, as Herodotus identified it (2.149.1–2, 4–5; 150.1–4), artificially maintained at 45 metres below sea level. Over the millennia, water evaporation, and the subsequent accumulation of salts, has caused the present high salinity of the lake, though it remains unknown exactly when its waters turned brackish and thus unsuitable for drinking and for agricultural purposes. The original lake formed during the Prenil left a thick layer of alluvial sediments over which lay the more recent deposits of Nile silt. Such deposits create a deltaic cone from the point where the water of the Bahr Yusuf enters the ancient lake, forming what has been termed the Fayum delta. Its fan-like surface extends towards the centre of the region, gently sloping down from 18 metres to about 5 metres, resulting in a vast terrace where the region’s capital, Medinet el-Fayum, stands; its ancient Egyptian name was Shedet, and in Greek it was called Krokokolopolis and Ptolemais Euergetis and then, in the Roman period, Arsinoiten Polis (Arsinoe). The location of the region’s main city, one of the oldest in Egyptian history, has never changed since it is strategically situated for control of the central hydraulic system.

It is clear that the habitability and wealth of the region greatly depend on this connection with the Nile, and on the careful management of the amount of water that is fed into the depression through the Bahr Yusuf: too much water would raise the lake level, thus reducing the amount of cultivable land, while too little water would not be sufficient to irrigate the vast agricultural area. It is therefore a question of negotiating a careful balance, which was achieved between the third century BCE and the third century CE. During this time, the Fayum periodically reached peaks of productivity and demography, alternating with less productive phases.

Projects of Land Reclamation

The first attempt to control the waters and the amount of land cultivated took place during the 12th dynasty, with the so-called first land reclamation project. Works probably started during the reign of Senwosret I and were completed by Amenemhat III. Senwosret II and Amenemhat III (c.1880–1860 BCE) chose, perhaps significantly, el-Lahun and Hawara as the
location for their burials, with both royal pyramids located to the right of the el-Lahun corridor. The locks that regulate the amount of water flowing into the depression are still located there. These, together with the connected canal system, were most likely among the first works undertaken during the Middle Kingdom, although there is no archaeological or textual evidence that sheds light on the exact extent of the works carried out at this period. On the basis of practical and geographical considerations, given that this is the only entrance point to the depression, it is clear that it is the one place where effective water control could be implemented through a system that would allow in only the quantity of water needed, with the excess flowing out northward through an artificial canal, the modern Bahir el-Giza. In this way it is possible to keep a check on the lake levels, which in turn is essential for any plan concerning a vast territory.

Various Middle Kingdom settlements and monuments are still preserved in the Fayum, but they do not provide us with any information regarding the type of works carried out during the first land reclamation project, or the extent reached at this time by the cultivable area. The latter depends on the presence of a capillary distribution of the waters over the territory through a series of natural channels and, above all, artificial canals, and on the management of the natural slopes and gorges that would cause the water to flow rapidly towards the lower areas of the depression without allowing it to be used for agricultural purposes. Such gorges are deep natural valleys dug into the deltaic sediments, unconnected with the hydraulic system of the Bahir Yusuf, which branches out at Medinet el-Fayyum into a series of canals with a fan-like shape. In addition, present at the lower are three artificial canals running from the Bahir Yusuf at the end of the el-Lahun corridor, bordering the region: the one flowing northwards is called Bahir Abdalla Wahbi, the southern one is the Bahir el-Gharaq, while the western one is the Bahir Qasr el-Banat and Bahir Qarun. They provide water to the lands located at the margins of the depression, thus maximizing its agricultural expansion. However, it is not known when these canals, or rather the predecessors of the current canals, which result from the nineteenth-century land reclamation campaign, were created. It is generally thought that they are part of the second land reclamation undertaken in the Fayyum at the beginning of the Hellenistic period by Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II. Some information about these works is provided by a number of papyri from the archive of Kleon (also known as the Petrie Papyri), the engineer who, together with Ptolemy and Theodosus, was in charge of the works in the Arsinoite nome. It is not by chance that these papyri were recovered from two mummies found at Medinet el-Ghurob, which is located on the opposite bank from el-Lahun.

Besides the hundreds of kilometres of artificial canals built or repaired during this important territorial project, hundreds of settlements were also created. The study of toponyms known through papyri suggests that the campaign of land reclamation started in the eastern area of the Fayyum, in the meris (a sub-territorial division of the Arsinoite nome) of Hermes, then continued in the southern area, corresponding to the meris of Polemon, and then onto the western area in the meris of Themistos (Clarysse 2007: 78-9). Of these settlements only a few have left traces in the archaeological record, for reasons that will be discussed below.

