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Recommended Citation

Keenan, JG. "Landscape and memory: al-Nabulsi's Ta'rikh al-Fayyum" in *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 42, 2005.

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Landscape and Memory: al-Nabulsi's *Ta'rikh al-Fayyum*

Toute profonde mutation de la méthodologie
historique s'accompagne d'une transformation
importante de la documentation.

—Jacques LeGoff, *Histoire et Mémoire*¹

ABSTRACT

Uthman b. Ibrahim al-Nabulsi composed his description of Egypt's Fayyum province in the 1240s A.D. His *Ta'rikh al-Fayyum* starts with nine summary chapters followed by a massive tenth chapter, a geographical gazetteer arranged alphabetically by villages. The text is predominately concerned with the author's present day, leaving no doubt the region's landscape had changed significantly since late antiquity. Almost all the village names were Arabic. The people had been Arabized—and Islamicized: only small Christian pockets remained. The sacred landscape had been correspondingly reconfigured. Additionally, the Fayyum, which had experienced a shrinkage of arable land and a loss of villages in late antiquity, had within more recent memory experienced further shrinkage. Most important, the villages on the Fayyum's fringes, the ones that had been abandoned in late antiquity and provided in the 19th and early 20th centuries an abundance of documentary papyri, were (almost) wholly forgotten.

Despite such unpromising premises, this article suggests by examples that the *Ta'rikh al-Fayyum* has much to offer the papyrologist, the archaeologist, and the ancient historian, respectively: a nearly full ecological and geographical template within which to set the ancient documentary evidence; a "virtual" tour of the whole province; and the chance to stretch the history of the pre-modern Fayyum another half millennium.

Uthman b. Ibrahim al-Nabulsi, whose text forms the basis of my article, composed his description of Egypt's Fayyum province in

¹ Éditions Gallimard, 1988, 337. cf. S. Randall and E. Claman, trans., *History and Memory* (New York 1992) 206.

the 1240s A.D. He had been assigned by the last Ayyubid sultan, al-Salih Ayyub (reigned 1240–1248), to make a fact-finding tour.² The goal was to reverse the province's declining productivity.

Al-Nabulsi's written report is conveniently referred to as *Ta'rikh al-Fayyum*. The author, so he tells us, aimed for accuracy and utility, eager that his reader would come away with a knowledge of the Fayyum equal to that of any native (*TF* 3–4). The work starts with nine relatively brief summary chapters. These are followed by a massive tenth chapter, in effect a geographical gazetteer of the whole province arranged alphabetically by villages. The usefulness of this arrangement for information retrieval is unfortunately compromised because (as usual) the alphabetization is by initial letter only and a disproportionate number of village names begin with alpha (largely because of the Arabic definite article) and mim (largely because of the word for hamlet or satellite village). The text itself is almost exclusively concerned with the author's present day, leaving no doubt in the mind of any student of the ancient Fayyum that its landscape had changed significantly since late antiquity. New to the region were cane fields, sugar mills, and water buffalo.³ Almost all the village and hamlet names had become Arabic (*TF* passim, but especially Chapter 7). The population itself had been Arabized, or perhaps more accurately "Bedouinized" (*TF* passim, but especially Chapter 5)—and Islamicized. The sacred landscape had been correspondingly reconfigured. Al-Nabulsi (*TF* Chapter 8) could count some 80 mosques scattered throughout the Fayyum, with a concentration of 31 in the provincial capital, Madinat al-Fayyum. Nevertheless, a few villages remained Christian, and thirteen monasteries remained active. These included the famous, but as yet unlocated, Monastery of Samuel of Qalamun and the monastery at Naqlun, still active today and the object of Polish excavation from 1986 to 1993.⁴ Twenty-five churches survived, but five of these were reportedly in unredeemable disrepair. Also note-

² B. Moritz (ed.), *Description du Fayoum au VII^{me} siècle de l'Hegire par Abou 'Osmân il Naboulsi il Safadi* (Cairo 1899). [Abbreviated in my text as *TF*.]

³ Cf. R.S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History* (London and New York 1995) 70–71.

