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What do we know about the Roman presence in Beheira (Western Delta-Egypt)? (First Glance)

Introduction

The survey project in the Western Delta (Western Rosetta Branch documentation project) of Egypt aims to do a complete and systematic documentation, mapping the architectonic surface remains, collecting and analyzing the surface pottery, a study of regional and interregional commerce.

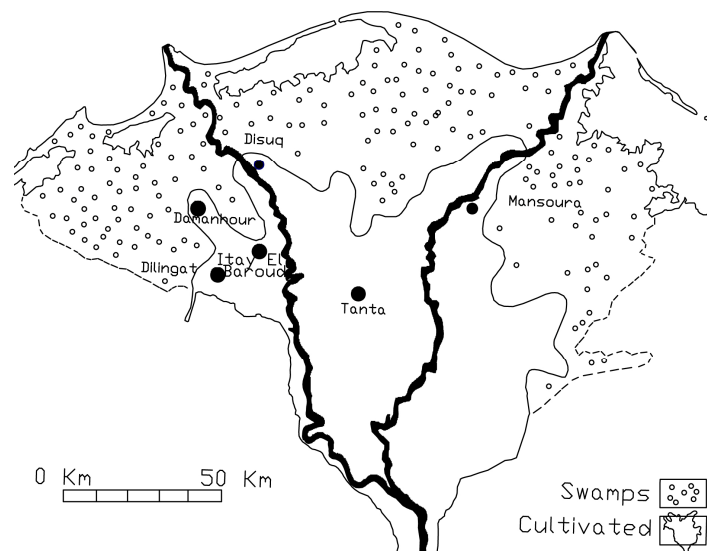
Offering the results to the local government will be a useful tool for further archaeological investigation and heritage management.

During summer 2008, fourteen archaeological sites were visited, mapped, and a database for all remains and pottery examples was created. The sites are (Kom al-Ahmer, Kom Wasit, Kom al-Nawam, Kom al-Tebn, Kom al-Akhdar, Kom Abu al-Godour, Kom al-Qadi, Ghasoli, Kom al-Gella, Sadaan, Kom al-Nighili, Kom al-Bakara, Kom Shimuli, Kom Toboul). The total number of the surveyed sites reached to 66 by the end of the project.

Problems

During the history of archaeological research in Egypt all attention was focused on Pharaonic evidence, little interest was paid to the Delta in general and to the Western Delta in particular, not to speak of the wet humid Delta with its black slapping soil. The publication of the ASAE since 1900 till 2000 confirms that fact, from 75 issues and 1960 reports only 107 are concerned with the Delta, 23 reports regard sites from the province of Beheira.

Nile was flowing and covering most of the Delta region every year before the construction of the high dam 1971, a real archaeological research would be impossible (figs. 1-2).



The Delta of Egypt divided by the River Nile between the 900 and 1200 A.D.