During the Roman period the whole canal system and the settlements continued to function as before, with periods of high population density and agricultural productivity, particularly of wheat. It is very likely that the canal system was repaired at the beginning of the Imperial period, and the productivity of the land system optimized, so much so that the Fayum became the granary of Egypt. The lake levels in the Graeco-Roman period were probably similar to or lower than that of today (Davoli 2001), since the remains of two settlements, Qaret el-Hamra and Qaret el-Rusas, have been discovered at the eastern end of its shore (39 metres below sea level). Like other possible settlements that were originally located by the lake shore in the Graeco-Roman period, these were probably destroyed by the waters as the lake height increased in late antiquity because of mismanagement of the canals, many of which were abandoned and silted up (Davoli 2001: 354-5). The causes of such a hydraulic and/or administrative crisis, which started in the fourth century AD, are not entirely clear. The result was a progressive depopulation of settlements, which decreased in size and number until they were completely abandoned, at least those located along the borders of the region.

It is these that, until the twentieth century, were the best-preserved sites, both because they were rapidly and completely covered over with sand, and because of their distance from agricultural land and human activity (Davoli 2001). On the other hand, settlements in the hinterland have disappeared through continuous human activity, and because of excessive wetness—conditions similar to those found in the Nile Delta. An exception is represented by the ancient capital, a site known as Kiman Faras, which, despite its hinterland location, remains to the north of Medinet el-Fayyum, and had been largely preserved up to the beginning of the 1900s.

During Muhammad Ali's reign (1805-48), what could be termed the third land reclamation campaign in the Fayum began, part of a process of renewal of the country and its economy. With agriculture being the state's main economic resource, an attempt was made to intensify production and to make it more efficient through the reclamation of desert areas and an overhaul of the hydraulic system, with the aim of better exploiting and controlling the Nile waters (Marsot 1984: 149-50). The new system involved both the construction of dams on the Nile, so as to create water reserves to be used throughout the year, in order to increase the number of harvests, and the creation of a capillary network of artificial canals that, thanks also to mechanical pumps, brought the waters to areas located some distance away from the river basin. Thus was introduced a type of perennial irrigation that even today allows for intensive agricultural production. These works concerned the Fayum too, where, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the extent of desert land reclaimed for agricultural purposes was almost the same as that reached by the Ptolemaic land reclamation campaign.

**Discoveries and Archaeological Excavations**

It was in the course of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century land reclamation process that the ancient Fayum settlements, abandoned and still preserved, were found by the new inhabitants, who started exploiting the mounds (kiman) for materials to reuse, these being easy to recover and freely available. The *sebkhetu*—individuals who collected *sebakh* (an organic deposit that can be used both as fertilizer and to obtain saltpetre)—sought out other material as well: stone, baked and unbaked bricks, wood, and potsherds were all needed for the construction of new settlements, bridges, and cemeteries. Artifacts, papyri, and monuments were found in some quantities during this activity, which, at the beginning,
was not regulated or controlled by the Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte (Davoli 2008). The process of land reclamation reached the western side of the Fayum in 1900, later than in the rest of the region, with the new canals, the Bahir Qasr el-Banat and the Bahir Qaraun, once more bringing water to areas near Theadelphia, Buhenemia, and Dianysias, settlements that had been abandoned between the fourth and the sixth centuries probably because of the lack of water. As a result, these archaeological sites were heavily destroyed by the sebakhin; important discoveries were made in the period between 1901 and 1911, such as the archives of Hermonius and of Sakaon (1903) and two Greek steiae mentioning the temple of the god Neperhoros and the Rubinsetion at Theadelphia. Gustav Lebeufre, at that time the inspector of the Service des Antiquités, relates that in 1908 Theadelphia and its cemeteries had been almost completely overtaken to cultivation (Davoli 2008: 112–13).

A large number of the Fayum sites still well preserved at the end of the nineteenth century were razed by the end of the 1930s (for example, Theadelphia, Euhemeria, and Philadelphia), while others were only partially destroyed (for example, Bacchias, Dionsias, Soknopaiou Nesos, and Tebtunis). The capital, at Kuman Fares, after being heavily damaged at the beginning of the twentieth century by sebakhin, was almost totally obliterated by the new districts of Medinet el-Fayum in the 1960s and 1970s (Davoli and Nahla 2006).