⁴ See the forthcoming chapter on Naqlun in G. Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and Monasticism in the Fayyum Oasis* (Cairo).

worthy is that the Fayyum, which had experienced a shrinkage of arable land and attendant loss of villages in late antiquity, had within more recent memory experienced still further contraction. Some of this is probably to be associated with the famine and dearth in the latter half of the eleventh century during the difficult reign of the sultan al-Mustansir. Finally, and most importantly for present purposes, the villages on the Fayyum's fringes, the ones that had been abandoned in late antiquity and had contributed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to an "explosion" in the recovery of documentary papyri, were (almost) wholly forgotten in al-Nabulsi's day.

Accordingly, the prospects of applying al-Nabulsi's medieval document in any meaningful way to the ancient Fayyum seem bleak. Examination of any traditionally-compiled modern map of the ancient Fayyum,⁵ that is, one compiled by means of papyrology and archaeology, will show that it operates, as it must, from a perspective entirely the opposite of al-Nabulsi's: any such map will present a Fayyum with habitational sites plotted almost exclusively on its outer edges.⁶ The main part of the Fayyum's anciently inhabited environment will look very roughly like a triangle, with its apex in the south and its northern base receiving longitudinal definition from the slightly aslant east-west expanse of Lake Moeris.⁷ The map's interior, were it enlarged, would present the kind of blank space that would in his boyhood have entranced Marlow, the internal narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. You may

⁵ See now, however, K. Mueller, "Places and Spaces in the Themistou Meris (Fayum/Graeco-Roman Egypt): Locating Settlements by Multidimensional Scaling of Papyri," *Ancient Society* 33 (2003) 103–25; *eand.*, "Mastering Matrices and Clusters. Locating Graeco-Roman Settlements in the Meris of Herakleides (Fayum/Egypt) by Monte-Carlo-Simulation," *APF* 49 (2003) 218–54; K. Mueller and W. Lee, "From Mess to Matrix and Beyond: Estimating the Size of Settlements in the Ptolemaic Fayum/Egypt," *Journal of Archaeological Science* (forthcoming) (references thanks to T.M. Hickey and J.G. Manning).

⁶ See, for example, Fig. 5.1.1 ("The Fayyum") in R.S. Bagnall and D.W. Rathbone (eds.), *Egypt from Alexander to the Copts: An Archaeological and Historical Guide* (London 2004) 128.

⁷ For Lake Moeris as a misnomer of the Greek geographers, without authentication from Egyptian sources: K. Vandorpe, "The Henet of Moeris and the Ancient Administration of the Fayum in Two Parts," *APF* 50 (2004) 61–78.

recall the famous, or perhaps now infamous,⁸ passage where Marlow early on talks of having been a "little chap...with a passion for maps. I would," so he tells his listeners,

look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map . . . I would put my finger on it and say, "When I grow up I will go there."

There are nonetheless significant exceptions to the ancient Fayyum's interior cartographic blankness, the most significant being its capital city, Krokodilopolis, or Arsinoe. This place is so significant an exception that when I see a map of the ancient Fayyum I sense, whether right or wrong, a construction where the fringe villages look *inward* from the edges to their capital city.

Al-Nabulsi's conception of the Fayyum was much different. Whether he ever compiled a true map or not,⁹ he makes it clear that in his mind he pictured the Fayyum as a circular depression ringed by mountains (*TF* 5, 7), with Arsinoe's successor, Madinat al-Fayyum, at its notional center. He used this as his base of operations, living there, as he tells his readers, for over two months "in a high building with a spacious courtyard" (*TF* 8). In the year or so that he spent in the Fayyum it would seem difficult for him to have visited all the nearly 200 villages and hamlets he notes both within and outside of his alphabetical gazetteer; but he must have traveled quite a bit, on horseback, passing through and even stopping at many of them. At each stop he would (*TF* 3) observe the village's "layout" and "physical appearance," and establish, among other relevant concerns, its distance from Madinat al-Fayyum, and its location, in terms of travel time and compass point direction, thereby providing an alluring invitation to any scholar interested in using the medieval Fayyum as a laboratory for applying central place theory.¹⁰ On the basis of al-Nabulsi's distances and directions, it

⁸ Infamous because colonialist. See D. Wood, *The Power of Maps* (New York and London 1992) 44–45, quoting B. Harley's paper, "Victims of a Map."

