The Fayoum, the Seila Pyramid, Fag el-Gamous and its nearby cities: A Background

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chapter 1

Because the excavations discussed in this volume take place in the Fayoum, and cover a time period that spans from the Old Kingdom through the Byzantine era, many readers will find it helpful to understand the history, geography, and geology of the Fayoum. Here we provide a brief outline of those subjects. This is not intended to present new information or be a definitive discussion. Rather, it is aimed at contextualizing the rest of the material presented in this volume, and thus making all of its information more accessible. The Fag el-Gamous cemetery and the Seila Pyramid are located on the eastern edge of the Fayoum, just north of the center of the Fayoum’s north/south axis.

Anciently called the “Garden of Egypt,”¹ the Fayoum sits in a large natural depression west of the Nile Valley.² The depression is about 65 kilometers across and covers about 12,000 square


kilometers.³ While some refer to it as the largest oasis in the Western Desert,⁴ others protest that this is in fact a false classification because the Fayoum receives the majority of its water from the Nile and not an independent spring as with traditional oases.⁵ No matter how one wishes to classify this region of Egypt, it is an area of unique geography, vegetation, and wildlife, with a rich history and an abundance of archaeology.

[page 7]

The landforms of the Fayoum are shaped by recent extensional tectonic activity that formed the depression,⁶ and by sediment deposition associated with Lake Moeris, or Birket el-Qarun. Active faults bound the Fayoum and have caused earthquakes in the past that may have damaged some of the archeological sites in the region, such as the Seila Pyramid. Depositional features include three lake terraces: the first and highest is the el-Lahun-Hawara terrace; the second terrace exists at about modern sea level and contains cities such as Crocodilopolis (Modern Medinet el-Fayoum);⁷ the third, and lowest, of the terraces lies in the northern part of the depression and contains little known ancient settlement.⁸ This northern portion of the depression sits below sea

⁷ The modern Arabic name is Medinet el-Fayoum. The Greek name used in the Graeco-Roman era was Crocodilopolis. The Egyptian name was Shedet. In this paper we will use the name that matches the time period being spoken of.
level and is enclosed by a rocky limestone mountain range to the north. The northern Fayoum desert is also known for its Eocene and Oligocene fossil sites, which are some of the best preserved in the world. These fossils are often found in the stones in which tombs were cut.

In the northwest is Birket el-Qarun, meaning “The Lake of Horns,” also known as Lake Moeris. This is a large, brackish lake sitting in the lowest area of the Fayoum depression, about 44 meters below sea level. Today the lake takes up only about one-fifth of the Fayoum depression. The lake has diminished in size due to drier climates, but once filled most of the Fayoum depression. In the prehistoric era, the lake was fresh water and contained many fish. Until the building of the Aswan Dam, Lake Moeris’ level would fluctuate depending on the flooding of the Nile, evaporation, and silt build-up in canals. Today and in ancient times, Lake Moeris is


13 Baines, Cultural Atlas of Ancient Egypt, 131.


supplied with water by the Bahr Yusuf, or “the Henet of Moeris,” a canal branching away from
the Nile just north of Assiut, cutting through the ridge Gebel el-Naqulun that separates the
Fayoum from the Nile Valley. Entering the ridge at Lahun, it emerges near Hawara and
continues to Medinet el-Fayoum. Upon entering the depression, various canals take the water
from Bahr Yusuf throughout the Fayoum. In addition, there is evidence in the north of about
four basins and wadis that may have been filled with water when the lake was full and
overflowing, creating smaller lakes around which many Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic artifacts
have been found, and where it is clear the earliest agricultural communities in Egypt
developed. The domestication of animals took place here by the [page 9] mid 5th millennium

17 Gardner, “The Recent Geology and Neolithic Industry,” 301; Siliotti, The Fayoum and Wadi
El-Rayan, 4; Hewison, The Fayoum, 3; Derda, Arsinoites Nomos, 62; Belinda Bolliger, Scott
Forbes, Mary Halbmeyer, Janet Parker, and Michael Wall, eds., Egypt: Land and Lives of the
to Ancient Egypt, 19; Baines, Cultural Atlas of Ancient Egypt, 18.


19 Derda, Arsinoites Nomos, 10; Caton-Thompson and E. W. Gardner, “Recent Work on the
Problem of Lake Moeris,” The Geographical Journal 73/1 (1929): 27; Boak, “Irrigation and
Population,” 354.

20 Derda, Arsinoites Nomos, 10.

a Fayum Canal: The Henet of Moeris/Dioryx Kleonos/Bahr Wardan/Abdul Wahbi,” in
Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth International Congress of Papyrology, Ann Arbor 2007,
Traianos Gagos, ed. (Ann Arbor: Scholarly Publishing Office, The University of Michigan,
2010), 365-376.


23 Annelies Koopman, Sjoerd Kluiving, Willeke Wendrich, Simon Holdaway, “Late Quaternary
Climate Change and Egypt’s Earliest Pre-Pharaonic Farmers, Fayum Basin, Egypt,” in Landscape
Archaeology. Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Berlin, 6th – 8th June 2012,
Wiebke Bebermeier, Robert Hebenstreit, Elke Kaiser, Jan Krause, eds. (Berlin: Exzellenzcluster,
stratified settlement sites at Kom K and Kom W: Fifth millennium BCE radiocarbon ages for the
Fayum Neolithic,” Nuclear Instruments and Methods in Physics Research B 268 (2010): 999-
1002.
While it is clear that changing lake levels affected these early civilizations, we are still in the process of refining exactly how and when.

The geography changes towards the south where there are basins associated with the Fayoum, but of different origin. The Gharaq Basin in the southern area of the Fayoum is separated by a ridge, but was likely formed by a different body of water independent of Lake Moeris. To the south-west of the Fayoum, also separated by a ridge from both the Fayoum depression and the Gharaq basin, is Wadi el-Rayyan. This area consists of two lakes—an upper lake called Qaret el-Buqairat, and a lower lake called El Midauwara—which were artificially created in the 1960s and 1970s when the Aswan Dam caused Lake Moeris to overflow. In addition, there are four springs south of Wadi el-Rayyan, which along with its lakes, provide water to this area.