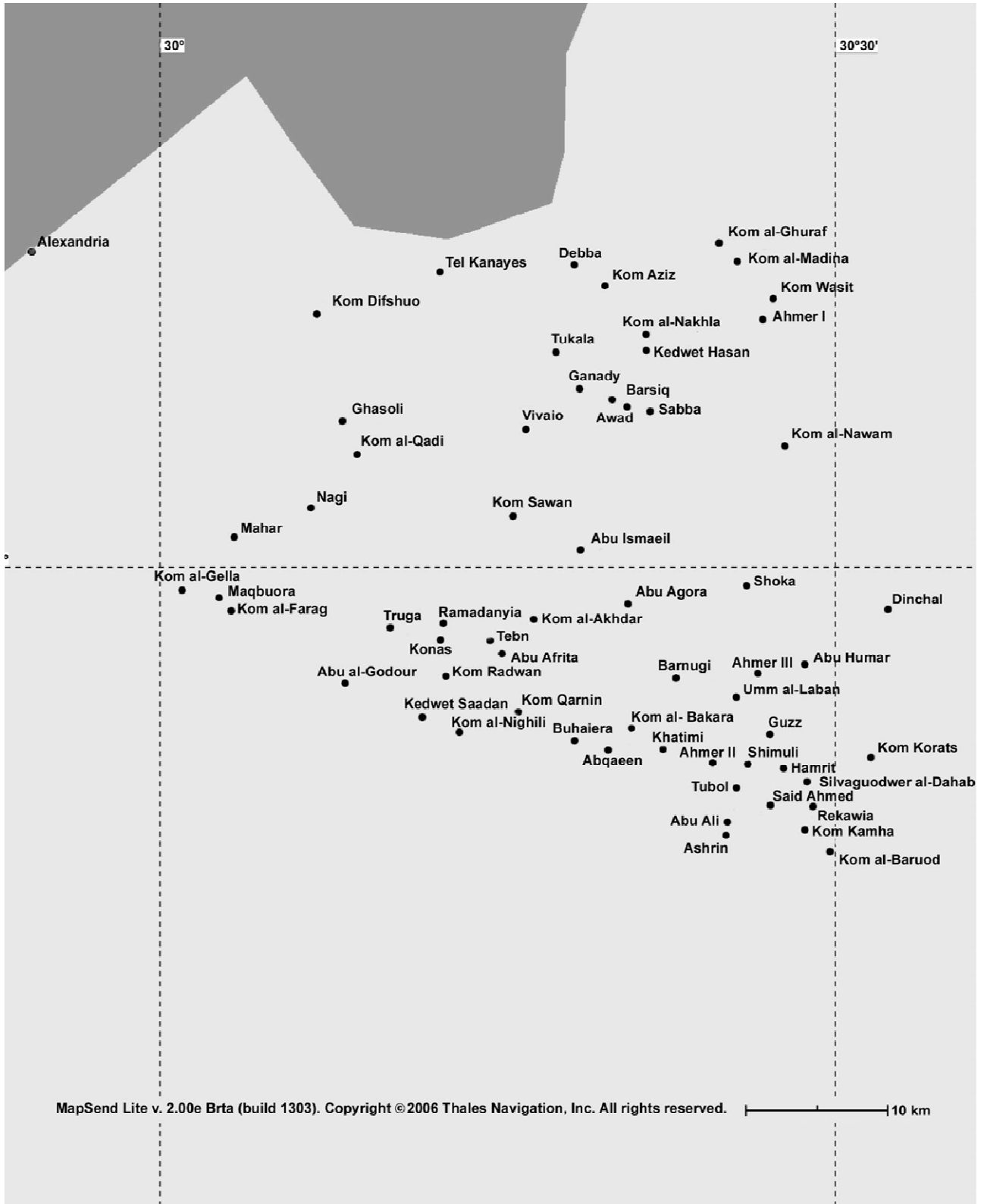


Fig. 2 - Sites under investigation and study, Western Delta, Beheira.

A medieval text (written by Al Maqrizi)¹ describes how people were traveling in the Delta and what happened when the Nile flowed all over Egypt. We can imagine the same conditions until 1950, when a modern road system was completed.

“And some described Egypt saying, three months it is a white Pearl, three months it is a black land, three months it is a green emerald, and three months it is a red goldy colored. The white Pearl is when Egypt, during the months of Epip, Messori and Thout becomes covered by water so that you see the whole world (Egypt) is white and its villages on *Koms* and *Tells* are like the planets surrounded by water from all sides, and there is no way from a village to another except by boat”².

Work progress

Ten sites were surveyed and investigated during winter - summer 2008; two of them are presented here, the reason of starting by Kom al-Ahmar and Kom Wasit that although they are the best preserved sites, they suffer a lot of illegal destruction.

Kom al-Ahmer

Working program: First visit to the site February 2008; a pottery and architectonic survey August 2008; the creation of a pottery database for each site is planned.

Location: N31°09.732', E30°26.921', situated in Markaz Mahmoudia, 16 km north of Damanhour, 6 km west of Rosetta branch of the Nile.

