Deserted Villages: From the Ancient to the Medieval Fayyum

James G. Keenan

Loyola University Chicago, jkeenan@luc.edu

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"Karanis was abandoned over centuries and the 'Pompeii premise' in which a site is found in working order, simply abandoned by its people, a kind of archaeological Mary Celeste, does not apply."1

"If we wish to shed some light on these causes, we must first make sure that we know when a village was abandoned. A date will enable us to focus on the circumstances, the combination of factors that led to the death of the village. Yet even if we have established at least the approximate date of a desertion, we may still be off the mark, for villages die slowly. It is therefore important to find out when the process of desertion began."2

"[A] chronological classification must remain what it is: a necessary hypothesis that is both accepted as valid and called into question, in a double movement that is not contradictory but complementary."3

This article, originally delivered as a paper at the 117th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association,4 is a development

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4 In Chicago, 3-6 January 2003, as part of a panel organized by Petra Sijpsteijn and Lennart Sundelin on "Comparative Approaches to Early Medieval Egypt." The title (but not the subtitle) has been changed; text and notes have been somewhat revised. In this work I have been immensely helped by Lennart Sundelin (on Arabic technicalities), Dominic Rathbone (for all matters Fayyûmic), Terry G. Wilfong (for Coptic sources and for the holdings of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology), and, especially, Ian Begg (for references, articles, and an extensive e-mail correspondence on Gilbert Bagnani and the archaeology of late Tebtunis). Rathbone and Begg read an early draft of the paper, offered valuable criticisms, and saved me from potentially embarrassing mistakes.
of twin papers given by Roger Bagnall and me at the XXe Congrès International des Études Byzantines in Paris, 19-25 August 2001, as part of a "Table ronde" on villages in the Byzantine world. On that occasion, we were responsible for Egyptian villages, he for villages as evidenced (mainly) in the Greek papyri, I for the medieval period based on al-Nābulsi's description of Egypt's Fayyūm Province, Ta'rikh al-Fayyūm (c. 1245 A.D.). Thematically, we had agreed to explore such topics as the physical relationship between villages and their central cities, ranges in village sizes, hierarchies of settlements, in short, "geographies of power." As I reconsidered both papers in revising mine for publication, I came to see that in our experiment, despite Bagnall's good work, but perhaps because of the way we had defined our concerns, the Greek documents of the fourth to the eighth centuries and al-Nābulsi's thirteenth-century Arabic text rarely connected. And since ancient historians have traditionally treated the history of the late antique Fayyūm as discontinuous, I was led to ask whether a continuous history of the Fayyūm, from antiquity to the Middle Ages, was after all possible.

Bucking offered important suggestions, causing me to take a closer look at the article's archaeological components, both in themselves and in their relation to the textual evidence. I received advice on numismatics from my Loyola colleagues Jacqueline Long and Scott VanHorn. Roger Bagnall also offered helpful suggestions. All shortcomings in this finished product are, of course, mine, not theirs. Many thanks are due to the interlibrary loan staff of Loyola University Chicago's Cudahy Library for courteous and unflagging assistance, especially in summer 2002.

The following abbreviated titles are used:

Attì = Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia, Firenze, 23-29 Agosto 1998 (Florence 2001)


TF = Ta'rikh al-Fayyūm [B. Moritz, ed., Description du Fayoum au VIIème siècle de l'Hégire par Abou 'Osmān il Naboulsi il Safadi. Publications de la Bibliothèque Khédiviale XI (Cairo 1899)].

5 As reflected in the title of Bagnall's paper, "Village and City: Geographies of Power in Byzantine Egypt."

6 A recent, significant exception: Jairus Banaji, Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance (Oxford 2001), passim.
More narrowly: Was it possible to fill the void, or at least reduce the gap, between the Greek papyrological record and al-Nābulṣī? My interest here, as in the Paris paper, was with the Fayyūm's ecology in a very broad sense, specifically the changing fortunes of some of its village settlements over the long term. To pursue this aim, since the Greek papyri and al-Nābulṣī tell only part of the story, it was clear that it would be necessary to consult evidence that papyrological historians have until recently not sufficiently noticed: on the one hand, archaeology, on the other, texts in Coptic and Arabic.  

At the outset it is necessary to point out that the region under discussion is a lake-like, roughly fan-shaped depression southwest and across the Nile from Cairo. It is not on the Nile but linked to it by the offshoot known as the Bahr Yūsuf that breaks into the Fayyūm through a gap at al-Lahun. The area was apparently dry under the Old Kingdom but flooded during the Middle Kingdom's XIIth dynasty. Centuries later, under the early Ptolemies, the lake was reduced in size by restricting the inflow of water at the Lahūn Gap. As a consequence, during the mid-third century B.C., the Fayyūm's arable area more than tripled, accommodating some 145 hamlets and villages, new and old.