The eastern edge of the Fayoum is where the Seila Pyramid and Fag el-Gamous cemetery are located. The eastern border of this area is known as Gebel el-Rus, the ridge on which the Seila


27 Beadnell, The Topography and Geology, 16-23.


Pyramid sits. This ridge exposes Tertiary rocks and is about 8 square kilometers in size. This escarpment rises [page 10] from 20 m above sea level to 125 m at its highest point. It shows Eocene and Pliocene strata. Gebel el-Rus exhibits “an angular unconformity between Eocene and Pliocene beds, Pliocene paleochannels filled with debris-flow deposits, a variety of sedimentary structures, trace follis, and distinctive faunas.” Water was carried to the area by a large canal that branched off the main water vein feeding the Fayoum. During the Ptolemaic era this canal was known as the “Canal of Kleon” in Greek. In Demotic, the Egyptian writing system most common at that time, it seems to have just been referred to as “the canal” (t3 hnt). In the Medieval Period it would come to be known by the name it still carries: “bahr Wardan,” also sometimes called the “bahr Abdallah Wahbi,” though in truth the Bahr Wahbi really refers to the modern canal that parallels the ancient canal, often running in exactly the same course. Before receiving the name Bahr Wahbi, a moniker that it received from the name of the engineer who plotted out the course of the modern re-digging of the canal, the ancient canal was often called Bahr Seilah. It is this ancient branch that fed the areas around the cemetery in antiquity and continues to do so today, though it was re-dug and rerouted somewhat in the early 20th century. It continues to be dredged and cemented even today. This canal forms the western

31 Ibid., 61
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 62
35 Ibid., 368. This is also sometimes called Bahr Wadan.
38 Ibid., 369.
39 Personal observation. 2013 is when we observed new dredging and cementing in of portions of the canal. The work has continued until the time of writing this, in 2018.
boundary of the cemetery. The arable land was west and downhill of the canal, where irrigation happened most easily. The land uphill from the canal, where irrigation would require pumping, remained barren and was reserved for the use of the dead.

Due to the abundance of water and the milder climate (compared to the Nile Valley), the Fayoum was and is lush in vegetation, home to a variety of animals and birds, and the only substantial area of farmland outside of the Nile Valley.40 Anciently, many plants and crops were grown in its fertile soil including grapes, olives, figs, wheat, barley, flax, onions, sesame, indigo, cabbage, sugar cane, and turnips.41 Along with its agricultural resources, the Fayoum [page 11] also contains quarries, such as those for limestone, which were used in at least the construction of the Seila pyramid,42 basalt, mined at Widan el-Faras during the Old Kingdom,43 and gypsum, mined at the quarries of Umm es-Sawan.44

Early on, before Egypt’s pharaohs began construction here, the Fayoum was a lush marshland,45 experiencing great fluctuations in lake level.46 Archaeology in this specific area suggests this

41 Hewison, The Fayoum, 18.
46 Wenke, “Epipaleolithic and Neolithic Subsistence and Settlement,” 34.
region has been inhabited since Paleolithic and Neolithic times, though evidence is limited. In fact, the Fayoum contains some of the earliest known Neolithic sites in Egypt. In general, these settlements and sites have been grouped into Fayoum A and Fayoum B (also referred to as Qarunian). Fayoum B or Qarunian sites, which are often dated to around the 7th to 8th millennia BC, have been unearthed north and west of the modern lake. Evidence suggests that these groups were hunter-gatherers, moving around the lake, relying on the natural resources of the oasis. Caton-Thompson dated these sites to the Mesolithic; however, often they are assigned to the Epipaleolithic phase.

Fayoum A, or Faiyumian, flourished around the lake during the Neolithic period, though the exact dates are debated. In general, these suggested dates are somewhere around the 6th to 5th millennia BC. Sites for this period have been discovered along the north and north-eastern ancient shorelines of Lake Moeris.

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It appears that the level of the lake rose during the Old Kingdom and then again during the Middle Kingdom, and finally began declining during the Ptolemaic era until it reached its modern size.  

Many have believed that in the Old Kingdom, the area was used mostly by royal members of society as hunting and fishing grounds and as a source of natural resources.  

It is true that there were lush marshlands that quickly became associated with the crocodile god Sobek, remaining the center of his worship into the Roman era.  

Undoubtedly the area around the Seila Pyramid was once more of an aquatic environment. Seashells are found in the sand deposits, and elderly farmers recount finding crocodile bones when they plowed their fields.  

Additionally, many hold that there were not any large permanent settlements in the Fayoum until the Middle Kingdom. This seems to be an increasingly inaccurate and less accepted view.  

What we do know of the use of the Fayoum during the Old Kingdom is largely from its northern areas. The Seila Pyramid and nearby cemetery (just north of the center of the Fayoum, on its eastern side), the temple at Qasr el-Sagha (though its date is [page 13] debated, is surely no later than the

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57 Personal communication with the local inhabitants in February, 2018.

58 Wenke, “Epipaleolithic and Neolithic Subsistence and Settlement,” 47.


60 Caton-Thompson, “Recent Work on the Problem of Lake Moeris,” 42.
Middle Kingdom), and tombs at Kom Ruqqaia, mines at Widan el-Faras (along with its quarry road and quarrymen’s camp), and Shedet (or Crocodilopolis, the cult center of Sobek worship), and an early Old Kingdom settlement near Kom Umm al-Atl (also known as Bacchias) all date to this period. It appears that there were at least three power centers in the Fayoum during the Old Kingdom, namely Shedet, Seila, and Birket Qarun. Ćwiek marshals evidence including archaeological structures, cemeteries, quarries, and titles of officials in order to demonstrate that the Fayoum was a larger and more important center during the Old Kingdom than has been previously thought.

