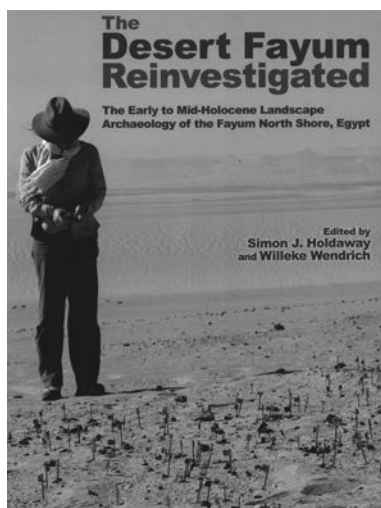


The Desert Fayum Reinvestigated: The Early to Mid-Holocene Landscape Archaeology of the Fayum North Shore, Egypt

Simon J. Holdaway and Willeke Wendrich (eds.)

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This edited volume is the culmination of extensive archaeological investigation, patient analysis of collected material and information, and tenacious theorisation. The eight chapters are presented in an accessible format, coupled with an array of figures and tables that present an engaging amount of information for this regional reinvestigation during the early to mid-Holocene of the Fayum North Shore.

This is a highly anticipated volume, the result of 10 years of fieldwork in the concession area of the North Shore. The multi-institutional project has produced a work that presents some tantalising results, with further possibilities of future research and interpretation of material in a regional context, which can holistically broaden our understanding of the period of study. There is an interesting use of multiple authors for all chapters in the book. This reflects the application of a holistic approach to interpreting the archaeological record, with different data-sets requiring

unique approaches, interplayed with a multifaceted approach to interpreting the record from the Fayum's North Shore region.

The first chapter presents a well-rounded introduction to the reinvestigation of the Fayum's North Shore that clearly articulates the aims of the study, and indeed the many facets of this archaeological enquiry. Led by the editors, the multitude of researchers involved with this project provide diverse interests and approaches to the subject material, such as Joshua Emmitt, Annelies Koopman, Veerle Linseele, John Marston, Rebecca Philipps, and Rebecca Ramsey, as well as a host of team members over many years in the field. The central aim, building on Caton-Thompson and Gardiner's work in the region,¹ was to apply a geo-archaeological and landscape approach to Fayum archaeology. This would be achieved through the URU Fayum Project interpreting the land and water use of the region northwest of Lake Qarun. To this end the project undertook a study and analysis of the natural, anthropogenic, economic, and social processes that formed the present landscape and the archaeological remains that are part of it. The interpretations of this study and analysis are provided, in part, throughout all of the remaining chapters, though Chapter Three, Seven and Eight, provide key insights into the findings of this reinvestigation.

The second chapter provides a good outline of the context of the Fayum in northeast Africa. The application of previous approaches to analysing data sets in northeast Africa is well positioned to show that the approach applied in the Fayum can be used as a regional case study to provide localised examination of this part of Egypt during the Neolithic period. The land-

scape approach that is detailed within Chapter Two aptly provides a means to analyse the variability within the data stemming from archaeological research undertaken in the Fayum. This moves away from interpreting the information as part of a 'Neolithic package', which is a misnomer in itself. Indeed, the authors suggest in Chapter Seven that the Neolithic package did not arrive late to the Fayum. Instead it did not arrive at all, as such a suggestion is too general for a complex proposition. Rather, the approach used in this volume looks at the whole record (or package), rather than selected aspects of the archaeological material, or selected typological studies.