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Thus recreated, the Fayyum, according to the standard view, remained prosperous well into the Roman period. Then came the inevitable decline. The great Michael Rostovtzeff, in his *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926), saw the Fayyum's regional decline as a component in the empire-wide decline during what he called "the period of military anarchy." "The predominant features of Egyptian life in the third century," he wrote (480-1), "were the gradual depopulation of the land, the decay of the irrigation system, and the increase of waste and unproductive land [,...] a state of things [that] was not confined to the Fayyum."10 In this connection, Rostovtzeff specifically cited the villages of Theadelphia and Philadelphia, in the northwest and northeast Fayyum respectively, where eyewitness testimony from the papyri suggested grave and irreversible trauma.11 Not fully available to Rostovtzeff in 1926 were the results of excavations conducted by the University of Michigan from 1924 to 1935 at Karanis in the far northeast Fayyum.12 Had they been available, he would undoubtedly have

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10 For the persistence of the notion that the Fayyum in general declined in the third century, see, e.g., Flavia Ippolito, "I tessitori del Fayyum in epoca greca e romana: le testimonianze papiracee," *Atti* Vol. II 701-15, at 706 ("Bisogna inoltre tener presente che a partire dalla seconda metà del III secolo d.C. si assiste ad un progressivo degrado del sistema di irrigazione del Fayyum, fenomeno che contribuiti all'abbandono di non pochi villaggi e città della regione"), and Orsolina Montevecchi, "Ioni nati in Egitto: La parabola della grecità nella valle del Nilo," *Atti* Vol. II 983-94, at 991 (the Fayyum as "una regione che subisce nel III secolo un forte degrado"). For reassessments putting the third century in a more positive light, see Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 1993) 1-13 (the empire generally), Alston, *The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt* (above, n. 1) 249-59 (Egypt, especially its cities, though at 258 pointing to "dramatic falls in population in the northern Fayum"). See earlier A.C. Johnson, "Roman Egypt in the Third Century," *JJP* 4 (1950) 151-8 (civic building projects as signs of third-century prosperity).

11 See especially the petition to the prefect from the villagers of Theadelphia (*P. Thead. 17 = Sel. Pap. II 295 = P. Sakaon 44) of 331/2 A.D.: only twenty-five tax-paying villagers were left, accountable for 500 arouras of land. Others had fled to the Oxyrhynchite and Kynopolite nomes and refused to return: a seemingly desperate situation. For another copy of this famous document: *P. Turner 44*.

used them to good effect. As it is, the single most influential, and frequently cited, statement on the Karanis material has been the short article by A.E.R. Boak on "The Population of Roman and Byzantine Karanis," published in 1955. Using the long Michigan poll-tax registers dating to the 170s when the Antonine plague was still active, Boak estimated Karanis' population at between 2,160 and 2,560. Later documents, from the early fourth century, led him to conclude that by then Karanis had become, in his words, "an exceedingly small agricultural community of 140 or slightly more landholders." In Boak's judgment (162), this proved that Karanis had suffered an "appalling shrinkage of population." The village nonetheless continued to hang on, declining gradually until its ultimate demise in the mid-fifth century.

In their writings on the Fayyum's decline, Rostovtzeff (necessarily) and Boak (apparently by choice) relied exclusively on the

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13 Gagos, *Atti* Vol. I 521; Davoli, *Archeologia e Papiri* (above, n. 7) 14. Plates of and references in notes to Karanis (Caranis) appear in later editions of *SEHRE*, but there are no additions to the text. See, however, the references to the village, and to the Michigan excavations and their expectations, in *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford 1941) 260 (Karanis) ("We hope that the excavators of Karanis, where the largest quantities of such objects [sc. agricultural and industrial implements] have been found, will furnish a comprehensive comparative study and technical analysis of them"). 294 (Karanis) (pigeon houses), 360 (Caranis) (Michigan excavations and mapping the irrigation system), 361 (Caranis) (a Ptolemaic foundation), 908-9 (Karanis) (shrinkage of the village area in late Hellenistic times).


papyrus documentation just mentioned. Of the villages in question, Rostovtzeff's Philadelphia and Theadelphia, though productive of many papyri, are as archaeological sites relatively poor. Boak's Karanis, however, and a fourth village, Soknopaiou Nesos, are another matter. Besides having yielded papyri, they are significant archaeological sites, widely excavated, though incompletely published. And it is these last two villages that were reconsidered by Peter van Minnen in a 1995 article on "Deserted Villages: Two Late Antique Town Sites in Egypt." Van Minnen's approach was conditioned by recognition of the well-known phenomenon of deserted villages in medieval Europe and driven by the intention to evaluate the last days of Soknopaiou Nesos and Karanis through their archaeology as well as from their papyri.

The much simpler case was Soknopaiou Nesos. Located in the desert zone north of Lake Moeris, it was essentially an Egyptian temple village, "peripheral with respect to the fertile area of the Fayyûm" but associated with several villages in the Fayyûm's agricultural zone. It had little arable land of its own; to compensate, it depended on leasing arrangements for land in villages that did have access to irrigation. Its economy depended (further) on pastoralism, fishing, customs collections from desert caravans entering and leaving the Fayyûm, and the village temple economy. The se-
ries of excavated coins ends in the mid-150s (156/7, to be exact) in the reign of Antoninus Pius. The population, struck by plague, was significantly reduced by the early third century. But the plague, in van Minnen's view, did not finish the village off, nor did a shift in caravan routes, nor the demise of the temple's crocodile cult. Rather, Soknopaiou Nesos, so vulnerably situated, fell victim to a general failure of the irrigation regime of the northeast Fayyum. The lands upon which its survival depended fell out of cultivation. The last dated papyrus to mention Soknopaiou Nesos belongs to 239 A.D. The village was abandoned soon after. Significantly, the site has yielded no traces of Christianity. A late coin of Constans I dating to 305/6 was, according to van Minnen (42), "presumably dropped by a fourth-century visitor."