It was during this era, at the dawn of the Fourth Dynasty, that the Seila Pyramid was built by Snefru. The discovery of this pyramid and the identification of its owner has been part of what has caused some to believe that the Fayoum was of greater importance during the Old Kingdom than was originally thought. Additionally, Grenfell and Hunt found a small Old Kingdom cemetery near the village of Seila (not far from the pyramid), and two small Old Kingdom

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64 Caton-Thompson, *The Desert Fayum*, 101.


67 See Ćwiek, “Fayum in the Old Kingdom,” 17.

statues were found near the pyramid, or perhaps in the cemetery.\textsuperscript{69} [page 14] Yoyotte postulated that the area near Seila had become an important administrative mirror to the Meidum area.\textsuperscript{70}

Dreyer and Kaiser concluded that it had become a seat of royal power and administration.\textsuperscript{71} They were followed in this conclusion by Stadelmann\textsuperscript{72} and then Ćwiek.\textsuperscript{73} Ćwiek later argued that Seila may have been \textit{the} administrative capital of the Fayoum at the time that region was growing in population and importance.\textsuperscript{74} Zecchi points out that the statues of officials found near

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ludwig Borchardt, \textit{Statuen und Statuetten von Königen und Privatleuten im Museum von Kairo, Nr. 1-1294, Teil 1. Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire.} (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1911), 6-7, plate 2, and Figures 5 and 6. Borchardt does not give anything for the provenance other than “Sile.” Andrzej Ćwiek, “Date and Function of the So-Called Minor Step Pyramids,” \textit{Göttinger Miszellen} 162 (1998): 43 fn 24, stated that these statues came from a cemetery rather than the pyramid. For this he cited Grenfell and Hunt’s report of work in 1900-1901. See Grenfell and Hunt, "Graeco-Roman Branch: Excavations in the Fayum," in \textit{Archaeological Report: 1900-1901}, F. Ll. Griffith, ed. (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1901), 4-7. However, the cemetery he spoke of was reported in Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, “Graeco-Roman Branch: Excavations in the Fayum and at El Hibeh,” in \textit{Archaeological Report: 1901-1902}, 2-5. While Grenfell and Hunt speak of finding a cemetery there they felt came from the Old Kingdom, they do not speak of any finds in the report, nor anywhere else we have searched in their records. They do not record anything about finding these two statues. Therefore we conclude it is best to rely on Borchardt’s publication saying these were from Seila, possibly from the cemetery, though they could also have been from the pyramid, which is where Borchardt worked. It is worth noting that in another publication, See Andrzej Ćwiek, “Fayum in the Old Kingdom,” \textit{Göttinger Miszellen} 160 (1997): 21, Ćwiek says that the statues “may come” from the necropolis. The exact location of the Seila necropolis cannot currently be identified.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Jean Yoyotte, “Études Géographiques,” 98.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ćwiek, “Fayum in the Old Kingdom,” 21.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ćwiek, “Date and Function of the So-Called Minor Step Pyramids,” 42.
\end{itemize}
the Seila Pyramid indicate that there must have been a somewhat regular presence of officials in the area, meaning that the area was a large enough administrative center to host royal representatives.75 One would presume that for agriculture and population, and even the building of a pyramid, to succeed, that Bahr Seila, known from Ptolemaic times, would already have existed by the Fourth Dynasty. It is not possible to tell if this is the case, but it seems an inevitable conclusion based on the needs for water.

Barta believes that the substantial population center at Seila would have helped supply the manpower for building both the Meidum and Seila Pyramids,76 which are 10 km apart. He also suggests that the shape and location of the Meidum cemetery indicate a close connection with the nearby Gerza cemetery (in the Fayoum), because they stretch towards each other. The Gerza cemetery was in turn associated with an old and traditional trade route that connected the Nile Valley to the Fayoum.77 This road runs right through the Fag el-Gamous cemetery and just below the Seila Pyramid, coming almost to the town of Seila (it may have come to it in earlier eras).

In some ways, the geography of the area dictates that the Seila area would have been an important part of the Fayoum. It is on the eastern-most edge of the Fayoum, meaning that it is closer to the Nile Valley than anywhere else in the Fayoum. Any road that cut across the desert from the Nile Valley in this eastern-most area would have run into the Gebel el-Rus ridge, whose extremely steep hills would have barred passage. The ridge suddenly ends just north of Seila, at the exact place the canal bends towards the east for a short distance. This is exactly where a road coming from the Nile Valley area of Meidum would enter the Fayoum, making this road the most direct route between the fertile depression and the concentration of population and culture that was next to the Nile. The Seila Pyramid sits at the southern and eastern end of the ridge, looking down on where the ancient road would have run and intersected with the canal. The need for transportation and trade, the ability to guard the way in and out of the Fayoum, and the ability


76 Barta, “Location of the Old Kingdom Pyramids,” 182.

77 Ibid.
to control and tax trade at such a transportation bottleneck, almost demanded that the Seila area become an important center. In many ways the Seila area was the gateway to the Fayoum, and the pyramid sat astride that entrance.

The Fag el-Gamous cemetery derives its name from the descendant of such a road. Literally meaning “the way of the water buffalo,” the cemetery was so named because in more modern times the Fayoum was connected to the Nile Valley railroad tracks by an overland road on which water buffalo and other goods traveled. Geography dictated the road be located here, just as we have noted it would have in the past. Such a road combined with a canal (Bahr Seila) that was part of a larger canal system would create a transportation nexus that may partially explain why Seila seems to have become something of a population center in the Old Kingdom, and would be part of why the Seila Pyramid would have been built there, though surely there were other reasons as well. The inhabitants of Seila would have been able to support the cultic functions of the pyramid, though the priests themselves may have lived in the foothills near the pyramid rather than in the village itself. This depends somewhat on [page 16] the frequency of the rituals that were performed at the pyramid. If weekly rituals, something unusual, were performed, then perhaps priests could travel from the village to the pyramid to perform the rituals. If daily rituals occurred, it is unlikely that the priests would have traveled such a distance. To date, searches for domestic structures for priests near the pyramid have not been fruitful.