At the end of the nineteenth century the archaeology of the Fayum was still largely unknown to scholars, since little had been published on this region by travellers and explorers—the first, albeit limited, study of its geography being that published in the Description de l’Égypte in 1822 (Jamart 1822a, b). In 1822 Rifaia was the first European to explore the remains of Krokotholippos and to undertake an excavation that could be defined as ‘stratigraphic’, if not for the excavation methods used, then because he was able to distinguish four levels of occupation that he recorded in a simplified, yet indicative, section plan (Rifaia 1825). In 1823, during the Prussian expedition in Egypt, Lepsius undertook a series of quick excavations and recordings at el-Lahun, Hawara, Soknopaiou Nesos, Krokotholippos, and Dionsias. The published plates and the description of the sites are today of great importance for determining the state of preservation of these sites and their monuments, which, in some cases, were lost in the following years. A dramatic improvement in the knowledge of Kuman Fares came from the works done in 1887 by Schweinfurth, who was the first and only person to publish a plan of the ruins (Schweinfurth 1887, pl. 2).

The first survey of the region with the aim of locating archaeological sites was undertaken by Petrie in 1890. He was able to identify about twenty sites, which he dated on the basis of the ceramic assemblages present on the surface. These he recorded on a crude map, which he drew himself. They are located along the eastern perimeter canal, in the el-Lahun corridor, and in el-Gharra (Petrie 1891, pl. 50).

Petrie’s discoveries at Hawara—among which were the many tombs of the Hellenistic and Roman periods with well-preserved cartonnage masks, shrouds, and mummy portraits, and Greek literary papyri—and, above all, at Medinet Ghurob—where he found cartonnage composed of Hellenistic papyri that Sayce immediately recognized as the oldest yet known—prompted the British papyrologists Grenfell and Hunt to begin fieldwork in the Fayum in 1895, under the aegis of the Egypt Exploration Fund. Their work produced the first coherent picture of Fayum ancient topography based on a series of papyrological discoveries made until 1900 (Grenfell, Hunt, and Hogarth 1900). They were able to identify toponyms with actual archaeological sites, thanks to the recovery of papyri during their excavations, which were, nonetheless, rapid, often lasting just a few weeks or days, and not accurate in terms of archaeological recording. In fact, their stated aim was that of recovering quickly the largest possible number of papyri. This prevented the systematic exploration of sites, or even of individual buildings, which were often destroyed only a few years later by sebakhin, and thus lost for ever. The evidence recovered by Grenfell and Hunt seldom has a find context, other than a generic indication of the place or of the area of a discovery (temple, house, or necropolis).

From 1895 to 1901 Grenfell and Hunt undertook excavations in sixteen sites, all of which are located in the desert along the region’s border, where the preservation of papyrus, and of organic materials in general, was more likely. Not all sites were equally productive in terms of finds, which, despite the technique and the methodologies developed by the two scholars, were still left to chance, and dependent upon the area chosen for investigation. In fact, numerous and important recoveries of papyri were made in the following years in the areas they had already explored, both by sebakhin and by other papyrologists. The difficult living and working conditions, together with the obvious need for rapid action so as to pre-empt the destructive activity of robbers and sebakhin, were, understandably, the main factors influencing the excavations of that time. Between 1900 and 1914, following the example of Grenfell and Hunt, using the same methodologies and with the same aims, other papyrologists began excavating in the Fayum. Between 1900 and 1902 Jouguet excavated at Medinet Madi (Narmouthis), Medinet el-Nahas (Magdala), on behalf of the French Ministry of Public Education. Notable in terms of both number and importance are the mummy cartonnages that he found in the necropolis of Medinet el-Nahas, and which yielded about 300 Greek papyri. In 1903, together with Lebeufre, he explored Magdala, which he described as a village of some importance in his slim report on the work carried out. Today the area is completely covered over by a series of moving dunes that prevent the location of the temple, the settlement, and the cemetery seen and excavated by the French scholars. In this case, as elsewhere, the wealthier tombs were those of the Hellenistic period, with cartonnage made from discarded papyri.

In 1902 Otto Rubensohn carried out excavations at Kharabat Iith (Theadelphia) and Kom Umnum el-Boreigat (Tebtunis) on behalf of the royal museums in Berlin. Rubensohn published the first study of the houses he investigated (Rubensohn 1905), although, as he himself cautioned, they were not always thoroughly excavated, since the aim of the excavations was to recover papyri, and not to record archaeological contexts. Yet, for a long time, this article remained the only evidence for domestic architecture of the Graeco-Roman period in the Fayum.