Clearly, Soknopaiou Nesos was a "rather unusual and isolated settlement," and obviously its end does not take us very far toward the Islamic period. With the village of Karanis, not too far east of Soknopaiou Nesos, our chances improve. To begin with, Karanis was larger and more diverse than Soknopaiou Nesos. It did not depend on temples for its livelihood; though near the end of the line, it did have access to the canal system. Boak's assessment of the village's fortunes has already been sketched. Van Minnen's analysis is more nuanced. Based on a table of surviving papyri, he concludes that Karanis, like Soknopaiou Nesos, suffered greatly in

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23 There is a late (sixth-century), dubious reference to "Nesos" (only) in SPP III 93.1. An interesting complication: P.Lond. II 322 of 214/5 (?) A.D. lists twelve inhabitants of Bacchias who had migrated to Soknopaiou Nesos because of the desertification of their own village. Cf. P.Fouad I 29 (224) for more of Bacchias' problems with its water supply (drinking water had to be fetched from distant springs).

24 Van Minnen, "Deserted Villages" (above, n. 18) 42, but see below, n. 50. Cf. R.A. Haatvedt, "IV. The Coins," in A.E.R. Boak (ed.), Soknopaiou Nesos: The University of Michigan Excavations at Dimē in 1931-32 (Ann Arbor 1935) 37-47: 95 coins were found in the Soknopaiou Nesos excavations, 53 of them in houses, 42 in the surface rubbish. The coin of Constans (Kelsey Museum inv. 40087) was among the latter. According to Haatvedt (38), it must have been "accidentally dropped by some visitor to the site, possibly a soldier or one of the desert guards." No signs of Christianity: E.E. Peterson and A.E.R. Boak, "Topography and Architecture," in Boak (ed.), Soknopaiou Nesos, 1-21, at 21.

25 Rathbone, "Surface Survey" (above, n. 8) 17.
the mid-third century, but, unlike Soknopaiou Nesos, was not ex¬
tinguished: it experienced instead a revival in the late third and 
early fourth century, "the effect of a deliberate resettlement of the 
site" (49). But the resuscitated village was a mere "shadow of its 
former self," a fact reflected in the archaeology of its domestic 
sphere, more restricted and impoverished than in earlier times. 
Nevertheless, the series of coins recovered from Karanis, consistent 
to the mid-fifth century, suggested yet another rebound in fortune. 
At the same time, however, a Copenhagen papyrus dated to 15 May 
439 (P.Haun. III 58) showed Karanis, now a Christian village with 
a clergy of two priests and five deacons, to be experiencing serious 
difficulties with its water supply: a village in deep trouble. Finally, 
van Minnen suggests, a difficult fifth-century Columbia papyrus 
(P.Col. VIII 242) points to Karanis' last days: only a few recalci-
trant inhabitants were left; the rest had gone. The documents fall 
silent. Karanis, like Soknopaiou Nesos, becomes history. The cul-
prit, once again: the failure of the irrigation regime in this part of 
the Fayyûm. In the course of his presentation, it must be remarked, 
vàn Minnen dismisses the dating of some Karanis pottery to later 
than the fifth century. Likewise deemed negligible are two late 
coins from the reigns of Justinian and Heraclius since these "fall 
out of the series and were presumably dropped by visitors to the 
already deserted site in the sixth and seventh centuries respec-
tively" (46). 27

This summary does scant justice to van Minnen's presentation. 
I limit myself to three remarks. (1) To van Minnen, the Karanis 
coin series, intact to the mid-fifth century, indicates a late resur-
gence of the village. Yet he also cites the Copenhagen papyrus of

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26 As re-edited and reinterpreted by J.R. Rea, "P.Col. VIII 242: Caranis in the 
Fifth Century," Proceedings of the XXth International Congress of Papyrology 
(Copenhagen 1994) 266-72. The text itself is difficult, but its lengthy and clumsy 
address is even more puzzling.

27 Kelsey Museum inv. 66889 and 66890, "surface finds from disturbed con-
texts (probably from the area to the south of the part of Karanis excavated in 
1928)." -Terry G. Wilfong (e-mail, 4 September 2002). These coins are numbers 
1744 (A.D. 539/40) and 1745 (Heraclius, without specific date) in Rolfe A. Haat-
vedt and Enoch E. Peterson, Coins from Karanis: The University of Michigan Ex-
439 as portraying Karanis, not necessarily "as a destitute and languishing community," merely one that was "much smaller than in earlier days" and "inexorably" (and very shortly, it seems) moving toward its end (50-2, at 52). (2) In a fresh look at the evidence, Nigel Pollard has argued that the pottery record, taken on its own, based on comparative typologies and imported wares, establishes that Karanis remained prosperous through the fifth century, surviving at least into the sixth. (3) The Copenhagen papyrus, acquired through the antiquities market and not from excavation, is in its own way almost as much a late stray as the coins of Justinian and Heraclius just mentioned. It may indeed show a village having troubles with access to water, but this kind of event may also be construed simply as an endemic phenomenon of the agricultural