Dreyer and Kaiser concluded that royal residences must have been near the minor pyramids, including Seila in that conclusion. Ćwiek postulates the same thing. He does so based on the

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78 See the two articles on the pyramid in this volume for more on these cultic activities. Also see Kerry Muhlestein, “Transitions in Pyramid Orientation: new evidence from the Seila Pyramid,” Studien zur Altagyptischen Kultur, 44/1 (2015): 249-258, tables 37-38.


80 See the article on ritual objects at the Seila Pyramid found in this article.


82 Ćwiek, “Fayum in the Old Kingdom,” 21; Ćwiek, “Date and Function of the So-Called Minor Step Pyramids,” 44.
idea that the king would have had such a residence near all of his pyramids. This does not make it clear whether the residence demanded a pyramid be built, or vice versa. Additionally, we are not convinced that the Seila Pyramid is fully similar to the minor step pyramids, though it is often included as one of them.\textsuperscript{83} Even if it is essentially different from minor step pyramids, that does not mean it did not hold important things in common with them, such as being in administrative centers and near royal residences. Furthermore, it makes some sense that the king would take some personal interest in a project as large as building a pyramid, even one that was only eight stories tall, such as the Seila Pyramid. It follows that his personal attention would be best accommodated if there were some kind of royal residence nearby. Still, the most we can really say is that the town of Seila seems to have been substantial during the Fourth Dynasty, being large enough to support the building and maintenance of a pyramid and its cult, and that it certainly received royal attention and visits, with perhaps a royal residence being constructed there.

It is clear that there is much more to be learned about the history of the Fayoum during the Old Kingdom, particularly in the Fourth Dynasty. Further studies of cemeteries, titles and histories from the Old Kingdom, archaeological work in places such as Seila, and administrative texts are necessary to better flesh out the roles and activities of the Fayoum during this era. It is also clear that the Seila pyramid both informs and is informed by our understanding of the Fayoum and Meidum areas during this era.

In the Middle Kingdom the Fayoum witnessed more extensive growth and development. Pharaohs of the 12\textsuperscript{th} Dynasty began major construction projects [page 17] in the area, which included land reclamation and water control.\textsuperscript{84} Amenemhat I began efforts to cultivate and control water flow in the Fayoum, even moving the capital closer to the Fayoum at Amenemhat-

\textsuperscript{83} See the article on the excavation of the Seila Pyramid in this volume.
ity-tawy, probably near Lisht. He may have built flood gates near Lahun. This focus on the Fayoum reached new heights during the reign of Senusret II (son of Amenemhat II). In order to control the waters of Lake Moeris, Senusret II implemented a new irrigation system, including a dam and canals, thereby lowering the water levels and creating cultivatable land in the rich soil revealed by the receding shoreline. Senusret II even built his own pyramid at Lahun. It may also have been during his reign that the temple at Qasr es-Sagha in the northeastern part of the Fayoum was built. However some argue that this temple was built in the Old Kingdom and was maintained throughout the Middle Kingdom, a view supported by Caton-Thompson and Gardner. Amenemhat III built his second pyramid at Hawara along with a mortuary temple called the “labyrinth” by Herodotus, and two 18 m tall statues. Amenemhat III also appears to have lead a land reclamation and irrigation project in the area to provide large amounts of land for agricultural use. He was even worshipped later as the god of the Fayoum, Poremanres.

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88 Caton-Thompson, “Recent Work on the Problem of Lake Moeris,” 43.

89 Callender, “The Middle Kingdom Renaissance,” 164.

90 Caton-Thompson, “Recent Work on the Problem of Lake Moeris,” 45-46.

91 Caton-Thompson, “Recent Work on the Problem of Lake Moeris,” 43-44.


Evidence for occupation and activity during the Second Intermediate Period is limited, but there are three small cemeteries—Maiyana, Abusir el-Melek, and Gurob—near the entrance to the oasis that contain burials dated to this time.94

There is little Fayoumic evidence from the New Kingdom or Late Period. A site just north and east of Harageh (near el-Lahun) near the cemetery at Gurob, seems to have been founded in the 18th Dynasty and lasted until the 23rd. It was about 200 meters square.95 Little else is known from in the Fayoum from these dynasties. Towards the end of the 23rd Dynasty and just afterwards, as early as the 7th or 8th centuries BC, land in Egypt, including in the Fayoum, was granted to Greek and Macedonian veterans as a reward for successful military service,96 though, as will be noted below, this practice greatly increased in the Ptolemaic era. Both Herodotus (ca 484-425 BC) and Strabo (ca 63 BC – 24 AD) visited the Fayoum and wrote highly of its natural resources and prosperity, indicating that it was flourishing before, during, and after the Ptolemy.97 In addition, hundreds of papyri fragments have been discovered in the Fayoum from these eras.98 In fact, it has been suggested that nearly one third of the documentation amassed for Egypt was discovered in the Fayoum.99

The Ptolemaic and Roman periods saw great improvements in irrigation and agriculture in the Fayoum.100 Land grants in the region increased at this time, especially during the rule of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (ca 284 – 246 BC) who promoted policies designed to enhance Greek


95 Reginald Engelbach, Harageh (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1923) 17-18; Lane, Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum, 15-16.


98 Lane, Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum, 17.

99 Derda, Arsinoites Nomos, 7.

100 Lane, Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum, 18.
colonization and reclaim more land for arable use. The Fayoumic lands given to soldiers by Ptolemy II and his successors created a population boom and an area of great ethnic diversity. Ptolemy II also renamed the area, calling it the Arsinoite Nome after his sister Arsinoe II. Due to a need for more cultivatable land, he reduced the size of Lake Moeris, and witnessed dramatic increases in agricultural production. Such projects to reclaim and maintain land for cultivation continued throughout the reign of the Ptolemies and during this time the amount of land used for cultivation reached its peak. The Fayoum became one of Egypt’s most prosperous and populated areas. As a result, many people migrated to the lush Fayoum depression, including Syrians, Jews, Persians, Greeks, Macedonians, and Samaritans.