⁹ Cf. R.J.A. Talbert, "Small-Town Sources of Geographic Information in the World of Imperial Rome," *CB* 80 (2004) 15–25, esp. 16, for the relationship between data collection (specifically Ptolemy's) and the *possibility* of map-making.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Alston, *The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt* (London and New York 2002) 349. Amenable to this approach in a small way would be al-Nabulsi's treatment of cane-producing villages and the center (Madinat al-Fayyum) and

would be possible to construct what our British colleagues (I am thinking here of Dominic Rathbone) would call a "tube map" of the Fayyum with its villages as stops of the Underground. No one, as far as I know, has tried this, the exercise seeming pointless because so many of the places named by al-Nabulsi survive today as active villages on or near the sites where they stood in the thirteenth century. As examples (three in place of many), I would cite Sinnuris, Itsa, and Biyahmu (discussed below). In any case, both my projected tube map and actual maps based on al-Nabulsi¹¹ would have disappointed young Marlow: their interiors are much too full. More to the point: it is only occasionally, and usually only at the outer edges of the Nabulsi map, that the medieval and ancient maps truly converge.

There are a number of leading examples. Of these it is best to start with the village of Talit in the far south Fayyum. This is a village that has not itself been the provenance of papyri, but it is well known for being mentioned in documents emanating from the nearby villages of Kerkeosiris, in the Ptolemaic period, and Tebutunis, in the Roman period. It is also named in late, that is, eighth-century, village lists in papyri from the rubbish mounds of Kiman Faris. These were papyri from the famous "First Fayyum Find" of 1877, the lion's share of which was acquired by Theodor Graf, eventually to become the basis for the Austrian National Library's collection. The village was never excavated; today it is mostly stripped, but its remains were surveyed under Dominic Rathbone's direction in July 1995.¹² The surveyed ancient village, with its rock-cut water channels, street grid, fractured millstones, and red-slip wares of the

sub-centers (especially Sinnuris and Damushiyya) to which they sent their cane for processing. See J.G. Keenan, "Egyptian Villages in the 13th Century: al-Nabulsi's *Tarikh al-Fayyum*," in C. Morrison and J.-P. Sodini (eds.), *Les Villages dans l'Empire byzantin IV^e-XV^e siècle*, Réalités byzantines 11 (Paris 2005) 567-76.

¹¹ I think specifically of the map that attends G. Salmon's "Répertoire géographique de la province du Fayyûm d'après le Kitâb Târîkh al-Fayyûm d'an-Nâboulsî," *BIFAO* 1 (1901) 29-77. See also A.S. Bey's map of the canal system: "Fayoum Irrigation as Described by Abu [sic] Nabulsi in 1245 A.D. with a Description of the Present System of Irrigation and a Note on Lake Moeris," *Bulletin de la Société Géographique d'Égypte* 20 (1940) 283-327.

¹² C. Kirby and D.W. Rathbone, "Kom Talit: The Rise and Fall of a Greek Town in the Fayoum," *Egyptian Archaeology* 8 (1996) 29-31.

fifth to the seventh centuries, is presumably the large village reported by al-Nabulsi (*TF* 128) to have been abandoned in the eleventh-century reign of al-Mustansir: it had been fully covered with sand, but new houses for a small village had been built at the edge of the fields of the ancient village. This is the village al-Nabulsi entered into his tax record.¹³

In al-Nabulsi's mode of reckoning, the new village of Talit was a half day's ride south of Madinat al-Fayyum. Its water was derived from the Bahr Tanabawayh, the medieval equivalent of the ancient Polemon Desert Canal. Villages along this canal had become vulnerable in the time before al-Nabulsi. In the latter half of his sixth chapter he lists twenty that had been abandoned within memory. These include, near the very end of the canal in the Fayyum's far northwest, Qasr Qarun, the ancient Dionysias, an important archaeological site¹⁴ and famous, though the papyri themselves were discovered elsewhere, as the ultimate source of the fourth-century archive of the military officer Flavius Abinnaeus.

Surviving into al-Nabulsi's time, also in the Tanabawayh canal system and not far from Talit, was a small village called Tutun. Al-Nabulsi, however, also knew of a village farther south that had itself once been called Tutun, but had come to be known as Tutun Da'rt—"Abandoned Tutun" (*TF* 86). Most scholars are inclined to accept the names of both villages as corruptions, apparent in both Coptic and Arabic documents, of the ancient Tebtunis, a legendary archaeological site ever since Grenfell and Hunt's excavations in the winter of 1899–1900.¹⁵ Al-Nabulsi presumably did not see the site of Tutun Da'rt, the ancient Tebtunis, but the new Tutun that continues in existence today and through which access is to be had to the site of Tebtunis several kilometers to the south near the modern village of Umm el-Buraygat.