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28 "The Chronology and Economic Condition of Late Roman Karanis: An Archaeological Reassessment," JARCE 35 (1998) 147-62, using the pottery housed in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology in Ann Arbor. The village was ultimately deserted, but one cannot say when (Pollard). Pollard, writing without reference to van Minnen's "Deserted Villages," is im Nutzen anticipated by Christina Grande, JRS 75 (1985) 284, in a succinct but penetrating review of L.A. Shier, Terracotta Lamps from Karanis (Ann Arbor 1978), e.g.: "[T]he excavators argued that occupation ended in the mid-fifth century A.D., but some of the lamps would appear to be more comfortably assigned on stylistic grounds to the next century, or, in some cases, possibly later still. Here, the dependence on an old excavation would seem to be inhibiting the objective dating of the lamps." Pollard (159-61) also reinterprets the coin evidence as presented by the excavators. Among other considerations, the series of Karanis coins is not continuous, but dominated by hoards of the late third and early fourth centuries (neither a sign of normal economic activity nor a measure of population, but probably indicative of "the general instability of the period"); for reasons having to do with the production of coinage in the fifth century, little fifth-century coinage was found at Karanis because very little reached the village from without. Likewise (161) the silence of the papyri, owing to the water table and the susceptibility of perishable materials to destruction, especially at the site's highest levels, cannot, according to Pollard, be taken as an argument for Karanis' fifth-century abandonment.

29 The papyrus came to Copenhagen in one of two lots bought with monies from the Carlsberg Foundation in the late 1920s and early 1930s, "apparently with the help of Fr. Zucker and W. Schubart" (http://www.igl.ku.dk/~bulow/PHaun.html). In the database of the Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis (http://aquila.papy.uni-heidelberg.de), the next oldest dated papyrus from Karanis is a fragmentary document of 21 December 381 (SB XXII 15798).
Moreover, in Danielle Bonneau's interpretation of the Copenhagen papyrus, Karanis in its supposed last days becomes a village represented not by two priests and five deacons, but by twelve priests and five deacons! This prompts Roger Bagnall to an amusing remark: "Karanis of the later fourth century," he once wrote, "gives the impression of a dying village, and it is scantily documented in the fifth century, but with seventeen clergy it had either managed a revival or supported too many clergy." Here, it seems, Bagnall sounds a note of mild perplexity while van Minnen is torn between a mid-fifth century Karanis that was both up and running and inexorably dying. Under present circumstances, Richard Alston's conclusion, that "we must suppose substantial occupation [sc. of Karanis] . . . to c. AD 500," affords a comfortable, but perhaps much too conservative a compromise. In any case, note

30 I borrow and adapt a phrase from Naphtali Lewis, Life in Egypt under Roman Rule (Oxford 1983) 121. This is essentially Pollard's take on the Copenhagen papyrus (above, n. 28, 148): "In fact, disputes over water rights are common in all societies depending on irrigated agriculture, prosperous or otherwise, and there is no reason to assume wider economic decline from this papyrus alone, if one reads it without the baggage of earlier work on Karanis." For a recent collection and discussion of Ptolemaic evidence on the subject, see Barbara Anagnostou-Canas, "Litiges en rapport avec l'eau dans l'Egypte ptolemäique," Atti Vol. I 41-9.


32 Which in itself causes a slight problem: "The village was still able to support two priests and five deacons; if the village had been very small it would have had only one priest." --van Minnen, "Deserted Villages" (above, n. 18) 51, using Rea's text and translation (preceding note).

33 Egypt in Late Antiquity (Princeton 1993) 283, cf. 284: "[T]his text gives a healthier impression of the village than its fourth-century documents." Cf., however, p. 111 (Karanis in "its final spasm of life" in the late third century). See also James G. Keenan, "Egypt," Chapter 21c in The Cambridge Ancient History XIV (2001) 612-37, at 619-20 (twelve priests and five deacons). Both Bagnall and I assume that each priest (if not each deacon) represents a separate church. This of course begs proof. Perhaps churches, even if small, had more than one priest.

34 Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt: A Social History (London 1995) 117-23, at 119, pointing to complications in the stratigraphy, the large number of
should be taken of BGU II 608, a list of names by villages, Karanis (in the genitive) in column 1, Stratonos in column 2, assigned by its editor to the Arab period. Nineteen male inhabitants of Karanis are listed (miscounted by the scribe as twenty). It is also likely that Karanis (as Καρανίς) should be restored in SPP X 67.2 (VII-VIII A.D.). Cf. SB I 5339.25.

Karanis therefore seems to have survived in some form into the early Islamic period, but if we wish to go deeper, we are going to have to look elsewhere, away from van Minnen's Soknopaiou Nesos and Karanis, to the Fayyum's deep south and the fabled site of Tebtunis, located near the modern village of Umm al-Burayga. Grenfell and Hunt excavated there, famously, in the winter of 1899-1900, concentrating on the human cemetery, the cemetery of sacred mummified crocodiles, and the Roman town—all rich in papyrus finds. Archaeologically the site was dominated by the Temple of Soknebtunis (the local variant of the crocodile god) with its processional way and adjacent dwellings. The combination of archaeology and the failure of dated textual finds after the 260s suggests the fourth- and fifth-century coins, and the Karanis glassware (mostly third century and later). Too conservative: see above and n. 28. See also Kathryn A. Bard (ed.), Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt (London-New York 1999) 308-13 ("Fayum, Graeco-Roman Sites"), at 310: "[T]he pottery from the site suggests continued (or renewed) habitation of the site well into the sixth and possibly seventh centuries before it was abandoned." —Terry G. Wilfong.