During this time the settlement of the Fayoum reached its greatest height both in terms of population and agricultural output. For example, just before the Ptolemaic expansion, Fayoum population is estimated to be 60-80 people per square kilometer. By the Roman era the towns of the Fayoum had about 120 people per square km. Many of the known cities in the Fayoum


were founded or expanded during the Ptolemaic period,\textsuperscript{110} including Karanis, Philadelphia, Bacchias, Philoteris, and Dionysias.\textsuperscript{111} After a small decline near the end of the reign of the Ptolemies, the Fayoum once again became a point of interest and prosperity under the Romans,\textsuperscript{112} as is seen in the revival of Karanis during this period.\textsuperscript{113} During its time under Roman rule, the Fayoum became a considerable source of grain for the empire.\textsuperscript{114} However, it appears that many (possibly all) of the towns and cities established or flourishing during this era were in serious decline or even abandoned by the 4\textsuperscript{th} or 5\textsuperscript{th} century AD.\textsuperscript{115} These include Karanis,\textsuperscript{116} Bacchias,\textsuperscript{117} Dimayh,\textsuperscript{118} Tebtunis,\textsuperscript{119} Philadelphia,\textsuperscript{120} Theadelphia,\textsuperscript{121} and


\textsuperscript{112} Boak, “Irrigation and Population,” 362.

\textsuperscript{113} Gazda, \textit{Karanis}, 9.

\textsuperscript{114} Derda, \textit{Arsinoites Nomos}, 281.


\textsuperscript{117} Lane, \textit{Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum}, 50; Hewison, \textit{The Fayoum}, 21, 96.


\textsuperscript{119} Lane, \textit{Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum}, 80; Hewison, \textit{The Fayoum}, 21.

\textsuperscript{120} Hewison, \textit{The Fayoum}, 21.

Dionysias.\textsuperscript{122} The ruins of Crocodilopolis, the cult center of Sobek which was often the capital of the Fayoum,\textsuperscript{123} are spread over four square kilometers from this time period. Among the predominately Graeco-Roman ruins lie a Middle Kingdom temple.\textsuperscript{124} Karanis (Kom Aushim),\textsuperscript{125} which lies on the northern edge of the Fayoum, was one of the largest cities in the Fayoum during the Graeco-Roman period\textsuperscript{126} and contains two temples dedicated to various forms of the crocodile god.\textsuperscript{127} Bacchias (Kom Umm al-Atl) is the site of a Graeco-Roman village, including a temple to Sobek, that flourished during the 3rd century AD.\textsuperscript{128} Tebtunis (Umm al-Burigat) is another of the Fayoum’s largest sites.\textsuperscript{129} Dionysias (Qasr Qarun) contains two temples from the Late Period and was the starting point of an ancient caravan route.\textsuperscript{130}

The Fayoum continued to be inhabited into the Byzantine period, when there were about 198 towns and 300,000 people living in the region.\textsuperscript{131} It was an important populated area in early Islamic Egypt as well.\textsuperscript{132} It is during the pre-Islamic eras that the cities and villages whose citizens were buried in the Fag el-Gamous cemetery flourished.

\textsuperscript{122} Hewison, \textit{The Fayoum}, 21.


\textsuperscript{124} Murnane, \textit{The Penguin Guide to Ancient Egypt}, 185.


\textsuperscript{128} Hewison, \textit{The Fayoum}, 69, 95-96; Lane, \textit{Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum}, 50.

\textsuperscript{129} Lane, \textit{Guide to the Antiquities of the Fayyum}, 80; Hewison, \textit{The Fayoum}, 69, 83-86.

\textsuperscript{130} Murnane, \textit{The Penguin Guide to Ancient Egypt}, 185.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{132} Wenke, “The Fayyum Archaeological Project,” 25.
There were a few villages near Fag el-Gamous. Their inhabitants must have been the primary users of the huge necropolis. Tanis, also known as Manashinshana (also referred to as Kom 2 by Petrie), was the closest settlement. Seila lies due east of the southern edge of the cemetery, and further south lies Bandiq. Somewhere close to these sites, but with a location not fully identified, was Alabanthis. Even further south is Hawara. Not far to the north is Philadelphia with Roda and Farqus further to the west. As was noted above, this area was partially settled by mercenaries. The presence of axe wounds on several Fag el-Gamous skeletal remains accords with the idea of a mercenary population within the cemetery. Such a population would have inhabited the region with diverse ethnic backgrounds. In some measure this accounts for the full range of hair color encountered in the cemetery and indicates that the cemetery probably has a multi-racial population. Philadelphia and Tanis are the two closest settlements to the cemetery, with Seila being nearly as close. Unfortunately, we know little about the Graeco-Roman settlement there, though it seems to have borne the same name. Thus Seila may have been an ancient contributor to the cemetery as well, but if so we are hampered in our ability to use textual evidence about that site.

133 On the identification of these locales, see the article on Mummy Portraits in this volume. It is not universally agreed that these are the same sites. For example, Kraemer, “The Meandering Identity of a Fayum Canal,” figure 1, lists Manashinshana and Tel Shinshana as different sites.


135 www.trismegistos.org/place/2108
We assume this area was similar to the rest of the Fayoum in that the majority of land was owned privately rather than by temples or the state. At the same time, there was probably a higher proportion of public land in the Fayoum than elsewhere in Egypt, and this public land was likely more communal than in the rest of Egypt on the whole. All the towns and villages near the Fag el-Gamous cemetery were serviced by and made fertile because of the nearby canal, Canal Kleon (Bahr Wardan/Bahr Seila). Tanis was close to the incoming water source, and Philadelphia received its water from Tanis. Besides the importance of the canal, Philadelphia and the nearby villages Tanis and Seila were important locations because of their position by the main road that led from the Nile Valley to the Fayoum. This is the same route that made Seila an important center in the Old Kingdom. This vital artery of travel gave life to the towns and villages on the eastern edge of the Fayoum, and the death of their inhabitants created the Fag el-Gamous cemetery.

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137 Ibid., 180-83 and 186.