History of research:

- The first archaeological activity took place in 1940³, excavation of two large Roman baths (figs. 3-4). The site now is divided into three main mounds and excavated /leveled areas between each mound.
- 14 bronze statues were found and a head of Ptolemaic queen in 1941. Since that year no further scientific research took place although the site could be the capital of the Nomos called Metelis.
- The first results of the Survey 2008 can emphasize the long duration of life on the site, surface pottery dates from the I cent. B.C through the late VII cent. A.D.



Fig. 3 - Remains of the Roman bath, Kom Al Ahmer, Mahmoudia.



Fig. 4 - The entrance of the bath complex, Kom Al Ahmer, Mahmoudia.

¹ Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn 'Ali ibn 'Abd al-Qadir ibn Muhammad al-Maqrizi (1364–1442) was an Egyptian historian.

² AL MAQRIZI, No date, Vol 1, 87.

³ EL KHASHAB 1949, 28-65.

Mound 1

The surface consists of the brown Nile silt color deposits. The highest point of the mound is occupied by modern cemetery. On the surface appear many pottery sherds as a result of the tombs digging. Unfortunately, religious sensitivities preclude any archaeological activity in the area. On the northern edge of the mound, remains of a red brick structure were found, but it was not possible to clean the area because it was too near to the modern cemetery.

Mound 2

Area 2 is 106 x 72 m, and lies 60 m west of Area 1. H 13 m, this mound is the highest of the three and the most promising for future works. Most of it is covered by thousands of destroyed red brick fragments. Remains of a huge unidentified, circular red brick structure were found while climbing to the top of the mound, which had been exposed by the wind and rain. The location of that structure is 3 m. below the top of the mound. Further work is required in order to understand this structure and others which might be underground. Pottery sherds were found all over the mound and some glass fragments were collected. This is the only complete area at the site that has not been damaged by local inhabitants, and is unexcavated.

Mound 3

Area 3 is 450 x 60 m., and it is 5 m. high. The mound is full of red brick fragments. The local inhabitants use the mound as a road / track; cars and agricultural machineries were observed crossing the site. Locals still use the mound as a source of fertilizer for their fields. A small bronze late Roman coin in a poor condition was found on the mound in front of the bath complex.

Area 4

Area 4 consists of all parts between the high mounds that had been leveled. Originally, the whole site was a very large mound but it was cut away by the Sabakheen. In this low area, it was possible to see remains of mud brick walls and some granite fragments. In photographs from 1943 the low areas appear full of water, but it is not clear if the water came from the lake or the Nile. Two granite oil presses were found behind Area 1. Some new houses were built on the edge of the site, where three granite grindstones were found; these are now used to wash clothes.

Pottery

2,176 sherds were collected in 20 x 20 m. area, (amphorae 77%, coarse wares 32%, and fine ware 1%). The amphorae were the most useful for the chronology, 45% of the amphorae are imported mainly from Gaza and the Aegean. The Egyptian amphorae were mainly belonging to Group C (Mariout productions) and Egloff 172. The chronology of the collected materials lies between the 2nd century A.D. and 8th A.D. This chronology, together with the previous one of El-Khashab which was based on the found coins confirms the long occupation of the site for about 1000 years (3rd century B.C. to 8th A.D.).

Kom Wasit- Nuss Saghir (fig. 5)

Location: N31 °10.478', E30 °27.370'; 2 km north of Kom al-Ahmar



Fig. 5 - Kom Wasit, General View.



Fig. 6 - Remains of buried mud brick wall, pottery fragments on surface, Kom Wasit.



Fig. 7 - Pottery fragments on surface, Kom Wasit.