Chapter Three begins well by addressing the age estimates of the archaeological material found in the lake edge deposits and their relation to lake edge occupation. This raises the issue of a lack of independent proof of direct association with archaeological features and sediment deposition in this area. Notably the authors indicate that whether people occupied the ground immediately adjacent to Lake Qarun cannot be verified due to hearth deposition alone. The use of satellite-derived DSM to produce high-resolution georectified contour maps of the study region, as included in this chapter, allowed for more accurate height estimates when compared and built upon the work of previous studies and their associated errors. This helps to correct the interpretations of the landscape of the palaeoenvironment, as well as the movement of the lake edge over time, with the associated interaction of peoples. The discussion and analysis of lake basins provides a vast amount of information that illuminates the paleoenvironment of the north Fayum region, with the results providing an interest-

1. Caton-Thompson, G. & Gardiner, E., 1934. *The Desert Fayum*. London.

ing assessment of the six basins along the northern shoreline (originally identified by Caton-Thompson and Gardiner). This has a key relation to the agricultural viability of the region, which is an aspect that is consistently tied back to the main aim of the project. This is perhaps best articulated when the authors of Chapter Three (Phillips, Holdaway, Ramsey, Wendrich, and Emmitt), note that as archaeologists, they are interested in how people used different parts of the landscape, in relation to the potential usage these areas provided.

Methodological considerations, as outlined in Chapter Three, are keenly highlighted by issues that the project had to approach when conducting fieldwork. One of the best examples of this was the high density of artefacts on the deflated surfaces. With such a large project area (approximately 142 km²), limitations on fieldwork were sure to arise, though these have been mitigated with modern survey techniques. The results of these surveys suggest that artefact concentration aligns with the areas around the basins identified by Caton-Thompson and Gardiner.² Importantly, the interpretation of flaked stone artefacts was approached as a whole, with the complete assemblage analysed, rather than favouring certain stone tools as part of this assemblage and inferring particular activity through this selection. The well-rounded analysis has meant that the assemblage provides information pertaining to the context of stone tools as part of the wider assemblage, and also about raw material reduction, use, and discard, as well as the movement of stone artefacts across the landscape. The examination of a complete assemblage is favourable, as it allows for the interpretation of a broad range of use and discards at particular locations, which can be plotted across the landscape. Other types of features or artefacts that are presented include grinding stones, hearths (notable for their use in providing radiocarbon results as discussed in Chapters Four to Six), ceramics, basketry and textiles, personal ornaments, faunal material, and floral material. Results outlined in Chapter Four, Five, and Six indicate archaeological depos-

its from the Fayum region, which are discussed in Chapter Three, are more extensive than previously thought, with deposits in lower elevations than those reported from previous fieldwork and investigation. This alters the interpretation of human interaction with this landscape, as reflected in the material collected by extensive surface survey, and some selected excavation. Chapter Four presents a discussion of the investigation in L Basin, with extensive tables and discussion of objects from this part of the concession area. This begins a valuable presentation of the data-sets from the carried-out survey and field seasons Chapter Five similarly discusses the results of archaeological investigation from K Basin, though there is the notable, and lengthy, addition of basketry from this area, which is a definitive highlight from the Upper K pits (destroyed in 2007, which the reviewer was able to view in person). Chapter Six details the results from Kom K, again with an extensive discussion and a brief summary that is interwoven into the synthesis in Chapter Seven. The data-sets stemming from these three chapters is substantive, with the analysis keenly linked to Chapter Seven and Eight. This provides a grounded understanding of how specific site investigation fits into wider models of Neolithic Fayum, and Egypt. There is a sound synthesis of evidence discussed in Chapter Seven. This is the most substantive chapter of the volume, with detailed discussion and conclusions of the research making it possible for future direction. The synthesis provides an attempt to approach the topic of the Neolithic origins in Egypt, though as noted this was traditionally based upon the use of limited sets of observations which form generalised models of interpretation. It is here that the volume moves away from such generalised models, by drawing upon the detailed analysis of archaeological material from a landscape at multiple temporal and spatial scales within the Fayum region. Notable within this chapter is the fact that radiocarbon dates do not provide a precise understanding of occupation duration in this region. It is perhaps suffice to state that

the results produced different indications of occupation at different times during the early to mid-Holocene, stemming predominantly from hearth generated samples (though some straw examples were obtained from Upper K Pits 68 and 75). The results indicate that the Fayum had greater use than previously thought, and while there are gaps in the chronology of this period, there is now a better understanding of the complex interactions and activities that took place with the landscape, during this time in the region. This is indicated by the movement of artefacts across the landscape. This is how the authors' research leads to the conclusion that the north shore of the Fayum was most likely part of a more spatially extensive system.