138 Ibid.
As was noted above, the inhabitants of Seila were probably buried at the Fag el-Gamous cemetery. Yet we know so little of Seila from this time period. Its name is attested in Greek and Demotic in papyri from the 1st century BC through the 8th century AD. Still all these references tell us is that it was a village (*epoikion; chorion*), in the *meris* of Herakleides, and that it was considered to be under the jurisdiction of the undertaker’s guild that was centered in that *meris*. Thus our discussion will focus on what we learn about the inhabitants of the cemetery from the population centers of Tanis and Philadelphia.

As we try to paint a picture of the settlements whose inhabitants were interred at Fag el-Gamous, some attention can be paid to changes over time, but for the most part our evidence for each era is so fragmentary that we may gain [page 23] a better overall picture by assuming that if some industries or establishments were present at one time, they were likely present for much of the life of the town or village. While this creates a picture with only broad brush strokes, such a picture can give an impressionistic view of life that is useful.

Tanis is attested in papyri from the mid 3rd century BC to the 7th or 8th century AD. The inhabitants of Tanis were known as Tanitai. We know that at least some of them were given land in Tanis as a reward for their military service in Memphis. Residents of a village like

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Tanis would likely have been preponderantly farmers, with many of them farming communal public lands (such as lands owned by the state or temples) as divided out by village elders. Often this took the shape of lands farmed by groups of families working together. Such farmers were thought of as rent paying tenants. Some leased lands in both Tanis and Philadelphia. Payments were sometimes, perhaps often, made in harvest of grain rather than monetary reimbursement.

We know from the Zenon papyri cache, found in nearby Philadelphia, that a number of inhabitants of Tanis leased land for agricultural use that was administered by inhabitants of Philadelphia. This is not surprising since Tanis fell under Philadelphia’s administrative jurisdiction, and many administrators and wealthy landholders resided there. During the Roman era the area was known for its vineyards, suggesting that many of the villagers would have been involved in viticulture. Fruit and olive trees were also cultivated there in at least some periods. The presence of an oil seller suggests that at least some of the olives were used to create oil locally. Today the area produces wheat abundantly.

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143 Monson, “Communal Agriculture in the Ptolemaic and Roman Fayyum,” 183.


146 See in Katelijn Vandorpe, Willy Clarysse, and Herbert Verreth, Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum, Collectanea Hellenistica – KVAB, VI (Peeters: Leuven, 2015), 162-63.

147 Ibid.


149 Caton-Thompson, “Recent Work on the Problem of Lake Moeris,” 49.


that mentions a tax on [page 24] grain,\textsuperscript{153} along with the presence of barley in some of the ancient tombs,\textsuperscript{154} suggests that village inhabitants would have also been involved in harvesting barley. At least some of this came from royal lands.\textsuperscript{155} The high quality and quantity of textiles found in the cemetery\textsuperscript{156} also suggests that the weaving industry may have been an important part of the local economy. Spinning seems to have been solely performed by women,\textsuperscript{157} and weaving was almost the same way.\textsuperscript{158} Splicing and spinning flax roughens the skin, and thus a number of women in the area probably had very rough hands.\textsuperscript{159} Papyrological evidence also indicates that there were shops and shopkeepers in Tanis,\textsuperscript{160} such as some who sold soup.\textsuperscript{161} There was also a bathhouse.\textsuperscript{162} There were professional dancers and those who employed them.\textsuperscript{163}

By the Roman period there was a high number of soldiers, including some from the cavalry, many of them having Roman names. Yet there were also a number of inhabitants with Egyptian


\textsuperscript{154} See the botanical report in this volume.

\textsuperscript{155} SB IV 7474 and http://www.trismegistos.org/fayum/fayum2/2251.php?geo_id=2251

\textsuperscript{156} See the article on textiles and jewelry as well as the article on the death of common people in this volume.


\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 116.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 115.

\textsuperscript{160} P. Cairo Zen. III 59450. See also http://www.trismegistos.org/fayum/fayum2/2251.php?geo_id=2251

\textsuperscript{161} http://www.trismegistos.org/fayum/fayum2/2251.php?geo_id=2251

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
names.164 At least one priest lived in the village,165 and possibly more when considering the fact that the neighboring town of Philadelphia had at least eleven operating temples within its borders.

Villages typically consisted mostly of houses made of sun-dried mudbrick.166 In Tanis there were probably also granaries and wine presses, and perhaps even buildings committed to weaving, though this may have taken place largely in houses and their courtyards instead. Homes typically had their own grinding stones. Most rural villages of the day also had dovecotes.167 It is very likely that the villagers engaged in other kinds of animal husbandry. Pigs, cows, and sheep are specifically mentioned in papyri.168 Based on pottery found at the cemetery it is likely that besides having access to professionally made ceramic vessels made in a pottery factory we know existed in the village,169 some villagers were seemingly very adept at making their own local variations as well.170 They clearly also accessed jewelry made of metal, ceramics, glass and shells. Some of these items seem to have been locally made.171 Villagers were also engaged in quarrying and brickmaking,172 with at least some of the bricks making their way into the

164 Ibid.

165 P. Bodl. I 150


167 Ibid., 113.


169 Ibid.

170 See the article on pottery with kill holes in this volume.

171 See the article on textiles and jewelry in this volume.

cemetery. Furniture in the village was probably made of wood. Based on finds from the cemetery we assume tunics were commonly worn and at least a number of women used wooden or ivory/bone hairpins in their hair.

Life in Tanis would have centered on families. Based on the demographics of the cemetery, Tanis and its surrounding villages probably experienced a juvenile mortality rate of about 33%, which means that their children had about twice as much chance of surviving to adulthood as did most children in Egypt. While we do not know why this is the case, it is probably at least partially due to the quality and quantity of food available in the highly arable land in which they lived and grew crops.