Between 1908 and 1910 the Berlin-run excavations continued under the direction of Zucker at Philadelphia, Narmouthis, and Soknopaiou Nesos. The good state of preservation of the remains of Philadelphia at this time can be evinced from the published reports, although, again, the various structures investigated were not properly recorded (Viereck 1928). The sketch plan of the site (Fig. 10.2), a few plans of a temple and two houses, together with a few published photographs, represent the only documentation available on the ancient settlement. The site plan, in particular, is of great interest since a few years later the entire archaeological area was completely razed (Fig. 10.3), and this is, therefore, the only document that gives an idea of the spatial organization of the town. However, it is important to note that this plan was not made at the time of the excavation, whose true extent is...
unknown, but only later, in 1924, by Ludwig Borchardt. Given that it is known that in the period between Zucker's excavations and 1924, sebakhin were particularly active at Philadelphia (witness the recovery around 1915 of the well-known Zenon archive), it is clear that the topographical plan is not truly indicative of the archaeological remains at the time of the original excavations. The negative effects of these papyri 'excavations' were soon evident to Rostovtzeff (1939), who criticized the lack of documentation of, and attention to, the archaeological context. In the meantime, and particularly during the period before the First World War, sebakhin were more than ever active in the Fayum, and in some instances were even well organized by landowning companies, which also employed the decauville, or light rail, in order to remove large quantities of sebakh more easily from the archaeological areas.

The chance discovery at Theadelphia, in 1908, of two stelae inscribed in Greek (Bernard 1981, nos 116 and 117) prompted first Lefebvre and later Breccia to undertake excavation at the site in the hope of discovering the temple of the god Pnephros, the Babasteion, and the crocodile necropolis mentioned in the inscriptions. The temple, which was still standing, was indeed discovered by Breccia in 1912, who had its stone elements dismantled and reassembled in the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria (Davoli 1998: 283–6).

In 1924 the sebakhin were at work at Karanis, where they had been authorized to remove 200 m³ of sebakh per day. Such quarrying was restricted by the presence of the University of Michigan expedition, which conducted archaeological excavations at the site from 1924 to 1934. Their work represents the main intervention carried out with systematic archaeological methodologies in the Fayum at that time (see Chapter 14). The settlement was explored quite extensively at all its levels. The ensuing publications, which include excavation reports and artefact catalogues, make it the best-known site of the Fayum, even today (Davoli 1998: 73–116). The same archaeological mission excavated in two areas at Dime es-Seba (SoknopaiosNesos) in 1931–2, where the same methodologies already tested at Karanis were applied. Unfortunately, the logistical difficulties linked to the location of the site, north of Lake Qarun, prevented further seasons of work (Boak 1935).

Sebakh digging and looting for antiquities dealers were also responsible for the destruction of a large residential quarter at Tobjans between 1920 and 1930, which produced a large number of papyri and private archives, sold mainly to American and European collections (Gallazzi 1989: 182–5). This did not stop entirely, even after the intervention at the site of the Società Italiana per la Ricerca dei Papiri in Egitto under the direction of Breccia, and later Anti, in 1929–35. Unfortunately, the important results of these excavations were never extensively published. Another archaeological mission of the University of Milan, directed by Vogliano, began excavating nearby Medinet Madi (1934–9) following the recovery of a considerable number of Manichaean texts there in 1930. Also very important was the discovery of a temple dedicated to the goddess Renenutet (Thermouthis), which had been built in the 12th dynasty and was then enlarged during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (Davoli 1998: 224–32).

Following the Second World War and the post-war period, few foreign archaeological missions returned to the Fayum. In 1948 and 1950 Schwartz directed the excavations of the Franco-Swiss mission at Qasr Qarun (Dionysias), whose findings were published in two volumes (Schwartz and Wild 1950; Schwartz 1969). Besides the archaeological recording of the excavated structures and of the Roman fortress unearthed in 1950, the first general plan of the site, with the still-visible buildings and roads, was also produced at this time. Built in stone, baked bricks, and mud-bricks, a fortress at the site was known to have housed the ala V

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**FIG. 10.2 Plan of Philadelphia, drawn in 1924**

After Vireck (1938, pl. i).
Between 1967 and 1975 a mission from Cairo University returned to Kom Aushim (Kar-nis), where they excavated a number of houses and discovered a public bath (Davoli 1998: 87–9). The latter was a small thermas complex built in fired and unfired bricks, with two rooms provided with a hypocaust, and which was in use during the fourth until possibly the sixth century (Castel 2009).