¹³ This new Talit is recorded in cadasters of the 14th and 15th centuries before final abandonment: information supplied by L. Sundelin and reported in the Leuven database of Fayyum villages (<http://fayum.arts.kuleuven.ac.be>).

¹⁴ P. Davoli, *L'archeologia urbana nel Fayyum di età ellenistica e romana*, Missione Congiunta delle Università di Bologna e di Lecce in Egitto, Monografie 1 (Naples 1998) 301–23.

¹⁵ J.G. Keenan, "Deserted Villages: From the Ancient to the Medieval Fayyum," *BASP* 40 (2003) 119–39, at 129–37.

What al-Nabulsi would have seen there had he visited ancient Tebtunis, we do not know. Since al-Nabulsi was an administrator, on a mission from the sultan, laboring under constraints of time, a serious, even dour personality, he seems unlikely to have made unnecessary sidetrips as an archaeological tourist. He does, however, mention at the beginning of his fifth chapter the pyramid at Illahun because for him it marked the beginning of the string of hills that encircled the Fayyum and the recommended point of departure for anyone inclined to make the three-day trip along the rim of the mountains enclosing the province. Al-Nabulsi seems to have seen the pyramid personally, and seems also to have visited the village of Biahmu (*TF* 66) in the central Fayyum, an hour north (by his reckoning) of Madinat al-Fayyum. There, in the matter of course, he saw the colossal pedestal bases that are now known to have been for statues of the Middle Kingdom pharaoh Amenemhat III. Al-Nabulsi refers to them as "stone idols, very ancient, colossal," one facing west, the other south, both inscribed "with ancient writings like those one sees on the pyramids and temple ruins." It had been rumored that ancient treasure was concealed inside them; but certain curious treasure-seekers who had dismantled the tops of the monuments had come out empty-handed. There was, nevertheless, to the east of the two monuments a wide waterhole whose water had curative properties. According to al-Nabulsi—and this does have the ring of autopsy about it—people who came to Biahmu for cures threw carob pods, and myrtle, and dirhems (silver coins) into the waterhole, presumably for good luck.

These monuments of Biahmu, to quote and paraphrase selectively from a passage in Susan Alcock's *Archaeologies of the Greek Past*, were "set within a landscape," a term embracing the total physical environment, settlement patterns, holy places, fields, in fact, just about everything.¹⁶ And so Biahmu's noteworthy monu-

¹⁶ *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories* (Cambridge 2002) 30: "Monuments, of course, live within a wider matrix of human activity; they are set within a landscape. Landscape, a capacious and currently much utilized concept, contains a multitude of meanings, all of which revolve around human experience, perception and modification of the world. Landscape thus embraces the physical environment, patterns of settlement, boundaries and frontiers, fields, cities, natural features, monuments, pathways, holy places, wilderness, and much much more. . . ."

ments were set within the wider landscape of the village itself, which was, in other respects, a fairly typical Fayyum village. It was mid-sized and had a congregational mosque. Its people were descended from a branch of the great tribe of the Bani 'Ajlan. They drew their water from the channel of the Bahr Sinnuris that ran north out of Madinat al-Fayyum. Although the Fayyum was generally remarkable for its orchards, Biyahmu like most Fayyumi villages remained principally a producer of staple crops: wheat, barley, and fava beans. It did, nevertheless, also have vineyards and oliveyards besides plantings of slightly over thirty feddans in sugar cane. Again, as typical of Fayyum villages in antiquity and today, its agricultural economy was mixed with the pastoral: cattle, sheep and goats were part of the village's assessment for payment of the *zakat*, or alms tax.