Philadelphia (Kom el-Hammam) was the largest nearby town to the Fag el-Gamous cemetery. At its height it was just under 120 people per square kilometer, making it about as densely populated as Theadelphia and Karanis, two of the larger towns of the Fayoum, though considerably smaller than Arsinoe. Estimations place the size of the city at 60

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174 R. Paul and Kerry Muhlestein, “Death of a Child: The Demographic and Preparation Trends of Child Burials in the Greco-Roman Fayoum of Egypt,” in Lesly Beaumont, Matthew Dillon, and Nicola Harrington, eds. Handbook of Children of Antiquity (Routledge, forthcoming). While paleodemographic studies have limitations that mean the demographic results are always tentative, this is equally, perhaps more, true for papyrological demographic studies. Thus it is worth comparing and contrasting the results of such studies.

175 For more on Philadelphia, see John Gee in this volume.


177 Bagnal, Egypt in Late Antiquity, 111.
hectares at its height. It was at various times described as a *kome* (town) or *polis* (city), even with neighborhoods (*vici*) within its precincts.

It has its own sizable necropolis nearby, and is often thought to have also used Rubayyat as a necropolis, where many mummy portraits were discovered. Thus, Fag el-Gamous may not have received many burials from this population center, though the fact that Fag el-Gamous is larger than the necropolis of this, the largest town in the area, suggests that perhaps some residents of Philadelphia may have used Fag el-Gamous for their interment. In fact, the northern end of Fag el-Gamous is just as close to Philadelphia as is Rubayyat, possibly signifying that the residents of this city may very well have used both cemeteries, perhaps being a major contributor to the large cemetery population. This idea is somewhat strengthened by the fact that for a substantial period of time the rights for embalming and burying the people of Tanis were owned by people who lived in Philadelphia. Furthermore, while both Tanis and Philadelphia were inhabited throughout the Ptolemaic period, very few burials in Fag el-Gamous come from that era. One thing that may account for this is the theory that the cemeteries often associated with Philadelphia were filling up by the Roman era and they had to expand into Fag el-Gamous. All things considered, the likelihood that many Philadelphia inhabitants were buried at Fag el-Gamous makes it worth trying to extrapolate information from Philadelphia as we try to understand the growth of Fag el-Gamous and the lives of those who rest in death within it.

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181 Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, *Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum*, 432.

As with Seila, there are geographical reasons for the settlement of Philadelphia. It too sat at the place where the local hills first allowed access from the Nile Valley to the depression of the Fayoum and a canal system. Thus, Philadelphia sat ideally positioned to aid in trade, to protect the Fayoum, and to collect taxes and distribute goods.\textsuperscript{183} Being near an existing canal allowed inhabitants \cite{Marouard1926} to take advantage of both a venue for transportation and to properly exploit the fertile possibilities of the area.

Large amounts of papyri have been unearthed from the town, as have wax tablets and ostraca.\textsuperscript{184} Combining that with papyri found elsewhere that mention the city allows us to say that the town seems to have been founded and settled early in the Ptolemaic era,\textsuperscript{185} and flourished at least from the middle of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century BC until end of the 4\textsuperscript{th} century AD.\textsuperscript{186} The establishment of a military fortress at the beginning of the 4\textsuperscript{th} century indicates it was still flourishing then, but the end of the use of that fortress about 100 years later suggests that the heyday of Philadelphia was ending.\textsuperscript{187} Other records mention the town until the 8\textsuperscript{th} century AD, though the last few centuries were probably a slow decline after the area had steeply descended from its apex, reached just before the time of Hadrian.\textsuperscript{188} This larger span roughly matches the dates of the burials at Fag el-Gamous.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{183} This conclusion was independently reached by Marouard, “Completamente distrutte,” 122, 146.
\item\textsuperscript{184} P. Viereck and F. Zucker, \textit{Papyri, Ostraka und Wachstafeln aus Philadelphia im Fayûm}, Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden, VII (Berlin, 1926).
\item\textsuperscript{185} Probably during the reign of Ptolemy II. See Marouard, 121-22.
\item\textsuperscript{186} See the article on Philadelphia in this volume.
\item\textsuperscript{187} Marouard, “Completamente distrutte,” 147.
\item\textsuperscript{188} See the article on Philadelphia in this volume; also Marouard, “Completamente distrutte,” 122-123.
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The city began as a place for settling mercenaries,\textsuperscript{189} a pattern which continued to fuel its growth for some time.\textsuperscript{190} Throughout its history many of its inhabitants had some kind of military connection.\textsuperscript{191} It was one of three Fayoum towns that had a large military fortress built in it at the beginning of the 4\textsuperscript{th} century AD,\textsuperscript{192} ensuring a renewed military growth during that time period. The military background and ensuing sudden, imposed settlement could account for the town’s orderly grid layout.\textsuperscript{193} It is worth noting that though the first inhabitants were foreign mercenaries, the houses seem to be a syncretic combination of Greek and Egyptian styles.\textsuperscript{194}

In the middle of the first century AD the town had about 1000 tax paying inhabitants.\textsuperscript{195} There were very low Nile floods in AD 45 and 47, which was [page 28] probably a major contributor to about a ten year economic decline during which time its tax collectors were consistently unable to bring in the taxes they were supposed to.\textsuperscript{196} Eventually the town started to flourish again. It became a large and densely populated center.\textsuperscript{197} Besides numerous temples, it contained buildings such as a theater, a \textit{stoa}, a gymnasium and a palace.\textsuperscript{198} The use of the surrounding

\textsuperscript{189} Marouard, “Completamente distrutte,” 146.

\textsuperscript{190} Bagnall, \textit{Egypt in Late Antiquity}, 111, and footnote 8.

\textsuperscript{191} Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, \textit{Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum}, 239-40; Marouard, 146-47.

\textsuperscript{192} Marouard, “Completamente distrutte,” 146.

\textsuperscript{193} See the article on Philadelphia in this volume. Also, P. Viereck, \textit{Philadelphia: die Gründung einer hellenistischen Militärkolonie in Ägypten}.

\textsuperscript{194} Marouard, “Completamente distrutte,” 123.

\textsuperscript{195} Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, \textit{Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum}, 257.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{197} See the article on Philadelphia in this volume.