From the end of the 1980s to the present day, the number of archaeological missions working on Graeco-Roman sites has increased, as has the number of publications on various historical, archaeological, and papyrological issues, and, as a result, our understanding of the Fayum during the Hellenistic and Roman periods is constantly improving. An Italo-French mission, present at Tebtunis since 1988, is obtaining important results through excavations, using up-to-date methodologies, a review of the findings of previous excavations, and archival studies. The temple area and the dromos have been re-excavated and their stratigraphy re-examined (Rondot 2004), as has also been the case with numerous public and private buildings, including a thesauros (granary), public baths (Hadjji-Minaglio 2009: 181–90), déîpneustèia (dining rooms connected with temple activities), and houses (Gallazzi and Hadji-Minaglio 2000; Hadji-Minaglio 2007).

Excavations at Kom Umm el-At (Bacchias) were resumed in 1993 by the joint mission of the universities of Bologna and Lecce, and continued until 2004. The site is currently being excavated by the University of Bologna. Three temples have been unearthed there in a fairly good state of preservation, houses over different stratigraphic levels (Davoli 2005), a thesauros (Tassinari 2008), a bath (Giorgi 2007), and a church (Buì 2007).

Thanks to the Fayum Survey Project, carried out from 1993 to 2006, and directed first by Dominic Rathbone and subsequently by Dirk Obbink and Cornelia Römer, important data about the ancient topography of individual sites have been collected (Rathbone 1996; Römer 2004); the information pertains to sites located on the southern and western sides of the Fayum depression, as well as the territorial organization of settlements located in and around the el-Gharaq basin (Rathbone 2003). The survey discovered lacustrine sediments of an ancient lake that appears to have covered the entire el-Gharaq depression during the Graeco-Roman period. On its shores were built a series of small settlements, including Magdola, Tell el-Ma‘arakà, Kom el-Khamisim, and Kom Medinet Ghoran. The decrease in the lake levels has been dated to the third century CE (Buì 2007: 32).

Annual excavation campaigns and topographical surveys have also been carried out since 2003 at Dime (Soknopaiou Nesos), by the Centro di Studi Papirologici dell’Università del Salento (Lecce) (Capasso and Davoli forthcoming). The topographical survey has documented the paving of the dromos, the cemeteries, and other visible structures in surrounding areas, besides those visible within the residential area (Fig. 10.4). Excavations have shed light on the developmental stages of the temple dedicated to Soknopaios and Isis Nepherses, and brought to light a new temple built in a second phase of the Ptolemaic period. It was built at the centre of the temenos using local limestone blocks (Davoli 2010).

A new settlement, in use between the first and ninth centuries, and comprising a monastery, two churches, and an extensive necropolis, has been located at Deir el-Banan, a couple of kilometres north of Naqran. This has been excavated since 2003 by a mission of the Russian Academy of Science (Krol 2005).
of archaeological investigation and re-examination of the findings of previous excavations. In addition, many important settlements have been destroyed, and much is still being lost because of modern land reclamation and the considerable population increase in the Fayum, even before sites can be documented. The data available for evaluating the complete plans of individual sites are often misleading or extremely limited. Indeed, existing planimetric drawings record only the state of preservation of structures visible on the surface at the time the plan was made. These structures could belong to different strata, or occupation phases, and therefore may not be contemporary with one another. This is the case, for example, for those sites exposed by sebkhetin, such as Bacchias, whose stratigraphy is very difficult to interpret owing to the presence of large craters where the exposed structures belong to the Hellenistic levels but are located next to hills with buildings of the Roman period.

The vast majority of the Fayum settlements bordering agricultural land, thus originally already close to the desert, display the kind of stratigraphy characteristic of kom and tell, consisting of several superimposed occupation levels, often interspersed with strata of wind-blown sand. A continuous and progressive sanding-up is a phenomenon characteristic of these settlements, where architectural devices are often in place to protect against the predominant north/north-west wind. Therefore, the activity of sebkhetin, even where it has not completely destroyed the sites, has greatly altered their stratigraphy, uncovering buildings belonging to different periods. Some settlements do not appear to have developed over more than one level, as, for example, Philadelphia, Theadelphia, Euhemeria, Philoteris, and Dionysias, because, although near the margins, they were located within the area of cultivable land and thus were less exposed to wind-blown sand. In the case of the first three sites, this can no longer be verified, since they were completely razed at the beginning of the 1930s, although traces of canals and of cultivation plots in the desert surrounding these towns testifies to the presence in antiquity of cultivation around them. In these instances, the settlements developed horizontally, that is, over a single level, presumably with buildings being modified, demolished, and reconstructed. The excavations carried out at these sites in the past do not provide much data, though enough to support such a theory (Davoli 1998: 343).