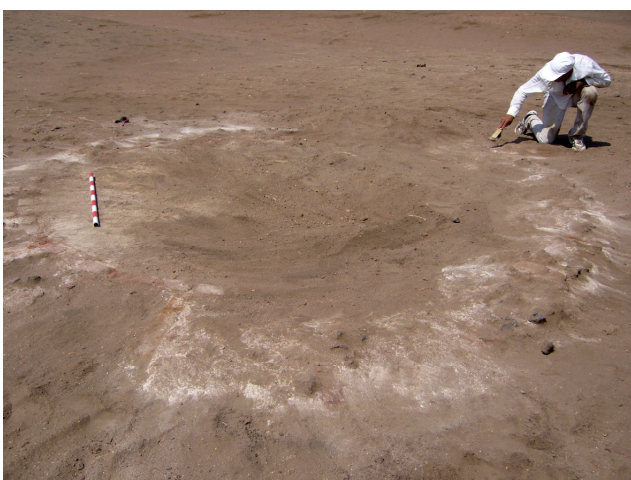


Fig. 8 - Remains of the *tholos* bath complex, partly cleaned, Kom Wasit.

The kom does not present any modern structure, which is a great chance for surveying and for further excavation. Many fragments of blue glass, bronze, imported amphorae were found. On the eastern edge few holes were dug by locals who hope that the kom will be removed.

In 1941 a pedestal with tunnel in bronze 2.30 m. with two stone blocks were found⁴ during the Sabakheen works, probably a base of a huge statue⁵.

Rainfall in February enabled us to see remains of buried walls of mud and red brick (figs. 6-7), the other part of the huge buried structure was cut and moved away by Sabakheen.

During the cleaning works, remains of a tholos bath complex (fig. 8) was found, a plan was drawn. This *tholos* is the third⁶ to be located of the same typology in Beheira province, a typology which is dated to the Hellenistic period and can be compared with other examples in Fayoum.

⁴ BRUNTON 1947, 293-295.

⁵ HABACHI 1947, 285-287.

⁶ The first complex and the best preserved is the one in Kom el Giza *Kafr el Dawar* , while the second is completely destroyed and was located in kom al-Nighili.

Ancient Metilis

I argue that during the late dynastic and early Hellenistic periods, Kom Wasit was the principal site in the area, serving as the capital, due the circular bath, structures remains, and the various finds which were mentioned before, probably under the name of Metilis. From the time of Ptolemy I, Kom al-Ahmer was likely inhabited as a secondary site; before the 1st A.D., it does not have impressive structures, but coins are presented. In these periods, the limits of the lake were not close to the three sites. However, by the end of the 1st century A.D., this changed; Kom Wasit was abandoned after it had suffered an increase in subsurface water, which dangerously affected its mud brick structures. As a result, all activity moved to Kom al-Ahmer which then became the capital of the region. Pottery sherds confirm the total abandon of Kom Wasit by the end of the 1st century A.D. The settlement at Kom al-Ahmer was very active in trade and commerce as it can be seen from the finds of pottery and coins. Kom al-Ghoraf (located 6 km N of Kom al-Ahmer) probably functioned as a secondary site. The presence of cisterns for water, wine or oil suggests that the site might have been used as a service area, or a significant storage area. The site may also have functioned as a protecting fort for the main town at Kom al-Ahmer. The capitals of the nomos were always protected, and the location of the three sites might give more importance to their function as a gate of Egypt from the North borders through the Rosetta branch of the Nile.

The situation continued with few changes until the Arab conquest, and changed little thereafter. However, by the end of the 9th century Kom al-Ahmer was abandoned, arguably because of another increase in the size of Lake Edkou, the lake which had expanded by the beginning of the 6th century A.D. as well as in the 9th century A.D. Al-Masudi reported that an increase in sea level allowed more water to flow into the northern lakes of the Delta. At this point, the salty water destroyed the fields and covered all low-lying parts of the town. This can be confirmed by Himdan's map of the swamps in the Delta and the Description of Egypt map. The area remained under salty water for centuries until the decision of Mohamed Ali to begin the reclamation projects.

The sites became visible once more on the map of 1866, due to a decrease in the level of the lake. It is important to note that until 1940, the water of the lake reached the lower parts of Kom al-Ahmer, while in Kom Wasit it is possible today to see the salt mixed with the soil surface. Salty soil is still not good for agriculture.

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