35 References to Tebtunis are rare in Greek papyri after the 260s. There are 21 possibly later references in the listing of A. Calderini and S. Daris, Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici dell' Egitto greco-romano IV, 4 (Milan 1986) 377-82, in six lines of text against nearly 150 lines of references for the preceding periods (beginning in 250 B.C.). These include P.Michael. 21 [if restored] (285), 22 (292), and 24 (296). Eight other documents from the earlier part of the late period (third-fourth century) are dated, by palaeography and context, only by century (seven to the third, one to the third/fourth century), and only one of the later references (fifth-eighth century) is dated by year. Thus the article on "Umm el-Barakât" in The Coptic Encyclopedia (vol. 7, 2289-91), published in 1991, is misleading when it identifies Tebtunis as a "site where numerous Ptolemaic to Byzantine papyri were found" (my stresses). Here the author seems to have been misled by one of his two bibliographic citations, the 1934 article by H. Kees in Paulys Realenzyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (VA, Pt. 2, 103), which in turn apparently relies on P.Tebt. I and II to prove that the site "bekannt geworden [ist] durch die dort 1899/1900 an Krokokdilmumien gefundenen Papyri aus frühptolemaischer bis byzantinischer Zeit." P.Tebt. I justifies Ptolemaic (al-
temple area had been abandoned in the third century, but Christian remains to the north of the ancient site proved a survival of the village in some form. A hypothetical solution may be found in the proposition, based on Greek papyrus evidence of the mid-sixth and early seventh centuries, that Tebtunis had, under Theodosius I (379-95) or Theodosius II (402-50), been rechristened Theodosiopolis and given juridical status as the capital city of a territory co-extensive with the old Polemon district of the Arsinoite nome. If this hypothesis is right, not only was Roman Tebtunis not abandoned, but it achieved even higher status as Byzantine Theodosiopolis.

Troublesome for the Theodosiopolis hypothesis, however, is the re-emergence of the village name Tebtunis, now spelled Teptunis, in documents, mainly village lists, dating to the seventh-eighth centuries. When the village, later still, makes its next significant appearance, it is not in Greek as Theodosiopolis or Teptunis, but, according to generally accepted probability, in Coptic as TOYTWN. The though the crocodile papyri are hardly early Ptolemaic); but the last securely dated Roman-period text in volume II dates to 265 A.D. (P.Tebt. 368)—not Byzantine by anybody’s standard; and nothing in P.Tebt. II derives from mummies.

36 Georgina Fantoni, CPR XIV (published in 1989) pp. 41-8. Of course, as Roger Bagnall points out (e-mail, 2 October 2002), this still leaves a considerable gap in Tebtunis’ history. The gap is somewhat mitigated by P.Prag. II 131 (455 A.D.), mentioning Psinteo of the Theodosiopolite nome (see lines 7-8 note). For other recent references, see CPR XXIV, esp. 27.10 note. It will be interesting to see whether recent excavations (see below) will lend support to the Fantoni hypothesis, which is based solely on documentary papyri. The relevant papyri, it should be noted, do not have Tebtunis as their provenance, but (probably) Kimân Fâris; see next note.

37 The several late documents that refer to Teptunis are unlikely to have been produced there; rather the majority (especially Wessely’s Vienna papyri in SPP III, X, and XX) likely come from one of the clandestine “Fayûm finds” (in 1877 and 1883: Davoli 150) in the ruins of Kimân Fâris northwest of Madinat al-Fayûm. In these Teptunis sometimes appears in lists along with other Fayûm villages (now called χωρία rather than κωμαί): SPP X 80, 108, 138, 158, 287v (in the Louvre), and X 239 = XX 229. The last, of the seventh-eighth century, preserves in cols. I–III an alphabetical list of villages beginning with nu and running through omega. Teptunis falls just a few lines after Tali (Arabic Talit), for which see below. In other words, these texts can hardly be proven to have Teptunis as their provenance.

38 For specifics on much of the Coptic and Arabic documentation and the basis for much of what follows: Sophia Björnesjö, “Toponymie de Tebtynis à l’époque
pertinent references come in the form of colophons to Coptic manuscripts written by scribes from Toutūn, commissioned for donation to distant monasteries. Dated by the era of the martyrs (284 A.D.), these range from 861/2 to 939/40, not counting a reader's note dated to 1014. In addition, there are plentiful Arabic references to Tutūn (طوطن) or its residents in papyrus and paper documents from the late ninth into the eleventh century. Toutūn/Tutūn then disappears from the documentary record, but it has served well here by translating us from ancient to medieval times.

39 The Monastery of Michael the Archangel in the Fayyūm (earlier) and the White Monastery of Apa Schenute at Sohāg (later on); references in next note.

40 A. van Lantschoot, Receuil des colophons des manuscrits chrétiens de l'Égypte, Vol. I, Les colophons coptes des manuscrits sahidiques. Bibliothèque du Muséon (Louvain 1929). XII (861/2), XIV (889/90), XIX (892/3), XXIII (894/5 or 897/8), XXXI (905/6), XLVI (903/4), XLVII (early X), L (913/4), LI (927/8), LII (between 923 and 933), LIII (939/40), LIV (939/40), LV (939/40) [and perhaps LVII (961/2)].

41 The Coptic Encyclopedia vol. 7, p. 2283 s.v. Tutūn (René-Georges Coquin), but cf. vol. 5, s.v. Monasteries of the Fayyum, 1650-1 (also by Coquin). The latter, on the basis of the colophons, seems to imply the existence of monastic scriptoria at Tutūn; the former settles for the probability of scriptoria that were "small family workshops or those of individual copyists." The main problem is our ignorance of the findspots of the relevant texts. If anything, context implies (based on the identity of the recipients of the donated manuscripts, see notes 39-40) that the provenance was not Tutūn even though the texts were probably written there.