\textsuperscript{198} Willy Clarysse and Katelijn Vandorpe, \textit{Zenon, un homme d’affaires grec à l’ombre des pyramides} (Leuven: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 1995), 51.
lands includes fields of sesame and *kiki* (castor),\(^{199}\) orchards, vineyards, fields of grain, fields of legumes, and houses for raising pigeons,\(^{200}\) as well as raising other kinds of animals, including at least donkeys, sheep and pigs.\(^{201}\) Of course these activities would give rise to merchants who sold this kind of produce.\(^{202}\) Moreover we know that a group of at least 80 weavers found the city of Philadelphia an attractive place to live,\(^{203}\) which is interesting given the number of high quality textiles found in the cemetery.

It is clear that there was a multi-national presence in Philadelphia.\(^{204}\) This is also true of the villages nearby, such as Tanis and Alabandhis.\(^{205}\) Some of the diversity in the area was due to the number of veterans who had settled in the area. For example, we know that for at least a time a group of Arab bowmen lived in Philadelphia, as well as Syrian cavalrymen.\(^{206}\) Intermarriages, both between racial backgrounds and between varying social classes, occurred.\(^{207}\) Many inhabitants were Roman citizens.\(^{208}\) At least some of the inhabitants that were not native to Egypt took up Egyptian religious practices to some degree.\(^{209}\) The multitude of temples in the

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200 Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, *Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum*, 238, 240.

201 Ibid., 240-45, 257.

202 For example, we know of wine merchants in Philadelphia. See Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, *Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum*, 408.


204 See Muhlestein and Innes, “Synagogues and Cemeteries,” 55.

205 Ibid., 56.

206 Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, *Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum*, 241, 244.

207 Ibid., 244.


209 Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, *Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum*, 364.
city suggests that in the pre-Christian era there would have been many priests, and we know the names of some who held hereditary priestly offices. At least one temple was dedicated to Hathor, and another to Anubis, whose temple collected payments from citizens who wished to receive services from that god. There was also an Isieion and a Sarapieion that were connected by a processional route, along with temples to other deities in the Egyptian pantheon and to Ptolemy II and Arsinoe. Presumably as Christianity became more and more accepted by the inhabitants of the area there would have been Christian ecclesiastical leaders as well. There was at least one sizable police station that kept good records.

Philadelphia was the administrative center for the area. Many of its residents owned considerable land holdings which they rented to farmers in the surrounding villages. Some leased public land in order to sub-lease it to others. They also rented land for grazing to those who owned the flocks and herds of Tanis, as was mentioned above. There was also royal land attached to the town, with men from as far away as the Memphite nome overseeing groups who farmed that land. Additionally, land owners from places like Antinoopolis and Ptolemais Euergetis

210 See Ibid., 181-82.

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid., 364.


214 For more on the temples, see the article on Philadelphia in this volume.

215 Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum, 322.


217 Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum, 408.

218 Ibid.

219 Ibid., 184-85.
appointed residents of Philadelphia to be agents for them in renting out their land for grain, palm or olive harvests.\footnote{Ibid., 204-05.}

Some who lived in Philadelphia owned shops in the nearby villages.\footnote{\url{http://www.trismegistos.org/fayum/fayum2/2251.php?geo_id=2251}.} Within the town we know of people who owned what seem to be commercial mills.\footnote{See P. Graux II; P. Michigan XII; P. Wisc. II; all as summarized in Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, \textit{Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum}, 80.} There were people of considerable means within the city. One example would be Aurelius Ol, who leased several sizable fields from the village leaders who made the land available to him because those who had been using it could no longer pay their taxes. Ol also loaned people money and had more than 50 sheep and goats.\footnote{See P. Gen I 12, 66-70, as summarized in Vandorpe, Clarysse, and Verreth, \textit{Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum}, 97-98.} Another example is found in Flavius Abinnaeus, a [page 30] Syrian who was probably a Christian and who became the commander of the fortress of Dionysias and who married Nonna, a citizen of Alexandria. They owned property in Alexandria that they leased to others. They also owned property and resided in Philadelphia, where they managed land on which they grew wheat. They owned slaves and had relations with people in Philadelphia, Alexandria, and Hermopolis.\footnote{Clarysse, and Verreth, \textit{Graeco-Roman Archives from the Fayum}, 138-142.} The Zenon papyri reveal the workings of a different very large estate that oversaw considerable lands and the construction of many buildings.\footnote{Rostovtzeff, \textit{A Large Estate in Egypt}.} As part of this it was also involved in creating canal and irrigation systems and dykes.\footnote{Ibid., 57-59.} The estate included a palatial house, a court, gardens, stables for cattle, store-houses, space for servants and employees, wine cellars, baths, and more.\footnote{Ibid., 69-70.} It probably also included elements other estates in the city had, such
as olive and wine presses, stables for horses, a bakery, and a large kitchen. Its holdings included goats, horses, cattle, and the growing of olives, grain, sesame, nut trees, and vineyards.

The surface ruins of Philadelphia contain a number of visible granite and basalt features, indicating a degree of prosperity in the city. Based on a surface survey of pottery, and a brief initial comparison of pottery from the various parts of the city, the area near the canal seems to have been a wealthier area than other parts of the city. The city also seems to have contained industrial elements, as indicated by what seem to be the remains of a lime smelting kiln. In other words, Philadelphia was a city of inhabitants from a variety of cultures, classes, and vocations. This diverse group of people potentially represent a range of possible inhabitants of the Fag el-Gamous cemetery.

Philadelphia, Tanis, and all the surrounding area went into decline in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, and largely disappear in the 7th and 8th centuries. At least some of the reason for this decline was likely the silting up and other damage to the Bahr Seila, which was the agricultural lifeblood for the communities of the northeast Fayoum. Still, no one fully understands the reasons for the steady shrinking of the Fayoum economy and population. Unsurprisingly, the Fag el-Gamous cemetery discontinues at about the same time as the nearby villages and towns also fell out of use. As the villages passed from use they also passed from history. Their stories lie largely untold, buried beneath the sand of the cities and cemeteries.

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228 Ibid., 70.

229 Ibid., 57-70.


231 Ibid.