It is clear that settlements evolved continuously in size, as well as in terms of number and density of houses, and of buildings in general. A diachronic reconstruction is possible only in a few cases or for limited areas, where all the levels were excavated stratigraphically, as, for example, at Karanis (Husseinian 1979), Soknopaiou Nesos (Boak 1935), Bacchias (Davoli 2005a: 218–19), and Tebtunis (Hadj-Minagliou 2007). The shape of the settlements is not known, but it seems possible that it would vary depending on the orography, and on their position with respect to the canals and the agricultural areas. It is clear that settlements of the Imperial period were more extensive and more densely populated than those of the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. Their enlargement was often influenced by the presence of a reference axis, which could be a dromos, a natural feature, or a canal.

Philadelphia has often been defined as a Hippodamian type of settlement because of its orthogonal, or grid-like, plan (Fig. 10.2). It has been suggested that the layout was therefore not of Egyptian origin, but settlements with regular and orthogonal plans are in fact present even in Pharaonic Egypt, as, for example, at Kahun (el-Lahun, 12th dynasty) and Amarna East (end of the 18th dynasty). Such an interpretation is based on a single, rather schematic, plan, drawn by Borchardt in 1924, and on an aerial photograph from 1925 (Davoli 1998, figs 60–1). However, it represents only a small part of the settlement, which had a much
greater extent, as can be seen from the actual traces on the ground, and from satellite images. The road system seems to surround blocks that are rectangular in shape and of the same size (100 x 50 metres). Two temples are reported, both small in size, located within these blocks and lacking a dromos. They appear to be minor temples, while the main one with its dromos has not yet been located, although this does not mean that it never existed. The settlement has an axial alignment determined by the local perimeter canal, which here flows in a south–north direction and with which roads were aligned. It would appear that there were no town walls, or other type of perimeter barriers, but the settlement’s expansion, if it did occur over time, was mainly to the north and the south, with the necropolis being located immediately east of the town centre (Fig. 10.3).

Another settlement oriented following the local main canals is Dionysias, where roads were parallel and orthogonal to the two canals that bordered the town on its north-east and south-west sides, as can be gathered from the plan made by Schwartz and Wild in 1950, and from satellite images. The temple, dating to the Ptolemaic period, is located virtually in the centre of the town, and has a south-east alignment, with a dromos and a kiosk for religious processions. On satellite images the settlement appears to be quite densely built, and divided into blocks along the main roads that crossed the town centre from the north-west to the south-east. The late Roman fortress does not entirely follow this alignment, but appears to be located on the margins, in an area apparently devoid of buildings. There are no traces of walls delimiting the perimeter of the settlement.

A third settlement that developed along a main axis (the dromos) is Soknopaiou Nesos, probably originally built around the main temple, which is located over a low hill reached by a raised dromos with a slight incline (Fig. 10.5; see Davoli 1998: 359–70 on the orientation of temples in the Fayum). In this case, too, the settlement has a north–south orientation, influenced in this instance by the presence of the lake to the south, which was used by the inhabitants to reach the agricultural area. The dromos at Soknopaiou Nesos is a paved processional way preserved over a distance of 329 metres, flanked by two parallel roads; it was built over a foundation wall standing at least 3 metres above road level. Therefore, the dromos represented a real barrier within the settlement, besides being a striking monumental way that effectively divided the town centre into two districts. Side stairs gave access to the dromos, while tunnels through its foundation walls linked the two side roads. On the basis of the current knowledge, it appears that the dromos was extended to the south as the settlement expanded in the same direction. Unlike Philadelphia, Soknopaiou Nesos developed around an axial road to which minor roads are aligned so as to form a grid, which is quite orthogonal, though not regular. Residential blocks seem to have developed during the Roman period with the construction of new buildings within the space previously left empty between the houses of the Hellenistic period. It is still unknown when the north perimeter wall was built, and whether it surrounded the entire site.

