
Stéphane Pradines, Aga Khan University, Stephane.Pradines@aku.edu

This publication of a PhD thesis is divided into three main parts, all very equally-balanced. The first part of the book is devoted to geography. The chapter entitled “Imagining the Nile” describes the sources and methodology used by the author. According to Greek and Roman geographers, the pre-Islamic Nile Delta gives us a good overview of the spirit of the time and the construction of knowledge on the western and eastern delta during the Islamic era. The author explores the main Arabic sources which have been edited and most of which have been translated (pp. 22–26 and pp. 377–389). He integrates the knowledge of ancient geographers and the Arab primary sources to produce an “easy to read” cartography which is published in the appendices (pp. 263–322).

For this historical cartography, Cooper elected to present the sites and the branches of the Nile in the form of tube lines and stations. These diagrams are the colour plates A1.1 to A1.8. Although they are indeed extremely easy to read, they bear little resemblance to the spirit of the medieval cartographers and I prefer the other black and white plates, A1.9 to A1.35, in the Human Geography section. I also think that geography should remain “human”... Although the geographic reconstructions are very useful, the only problem is that the book is quite small and you do need to have good eyesight to be able to read the names of the sites on the maps. Another Appendix is the Gazetteer of Delta place names mentioned by Ibn Hawqal and al-Idrisi. This database is clearly essential for future surveys for the author or other archaeologists.

It is impossible to write about the Nile without mentioning the canals and irrigation system. All the branches of the Nile, whether they still exist or have disappeared, were explored by Cooper, and the western and eastern delta are explored and described meticulously (pp. 43–99). One of the most famous canals in Cairo was the Khalij Amir al-Muʾminin that connects the Nile and the Red sea, which was probably controlled by Fort Babylon built by the Roman Emperor Trajan and most probably reused by the Umayyads. Two pages are devoted to Bahr Yusuf, the important canal that connects the Nile and the Fayum oasis. Cooper gives us some useful information about this connection but it was not necessary to devote a whole chapter to it. Finally, one of the most important topics of this first part is the changing configuration of the Nile Delta waterways and the shifting course of the Nile. One of the best examples of this is the appearance and disappearance of archaeological sites, such as Tinnis.

The second part of the book focuses on the people, as well as on the navigation, of the Nile. It is a really innovative attempt to understand how people travelled and

Keywords: Nile, river, Egypt, navigation, boat
used the Nile River in medieval Egypt. The chapter on the Nile flood cycle is a precise study of the annual flood cycle. Since the Pharaonic and Roman periods, the flood levels were calculated and estimated using the Nilometer in Aswan and the Medieval Nilometer in Rhoda. Cooper shows us that it was not so easy to navigate on the Nile. Propulsion was dependent upon the wind, currents and human labour. It was extremely important to take into consideration the local hazards such as river mouths and sea currents, sandbanks, cataracts and mountains. The chapter on Nile journey times is very interesting for an understanding of how people thought about travel and also to locate archaeological sites according to distance and time travelled.

There is some information on navigation in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (pp. 167–186). The link between the Red Sea and the Nile should be explored in depth with some maps of the Wadi Araba, Wadi Halfa, Wadi Halaqi... It would also be interesting to talk about the Darb al-Arbain that I refer to as the “invisible Nile,” another way to travel and trade with the Sudan and Sub-Saharan Africa.

As noted by the author, very little is known about the medieval boats themselves. Copper forgot to refer to a recent attempt to deal with this topic by Empereur in the Hairy’s book on the Water (Hairy 2011) and the discoveries by JM Mouton in Qalat al-Guindi and Coptic boats used during the Ayyubid period (Mouton et al. 2005). Underwater archaeology on the Nile was almost non-existent for the medieval period despite a few attempts in Luxor and Aswan during the final years. I would guess that Cooper’s training at Southampton will push him in this direction in the near future.

The third part of the book is devoted to ports and the navigational landscape.1 It is a selection of major river ports and sea ports. This part describes archaeological and historical sites. It is probably the weakest part of the publication. There is absolutely no data on the Middle Valley and almost nothing on Upper Egypt. What about the major harbours of Qus (Garcin 2005) and Aswan?

In the chapter on Cairo, there is an interesting discussion about how to control the trade in Cairo by means of obstructing the river by a bridge made of boats. However, we have very little information on the Cairo ports. The ports of Al-Fustát and Cairo are not really described, despite a discussion on the new Mamluk harbour of Bulaq. What about the history and location of the Abbasid, Tulunid, Fatimid and Ayyubid harbours? As was mentioned for Late Antiquity and the Fort of Babylon, Cairo should be seen as a strategic point not only in the Nile trade system but also in the defence of Egypt. Except for the boats’ pontoon, there is no mention of the military aspect of the Nile in Cairo and no description of the famous arsenals (Pradines 2015). The shift of the Nile bed has an influence on all the urbanisation in Cairo, as is shown ion the map of the Nile banks (p. 189), originally published by Casanova (Casanova 1897). There is absolutely no mention of the location of the medieval harbours, despite the abundance of literature concerning the river and the capital city.

The chapters on the ports of the western and eastern delta are the best. I would like to see more plans for each site discussed, as was the case for Tinnis for example. There is a little mistake about the al-Tina mouth on the map (p. 210) which was most

---

1. The general map of the medieval ports of Egypt (p. 188) should be attached to the previous chapter, the Part 3 introduction.
probably located closer to the west of the Tina site. In my opinion the author did not go to the site before he published his book. If he had, he would have seen that the settlement is built to the west of the fort and so the mouth should be located further west (Pradines 2016).

The chapter on the Ports of the Red Sea has an excellent description of the al-Qolzum harbour (pp. 230–237). However, the remainder of the chapter is very disappointing. The book is full of maps but there is a dearth of iconography devoted to the ports themselves and we have to question why no plan exists of Quseir al-Qadim and Aydhab. With regards to Quseir, it is very surprising that there is no reference to the major work carried out by Donald Whitcomb (Whitcomb and Johnson 1982, 1979; Whitcomb 1996).

This book should really be entitled “The Medieval Nile Delta” as this is the main topic of this publication. As mentioned by Cooper, almost nothing has really been done on the Nile Delta since Omar Toussoun’s monograph in 1922 (Toussoun 1922). This is not an archaeological publication but rather a source book and an essential historical study for archaeologists who work in the Delta. The data presented here is not only of interest to the medievalists but also to all specialists of Egyptian history. The book is more about the navigation, the Nile branches and canals than about trade or military issues, which are under-explored. The best parts of the book are the first and second parts, on geography and navigation. There is a need for a deeper investigation into the trade and traders on the Nile, especially in Aswan, Qus, Cairo and Alexandria. The only mention is just a few pages on storerooms (pp. 201–203). Some chapters are very short, especially the one on Cairo. Upper Egypt is almost non-existent in this study. We cannot blame the author for not covering the whole Nile as he had a huge amount of data to deal with and he explored an underestimated field of research. John Cooper is the specialist in the medieval Nile as his knowledge of the topic extends beyond the Nile Delta and probably offers some new avenues for future research.

References

Casanova, Paul.

Garcin, J.-C.

Hairy, Isabelle.


Pradines, S.


Toussoun (Prince Omar).
Whitcomb, D.  
Whitcomb, D. and J. Johnson.  