The final chapter makes a concise synopsis of the discussions and summaries from previous chapters. Notably, the history of the Fayum seems to be more complex than the two periods traditionally proposed for this region. Chapter Eight provides a sound contextualisation of the evidence from the Fayum within the wider context of the Western Desert, and connections to Lower Egypt. The chapter begins with the realisation that the current understanding of the Neolithic in the Delta and Nile Valley, and perhaps the associated Eastern and Western Deserts, lacks from a detailed study which charts the nature of archaeological remains without typological bias, and also considers site occupations within a wider landscape context. This is quite rightly conceded, and this volume does help to rectify this within the Fayum region, also indicating beneficial links to research undertaken in other regions of Egypt.

The results of the study indicate that there is variability across the landscape of the north Fayum. This is indicated by different archaeological records preserved to differing degrees in different places dating to different times. This is hopefully not unexpected by the project, as uniformity is rare in archaeological records across a wide landscape, especially one of this size. The authors do not attempt to ask where the people of the Neolithic came from,

2. Caton-Thompson, G. & Gardiner, E., 1934. *The Desert Fayum*. London.

or where they went; rather they present an approach to studying the early to mid-Holocene material from the Fayum that considers the complexity of the archaeological record, the interaction between different locations within the concession area, the interplay of human activity across a diverse and changing landscape, and the possibility of further enquiry. This was gained, as noted at the end of Chapter Eight, by three important elements of enquiry: substantial time in the field for thorough recording; reinterpretation of methods in relation to their objectives (outlined above); and the theorisation of their findings, as presented in this volume, and a host of associated articles produced throughout the course of the project's history, and hopefully beyond.

The organisation of each chapter is well-laid out in an easily accessible discourse of the information from the archaeological remains and discussion of this material. It is notable that some notions which are put forward by the authors (though it is not always discernible by which one), are lacking citations, or at times could be bolstered by further explanation. Such citations

would further support the summation in Chapter Eight, or the discussion sections in chapters preceding this. However, this is coupled with the limitations of the size of a volume of this scope, which has limited room for extrapolation. Perhaps this can be remedied by further publications associated with this research, and the development of a wider understanding of the Fayum, and indeed other parts of Egypt during the Neolithic. This is certainly, and frequently, advocated by the authors in this volume.

While every volume attempting to outline the results of a project of this size and scope will have deficiencies, the positive approach and reinvestigation of the archaeological record and landscape of the North Shore of the Fayum should leave readers wanting more. Due to limitations already alluded to, it is an imperative that others use the work outlined by Holdaway, Wendrich et al., to help contextualise Neolithic Egypt, and hopefully will be able to match the scale of their application, to provide a better overall holistic understanding of Egypt during this period. Important studies such as this are seldom published to this extent, and the

fact that this reader is left with more questions, than answers, is a product of the fact that the material presented paves the way for future possibilities, rather than lacking conviction in what has been presented in this volume.

Thus, as suggested by the title of the book, the results of this study offer a thorough reinvestigation of the record from the north Fayum shoreline, which has the potential to make stronger links with this region and others from the Levant, through the Nile Valley, into Lower Nubia, and the Saharan Western Desert of Egypt with work undertaken by members of the Dakhleh Oasis Project in the latter region. It is pleasing that limitations of access, and excavations constantly balanced by ever encroaching modern agricultural needs within the Fayum did not deter work (albeit, the impact is notable on the extent and types of results that were yielded, unfortunately). However, there is still the possibility and hope that such a volume could be expanded, with motivation for similar studies in other parts of Egypt, building on the now well-laid foundations from the research undertaken for this volume.

Caleb R. Hamilton