At Tebtunis a clear urban change can also be detected between the end of the Hellenistic period and the beginning of the Roman period, with the construction of new houses and the restoration of the dromos (Hadjii-Minaglou 2008). In this case, the main temple and the dromos are located on the south-west side of the town, with only a very small part of the settlement developing west of the religious complex, while the vast majority of the buildings are located to its east and appear to follow a slightly different alignment. The temple and the dromos are oriented to the north, that is, towards the cultivation area, and are orthogonal to the local main canal. A similar case is that of nearby Narmouthis, whose temple, founded in the 12th dynasty and then enlarged in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, is located to one side of the settlement. It is oriented to the south, with a long dromos that extends towards the cultivable area. The road system visible on the surface, thus likely to date to the Roman or late Roman period, consists of orthogonal roads forming an apparently regular grid aligned to the cardinal points and the dromos (Bresciani et al. 2006: 257).

Within the urban picture of the Fayum, Karanis appears to have a completely different urban layout: two main roads have been identified, both with north–south alignment—that is, towards the canal. The better-preserved and recorded layer has been dated to the Roman period (Level C, late first to mid-second century CE), and consists of a series of irregular blocks separated by orthogonal roads that do not form a square grid, most of which end in T-junctions. Two temples have been found, both built in stone and apparently devoid of a dromos extending outside the temple enclosure, although it is important to note that this central area has been totally razed. However, the settlement developed well beyond the central area investigated by the University of Michigan, for which we still have no chronological data. Karanis also preserves public and semi-public buildings, such as granaries, dovecotes, and baths (Husselman 1979; Castel 2009), whose presence in other settlements is attested from papyri and the occasional chance discoveries.

One of the main characteristics of these settlements, therefore, is the presence of a dromos, stone-paved, with one or two kiosks. The dromos was where processions took place fairly frequently throughout the year, during the celebration of festivals dedicated to the main god and its symmaei theos. In the case of Soknopaiou Nesos, it is clear that the dromos
did not serve any secular function, given that it stood much higher than the nearby roads. The better-preserved dromoi, with their associated structures and monuments, are those of Tebtunis, which is 210 metres long, and Narmouthis, at 230 metres long (Bresciani and Giannarusti 2009). Three different building phases have been identified at Tebtunis, dating from the beginning of the Hellenistic period to Augustan times (Rondot 2004). In these settlements the main temple was surrounded by a wide temenos, not always preserved, that enclosed chapels, workshops, and priests’ accommodation. The location of the main temple at the Fayum settlement varies with respect to the residential area of the town, although it is not possible to determine the temples’ position during single phases of occupation because these sites were not completely excavated. In at least three cases the temple appears to have occupied a central position (Dionysias, Karanis, and Bachias), while in others it stands on one side of the settlement (Tebtunis, Narmouthis, and Soknopaiou Nesos). At Soknopaiou Nesos the temple is located at the northern end of the site, although it still retains a central, dominating position, since it stands on a higher ground and because its dromos represents the central axis of the settlement (Davoli 2010a). Smaller temples have been identified along dromoi, for example at Tebtunis, Narmouthis, and Soknopaiou Nesos, but also occur within the residential areas, such as at Philadelphia.

Houses of the Roman Period

The architectural typology, the materials, and the building techniques employed in the settlements of the Fayum are quite uniform throughout the region, even during different historical periods. Dwellings of the Roman period are built using unfired bricks, sometimes over foundations of local stone chips, with three basic plans: rectangular, square, and L-shaped or irregular (Davoli 1998: 355–8). They consist of individual family units, each self-contained, with an external courtyard, where, generally, cooking installations were located. Houses developed over several floors. Those with a rectangular or a square plan generally have quite deep foundations, inside of which are small, unconnected cellars, roofed with barrel vaults, and accessed via narrow trapdoors. These types of house were generally at least two storeys high, with the upper floors accessed via a staircase built around a central pillar. The number and layout of the rooms vary considerably. Rooms above ground have flat roofs made of palm beams, reeds, and unfired bricks. Windows are generally narrow openings with slanting sills, placed just below the roofline so as to allow the sunlight in from above. Rooms were furnished with niches of various dimensions: some were provided with shelves and used as storage, while others were decorated, sometimes quite richly, with modelled plaster and used as a place for private worship (Husselman 1970: 47–8). A particular type of house, well attested in documents, is the tower house, or pyrgos, which was characterized by a square floor-plan and load-bearing walls; the latter suggest the presence of several floors, thus giving this type of house the appearance of a tower. Only three of these are attested in the archaeological record: two at Tebtunis and one at Soknopaiou Nesos (Hadji-Minaglou 2008). Houses with an L-shaped or irregular plan are generally large and richly decorated with stone architectural elements in the classical style, and sometimes with painted plaster in the same style. They are also characterized by the presence of a large reception room, perhaps for banquets, with one open side on which there are two pillars. This house type is attested at Dionysias, Thadeophilia, and Narmouthis in levels dating from the Roman or Late Roman period (Davoli 1998: 281, fig. 136; 233, fig. 112; Bresciani et al. 2006: 245–6). Because of their lavish decoration, these buildings have been understood as having had a public function, although such an interpretation is not corroborated by specific findings. They could equally be large private houses, like those of the third and fourth centuries, with elaborate painted decoration, that have been discovered at Trimitris and at Kellis in the Dakhlia Oasis (Bagnall et al. 2006; Hope and Whitehouse 2006). At present, only one peristyle house is known, found at Tebtunis, but even in this instance the plan does not follow exactly that of houses elsewhere in the Greek and Roman world (Hadji-Minaglou 2008).