42 See Bjöörnesjö and Timm (above, n. 38), cf., e.g., Raif Georges Khoury, Chrestomathie de papyrologie arabe (Leiden-New York-Köln 1993), nos. 27 (950), 53 (983), 47 (992), 57 (1004), 41 (1012/3), 54 (1014). See also Adolph Grohmann, "New Discoveries in Arabic Papyri: An Arabic Tax-Account Book (Inv. No. 400) Found in Umm el-Bureigāt (Tebtynis) in 1916," Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte 32 (1949-1950) 159-70, for early tenth-century papyri, Arabic and Coptic, found in a wooden box, including (p. 160) a letter mentioning Tutūn. See now also CPR XXI (= Gladys Frantz-Murphy, Arabic Agricultural Leases and Tax Receipts from Egypt, 148-427 A.H./765-1035 A.D. [Vienna 2001]), nos. 61 (872/3), 73 (901/2), and 80 (929/30)—all receipts for land-tax (kharāj).
As for medieval Tutūn's archaeological zone, it lies north, and northeast, of ancient Tebtunis. The main points of interest have been four churches. The first was excavated by Grenfell and Hunt in one week in December during their 1899-1900 fieldwork. They left no detailed account, but they did leave a notebook, with a record of inscriptions, and photographs. The church walls were decorated with frescoes, described by C.C. Walters in an article published in 1989. Some of the paintings had labels in Coptic, a couple had Arabic inscriptions. Walters was inclined to see the frescoed church as belonging to a monastic complex and the paintings as

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44 Discussed by Ian Begg in a paper, "The Churches of Tebtunis," delivered at the 53rd Annual Meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, Baltimore, 26-28 April 2002. There were three churches, instead of four, if Bagnani's painted church is the same as Grenfell and Hunt's; but this seems unlikely. For the Bagnani churches, see now Peter Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Section 1, vol. 62 (Leiden 2002) 423-7, with Abbildungen 45-7, apparently (423 n. 131) unaware of Walters' article (below, n. 46) on Grenfell and Hunt's painted church. See further below, n. 51.

45 For the history of excavations at Tebtunis, see the excellent account of Claudio Gallazzi and G. Hadji Minaglou, "Fouilles anciennes et nouvelles sur le site de Tebtynis," *BIFAO* 89 (1989) 179-91, highly informative for the depredations of the fellahin, throughout but especially on the Arab strata (see below). See also Davoli 179-211.

dating to the mid-tenth century. Crucial was the notebook transcript of a Coptic inscription dating to 953.  

Walters could in 1989 speak of a monastic complex because three churches, one of them with associated buildings, had been uncovered in the course of Italian excavations conducted from 1929 to 1936: two churches in 1931 (little time was apparently spent on these) and a third (the one with the well-known painting of Adam and Eve before and after the Fall) in 1933. The last church with "its conventual annex" was to a large extent built with materials taken from the Graeco-Roman ruins. The excavation’s field director,

47 Walters (preceding note) 205-8, assigning one of the paintings, however, to a bit later, the first half of the eleventh century. He also refers to the Arabic script on the painting of St. Theodore and another warrior-saint, concluding, "The forms of the letters would place them securely within the period AD 950-1050, and one might be tempted, given the evidence already adduced, to assign them to the earlier date." He alludes to evidence based on an artistic motif (the palmette) and the inexpert artistic style of the painting (like the painting of the Fall of Adam and Eve, also from Tebtunis but discovered in 1933, "dated variously to the tenth or eleventh centuries"). Of these last two arguments, the one based on the palmette, given the conservatism of artistic motifs and widely possible dates, is not very helpful. For a case in point, see Ulrike Horak, "Antike Mode auf Papyrus," Atti Vol. I 641-53, at 646: she considers a cluster of motifs on a fragmentary clavus (vol. III, Abb. XXXIc), previously dated to the ninth century, to be "etwas zu spät," proposing in its place a dating to the fifth-sixth century! The dating based on artistic style is circular.


49 Gilberto Bagnani, "Gli scavi di Tebtunis," Bollettino d'Arte 27 (1934) 119-34, with fig. 18; now on display in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. For supposed theological implications, see J. Jarry, "Reflexions sur la portée théologique d'une fresque d’Umm el-Baraqat (Tebtunis)," BIFAO 66 (1968) 139-42, refuted by J. Leroy, "La peinture murale chez les Coptes," MIFAO 94 (1975) at xvii n. 3 (non vidi).
Gilberto Bagnani, was inclined to see this church as dating from the fifth century, based on Coptic architectural remains (column capitals), and as part of a monastery that, based on dinars dating to the reign of Malik al-Kāmil (1218-38), survived to the fourteenth century.50

Bagnani’s painted church and one of the churches excavated in 1931 have apparently been rediscovered by the Franco-Italian team that has been working at Tebtunis since 1988.51 The expedition’s