Identified by Carl Wessely as the village that in Ptolemaic and Roman papyri went by the name Ἀνδριάντων κώμη,¹⁷ "The Village of Statues," Biyahmu clearly has an archaeological and documentary history, more discontinuous than full, that runs from at least Amenemhat III down to today. Its proximity to Madinat al-Fayyum, therefore in the Fayyum's interior, assured Biyahmu of a more dependable water supply; it ran fewer risks than the villages on the Fayyum's outer fringes. Thus it is no surprise to find Biyahmu listed with other Fayyum villages in papyri of the eighth century, in the early Islamic period, well after the Fayyum's supposed fourth-century eclipse. Most of these papyri are now to be found in the Vienna collection and derive from the first Fayyum find mentioned above. In these village lists Biyahmu is known, in Greek, as Πιαμούει.¹⁸ In the most complete of the alphabetical lists (*SPP* XX 229), which names 59 villages from the second half of the Greek alphabet, Piamouei appears with about a dozen other villages whose names can be traced back to antiquity and forward to al-Nabulsi

¹⁷ See A. Calderini and S. Daris, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici dell' Egitto greco-romano*, vol. I, part 2 (Madrid 1966) 33: 7 references from the 3rd century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D.

¹⁸ A. Calderini and S. Daris, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici dell' Egitto greco-romano*, vol. IV, part 2 (Milan 1984) 126: 8 references from the 7th–8th centuries.

and even to the Fayyum's modern set of place names.¹⁹ These village lists are unfortunately usually barren of incidental detail. They were probably for that reason, in addition to the earlier scholarly disdain for late-period papyri, generally ignored after their publication and close study by Carl Wessely in the early twentieth century. They have recently, so to speak, been "rediscovered" by Jairus Banaji and Federico Morelli,²⁰ who have made, respectively, important topographical observations and editorial corrections. More can be expected.

An extended treatment of the late Byzantine/early Islamic Fayyum, this much-neglected time and place, awaits its dedicated scholar. In the shorter term, the survival of identifiable and locatable Fayyum villages in the eighth-century papyri suggests, among other things, that scholarly impressions of the Fayyum's fourth-century eclipse, based on anecdotal evidence from places like Karanis and Theadelphia, may have been exaggerated. Al-Nabulsi adds yet another dimension to the broad demographic shape of the Fayyum. Besides recording or recalling several villages whose history is ancient, he leaves no doubt that villages were the atoms of the Fayyum's administrative structure and that there was a hierarchy of villages, ranging from the tiniest of hamlets to substantial villages with their own satellite villages and hamlets. He also shows that although villages in crisis had been abandoned, some villages, like Talit or Tutun, simply moved to more promising ground, that as some villages declined, others began to flourish. We must imagine a fluid rather than a static topography, in the medieval and, by retrojection, in the ancient Fayyum.²¹

Further, it is clear that the reconstruction of the history of the late Byzantine/early Islamic Fayyum must not rely solely on the documentary papyri or what can be derived from al-Nabulsi,

¹⁹ Discussed by me under the title "Fayyum Villages in *SPP* XX 229," at the XXIV International Congress of Papyrology in Helsinki, 1–7 August 2004; forthcoming in the *Congress Acta*.

²⁰ J. Banaji, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour and Aristocratic Dominance*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford 2001) 176–80 and 241–50 (= Appendix 3); F. Morelli, "I χωρία in α dell'Arsinoite. Le liste alfabetiche *SPP* X 37, 40, 81, 134, 135, 240 (= *SPP* XX 226), 265, 269, *P.Münch.* inv. 294, *P.Prag.* I 26," *ZPE* 149 (2004) 125–37.

²¹ Keenan, *op.cit.* (above, n. 15) 136–39.

whether in terms of data or the long view of Fayyumic history to which his text so immensely contributes. The old archaeology of Karanis needs to be reassessed for its chronological implications: as evidenced by late-dated pottery, terra-cottas, and two stray coins, the site of Karanis died off papyrologically well before it was archaeologically exhausted. (It is not alone in this regard.) Fortunately, the renewed and continuing excavations at Tebtunis have not ignored the site's Islamic remains, though the results published so far, archaeological and papyrological, have been limited.²² Finally, and I think most appropriately, a project whose beginnings I am sketching here provides an ideal opportunity to honor, though with a slight twist, Emily Vermeule's plea in her sprightly and provocative presidential address to the American Philological Association in December 1995,²³ an opportunity, that is, to join in harmony "the dirt and the word," archaeology, on the one hand, papyrology and al-Nabulsi, on the other.

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²² *Ibid.* for some details.

²³ E. Vermeule, "Archaeology and Philology: The Dirt and the Word," *TAPA* 126 (1996) 1–10. See further J. Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London 2001) with ample bibliography (128–41).