There are numerous Greek and Demotic papyri, such as sale contracts, that mention houses, stating not only their cost but also the dimensions and number of rooms and storerooms. From these documents it appears that houses were sometimes divided into smaller units, owing to inheritance, which could then be sold individually (Machler 1883). To my knowledge, no archaeological evidence has been found for partitioning inside houses, from which one could infer a clear division of space creating separate areas, possibly unconnected. The division of ownership thus reflects probably not an actual division of space but part-ownership of the property’s value.

Conclusion

The Fayum was developed in Hellenistic and Roman times to maximize agricultural output, which also led to the foundation and development of several settlements. Although many sites were known by name following the discovery of papyri in the late nineteenth century, early explorations were not well documented or published by the excavators, and considerable damage was wrought by illicit digging and sebakhin activity. Fortunately, a number of ongoing projects, combining archaeology, papyrology, and archival research, are constantly improving our knowledge of Fayum settlements, and in particular the interrelationship between the temple, its dromos, and the residential areas of the towns and villages. This important research promises to provide excellent evidence for the day-to-day life of Egypt’s farming and priestly communities in the Roman period.

Suggested Reading

Bagnall and Rathbone (2004) is a useful archaeological guide to the major sites of Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine Egypt, well documented and updated with new discoveries and bibliography. Davoli (1998) is dedicated to the study of Graeco-Roman archaeological sites in the Fayum, through the critical analysis of a wide bibliography and a good knowledge of the archaeological remains. On the Roman administration of the Fayum, see the fundamental
work of Tomasz Derda (2006), which analyses papyrological sources for the development and administration of the region.

**Bibliography**


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CHAPTER 11

THE THEBAN REGION UNDER THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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The Theban region refers to a portion of the Nile Valley north and south of the site of Thebes (modern Luxor), in Upper Egypt. The borders of the region are not clear-cut; but for the purpose of this study, we can set them at Kerameia (modern Medamud) in the north and Pathyris (modern Gebelein) in the south (Fig. 11.1). In the Pharaonic period, this area formed the fourth Upper Egyptian nome, designated the 'nome of the sceptre' (W3.1). The early Ptolemaic rulers included it as a toponym with the name Perithebas (Περίθεβας) within a larger administrative unit called Thebais, the capital of which was the newly founded polis Ptolemais Hermiou, some 120 km north of Thebes. In the second century BCE, probably in the 170s, Thebais was upgraded to an epistrategos, overseen by an official called the epistrategos. In the frame of this new administrative arrangement, which remained valid until late antiquity, the Theban region was subdivided into two nomes: Perithebas and Pathyrites, the latter eventually called Hermontithes after the transfer of the nome capital to Hermontis (Armant) caused by the devastation of Pathyris during the rebellion of 84-88 BCE. The Peritheban nome included the entire east bank territories of the region and a portion of the west bank territories north of Djeme (the Mennoneia), while Pathyrites (Hermontithes) was composed of only west bank territories, extending from Pathyris north to Djeme. The nome capital (metropolis) of Perithebas officially bore the name Διόσπολις ἡ Μεγάλη (Diospolis the Great, or Diospolis Magna), but the nome itself may have never been called Διοσπολείτης or Διοσπολείτης (Diospoleites or Diopoleites) (Thomas 1964).

The Sources

The study of the Theban region in both Ptolemaic and Roman times benefits from exceptionally rich and multifaceted source material, which can be divided into two categories: archaeological sources and written sources. The first category comprises sites and artefacts of mostly sacred and sepulchral character, and to the second category belong texts in Egyptian...