50 "Gli scavi di Tebtunis," Aegyptus 14 (1934) 1-13, at 8. The current whereabouts of the coins, discovered by sebakhīn, are unknown. Note that, although the coins had no archaeological context (there is no hint they were discovered in or near the church), Bagnani treated them as integral to the dating of the monastery and throws in an extra century for good measure. This contravenes the usual assumptions, as conveyed by earlier remarks in this article on the late coins of Soknopaiou Nesos and Karanis. As my colleague Jacqueline Long advises me (e-mail, 17 July 2002), "Coins (and other oddments) that turn up in archaeological sites not fitting into a context that implies regular habitation are typically assumed to be later intrusions. . . . They are secluded "from the integral assessment of the site" and treated "as isolated objects." With respect to the villages mainly under discussion here, I find myself haunted by images of late "visitors" (joggers? campers? scavengers? squatters? brigands?) to deserted sites and wondering why they were so careless with their coins: did their purses have holes? I have myself visited a number of ancient sites, including Karanis and Tebtunis (but not Soknopaiou Nesos), without (so far as I know) dropping a single penny. Bagnani, in the article cited here (see also "Gli scavi," preceding note, 133-4, using Abu Salīh’s detailed description of the monastery at Qalāmūn), also argued that the Tebtunis monastery was identical with the storied and long-lived monastery of Samuel of Qalāmūn—but this is impossible, given the testimony of Arabic authors, including al-Nābulṣī, according to whom (TF 22) the Qalāmūn monastery was located in "the farthest of the districts [sc. of the Fayyum] near al-Bahnāsā." Other scholars (see Nabia Abbott, The Monasteries of the Fayyum [Chicago 1937] 43-5) place the monastery in the Wādī Mawālīh, southwest of the Wādī Rayyān, not exactly "near" al-Bahnāsā, but perhaps ever so vaguely in its general direction. For Bagnani’s conclusions based on pottery, see "Scoperte di ceramiche in Egitto," Faenza 21 (1933) 99-102. Though admitting the difficulties in dating pottery precisely, he holds that the pottery fragments ("clinkers"), both those seen on the antiquities market in Cairo and those found in medieval potteries set up in the ruins of ancient Tebtunis, prove the monastery thrived perhaps between the tenth and fourteenth century, with the piece illustrated in this article (tav. XVIII) coming from the end of that period (it is not clear whether this piece is from the excavations or the antiquities market).

main concerns seem to be the ancient temple complex and Roman-period houses, and the recovery of papyri, but attention has also been devoted to later strata. As the director has written: "Far more recent remains are . . . being revealed in the northern reaches of the kom, where buildings of Arabic date are being excavated. One belongs to the seventh or eighth century and was occupied until the end of the tenth century; an adjacent building is providing stratigraphy dating back to the ninth century, with an abundance of pottery of the Fatimid age, as well as papyri and papers with Arabic texts." A slightly earlier, but specific look at the late site by Roland-Pierre Gayraud mentions surface pottery and other finds of eighth-ninth century vintage, along with shards of the fifth-sixth century, establishing that there had probably been continuous habi-

published by Bagnani but aerial photographs taken by the Egyptian Air Force in 1934 and 1936 (not 1935, correction by Ian Begg, e-mail, 9 August 2002) can be found in the Bagnani archives at Trent University. Additional archival materials (Carlo Anti's) are in Padua and these, though not referenced, contributed relevant information for the three churches (labeled A, B, and C, with plans for A and C) that are at the core of the article in The Coptic Encyclopedia on Umm el-Barakāt (vol. 7, 2289-91) by Peter Grossmann. See now, with specifics as to sources, Grossmann, Christliche Architektur (above, n. 44) 424 nn. 132 ("Der von uns abgebildete Grundriss (Abb. 47) dieser Kirche [sc. Church C] wurde am Hand von [sc. published] Photographien erstellt, von den beiden übrigen Kirchen A und B fand ich im Instituto di Archeologia der Universitāt Padova . . . wenigstens ein paar Aufnahmeskizzen und Photographien") and 133 ("Der in Abb. 45 wiedergegebene Grundrisse [sc. of Church A] wurde auf der Grundlage einer mir dankenswerterweise von Professor L. Pollacco (Universitāt Padova) zur Verfügung gestellten Aufnahmeskizze und mehrerer Photographien erstellt"). Traces of Church B, according to Grossmann (424), are still visible on site.


tion from the Byzantine into the Islamic period. In Gayraud's assessment, the village remained important into the eighth-ninth century; it was occupied until the end of the tenth, the eleventh, or even the beginning of the twelfth.

Here it is most convenient to accept the eleventh-century date and to assume that Tebtunis/Tutūn made a radical move northward, some five km., to its present-day location. Now a large and important village, in al-Nābulūsī's day, in the mid-thirteenth century, it was small (TF 86). Nevertheless, al-Nābulūsī knew of a large village named Tutūn (تُطُن) that had been abandoned, and he clearly viewed the small village of his own day as a continuation of the deserted village under the same name. It is tempting, with Sophia Björnesjö, to associate the abandonment of Old Tutūn with the shift in location of the nearby village of Talīt four km. to the west—though Talīt's shift was not nearly as radical as Tutūn's. According to al-Nābulūsī (TF 18, 128), Talīt was a "new village with few inhabitants" rebuilt at the base of "the mountain" on which it had formerly been sited. The old village, "large and well-populated," had been abandoned "during the dearth of al-Mustānsir" and buried by the sands. The "dearth" here refers to the famine, and associated plague, of "the dreadful years 1063-1072," "a turning-point in the demographic history of Egypt." Al-Nābulūsī (TF 18, cf. 90) describes the relocations of other villages in similar terms—though without specific chronological associations with al-Mustansir's famine. Interestingly, a village named Tabā (تَبَّان), appearing in an

54 Above, n. 38. The village Talit, about to be discussed, is most commonly known as Tαλίτ in Greek papyrus documents starting in 250 B.C.: Calderini-Daris, Dizionario (above, n. 35) 343-4.

Arabic document dated to 1065 and located in the south Fayyum, is identified by al-Nābulṣī (TF 17: 485) as an abandoned village, but one that was not, like Tutūn and Talīt, rebuilt. It is tempting to link its demise with those of Old Talīt and Old Tutūn and to see all three as figuring in a rash of abandonments of south Fayyum villages in the late eleventh century.

But archaeological experience, specifically Dominic Rathbone's survey of this region suggests a more complicated picture, and, I think, the necessity of approaching the problem one village at a time. Rathbone sees various ancient villages in the south Fayyum's Gharaq basin as having been abandoned in the fourth-fifth century, reoccupied (on a smaller scale) in the sixth-seventh century, then fully deserted. Sites to the east, in the Tutūn basin, based on the dating of vitreous-glazed wares, survived at least to the eighth, and possibly into the eleventh century. Although the evidence is far from satisfactory, it nonetheless "shows [in Rathbone's words] that the contraction between the Roman and mediaeval periods was not a one-phase general process, but the eventual result of a cumulation of local problems of different date, probably caused by cases of failure, for whatever reasons, to maintain particular canals." Moreover, against the traditional belief in a general contraction of the Fayyum in late antiquity, based on the demise of some of the Fayyum's north-fringe villages, probably atypical of the Fayyum at large, we should place the longer-term resilience of villages in the far south.

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56 Khoury, Chrestomathie (above, n. 42) no. 75 with p. 135, note to line 3. Two fieldguards from Tabā reach agreement over pay for guarding land in the village of Ihrit. The latter village is presumably "the devastated Ihrit" in al-Nābulṣī's list of deserted villages along the Bahr Tanabtawayh (TF 17, and below, n. 59) rather than the mid-sized village of the same name two hours from Madinat al-Fayyum (TF 44-6). Tabā appears second in the list of twenty-one deserted villages, Ihrit, fifth.

57 Dominic Rathbone, "Surface Survey" (above n. 8) 17-8 (quote from 18).

58 "Although the traditional view, based on some sites in the northern corner of the Fayyum, is that irrigation and settlement contracted in Late Antiquity, before the Arab conquest, the picture at Kom Talīt, on the southern edge of the Fayyum, appears very different: the site was occupied from its apparent Ptolemaic foundation through to the eleventh century AD"—Christopher Kirby and Dominic Rathbone, "Kom Talīt: The Rise and Fall of a Greek Town in the Fayyum," Egyp-
In fact, there are in al- Nābulṣi’s TF many casual allusions to the decline and contraction of Fayyūm villages in the period before his survey. But from time to time al-Nābulṣi also points to positive developments. Most interesting is the case of Shana (TF 122), a large village in the far eastern Fayyūm (and somewhat north) that was in fact two villages: Old Shāna, located at the tail end of the mountain in the Fayyūm's depression, and New Shāna, in the depression north of the old village. It seems that part of Old Shāna's population had migrated, not from want, but for opportunity: namely, to occupy the neglected lands of al-Lawāṣī, a village on the Bahr Wardān, identified by al-Nābulṣi as having been abandoned (cf. TF 18) many years before his own time (TF 122).

An instance like this hints that the village topography of the Fayyūm was not static but shifting, and not always for the worse. This should be a caution to those who see the late antique Fayyūm only in terms of simple decline. As for comparisons, there is no compelling need to look to medieval Europe: al-Nābulṣi provides evidence, so to speak, right at home. The links between the Greek papyri and his survey are provided by Coptic and Arabic documents and by archaeology. As I hope to have shown, these sources make a continuous history of the Fayyūm from antiquity to the Middle

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59 And not so casual, especially in his lists of deserted villages along two of the major canals, the Bahr Tanbatawayh (twenty-one villages in all) and the Bahr Wardān (ten), at the end of TF Chapter 6 (17-8). These suggest a generally shrunken Fayyūm from that of antiquity. Nevertheless, like Talit, some of the deserted villages were rebuilt near their original locations, TF 17: Haddāda, Buljusūq, Umm al-Sibā‘, and Dumya (replaced by Bamūya)—all producing crops in al-Nābulṣi’s day.

60 E.g., a small village, an hour east of Madinat al-Fayyūm, Damwat al-Dāthr (TF 100), had been rebuilt after it had fallen into oblivion. The people of another village, Fānū (TF 133), left their native village, two hours north of Madinat al-Fayyūm, to be absorbed into the neighboring large village Naqalīfa. Another settlement, Haysha Dumūshiyya (TF 172), two hours south of Madinat al-Fayyūm, formerly a hamlet (minšiyya) known as Minshāṭ Rabī‘ (TF 19), had grown to become a small village (bulayda). More generally: TF 18 (villagers of currently inhabited villages working the land of abandoned villages).

61 Cf. Pesez and Le Roy Ladurie (above, n. 2).
Ages not only possible, but worth pursuing.\textsuperscript{62} On the human level, as Ian Begg has suggested to me, all this is probably yet another story about human adaptation to change for purposes of survival, whose protagonists, I would add, were people whose names we are unlikely ever to know.

\textit{Loyola University Chicago}

\textsuperscript{62} Banaji, \textit{Agrarian Change} (above, n. 6), esp. 176-80, 241-50 (= Appendix 3), is suggestive of what this work can be expected to accomplish.