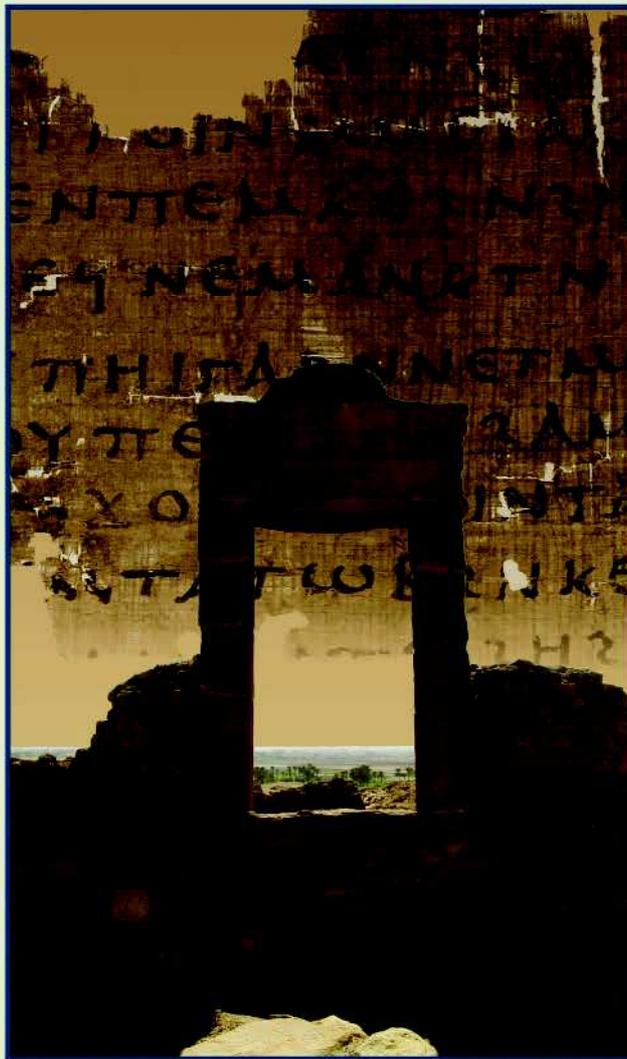


# Coptic Literature in Context (4th-13th cent.) Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology

edited by  
Paola Buzi



# PaST

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Paola Buzi

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# Contextualising Northern Egypt in Late Antiquity: An Archaeological Perspective from Western Delta\*

Angelo Colonna – Sapienza Università di Roma

## Abstract

After a brief theoretical introduction on the notion of 'place' developed by the 'PATHs' project and its implications for the geographical representation of the contexts of Coptic manuscripts, the article focuses on the north-western Delta, and discusses a group of important sites (Buto, Koprithis, Sais, and Xoïs) as case-studies to test that notion and to explore the impact of the archaeological investigation of the area on our understanding of Late Antique and Medieval Egypt. Insisting on the urban character of those sites, as well as on their apparent integration into a dynamic regional system, it is suggested that Delta archaeology can positively contribute: (1) to redress the imbalance towards the Valley and the monastic contexts, emphasising the role of the cities as intellectually active milieus; (2) to stimulate a more critical sensibility towards archaeological evidence, material culture, and survey data as instrumental in building an integrated, holistic, and well-balanced approach that complements textual information and allows us to reconstruct a detailed picture of the historical and cultural landscape of Christian Egypt.

## Keywords

Western Delta, religious landscape, cultural geography, Sais, Buto.

## 1. Introduction

The *Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature* is a complex intellectual enterprise that lies at the intersection of different disciplinary fields: codicology and philology on the one hand, geography and archaeology on the other. While the former two inform us of the physical (= manuscripts) and cultural (= works) objects of Coptic literary creation, the latter focus on the spatial and material setting of those objects, their production and circulation. So far, the difference has been not just one of content but especially of emphasis: material contexts and spatial representation are less an area of concern in Coptic research than the study of formal, linguistic, and literary aspects. Yet, the material and geographical dimensions are crucial to the understanding of any historical phenomenon and cultural activity or process. The challenge taken by 'PATHs' is integrating those different perspectives, while the aims of the present contribution is, accordingly, to propose an informed discussion on the potential of archaeology for the reconstruction of a geography of Coptic literature, i.e. of the social-cultural milieus and environments where Christian literature in Coptic language was produced and disseminated in Late Antique and Mediaeval Egypt, between the 3rd and the 13th centuries CE. A few sites from the central-western Delta will be reviewed to illustrate problems and possibilities, and will provide the basic material for the analysis.

## 2. Placing 'PATHs'

Although the technical efforts and methodological choices underpinning the construction of the 'PATHs' database have already been discussed,<sup>1</sup> it is useful to briefly sketch the theoretical structure and hierarchical organisation of the *Places* dataset.

\* The present article is one of the scientific outcomes of the ERC Advanced project 'PATHs – Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths: An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature. Literary Texts in their Geographical Context: Production, Copying, Usage, Dissemination and Storage', funded by the European Research Council, Horizon 2020 programme, project no. 687567 (PI: Paola Buzi, Sapienza Università di Roma), <http://paths.uniroma1.it>.

1 A detailed introduction to the section Places of the 'PATHs' database is provided on the project website: <https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/places>. Cf. also the contributions of Bogdani and Colonna in BUZI *et al.* 2019 and the overview of Buzi in this volume. For an informed discussion on the structure of the *Atlas*, cf. BOGDANI 2017, and his contribution in this volume. For a parallel perspective focused on the Eastern Delta, see the contribution of Ilaria Rossetti in this volume.

Places are intended as (1) physical spatial units (sites) that can be archaeologically observed and documented, i.e., they can be referred to a tangible area, with a topographical location and a distinctive configuration of material correlates. (2) Special attention is accorded to those contexts linked to the production, circulation, storage, preservation and discovery of manuscripts. (3) Finally, major political, religious and cultural centres (in particular episcopal sees), which are relevant for the reconstruction of the landscape of Byzantine and Mediaeval Egypt, are also recorded, even though they no longer preserve archaeological traces.

This tripartite structure highlights some distinctive points that, on the one hand, distinguish 'PATHs' from other works and tools developing along similar lines<sup>2</sup> and, on the other hand, have a decisive impact on – and thus are indicative of – the project's understanding, conceptualisation and visualisation of Late Antique Egyptian cultural landscape.<sup>3</sup> These points can be labelled as materiality, relationality, and cultural significance, and they raise important implications: firstly, 'PATHs' takes into account (as far as possible) all the documented archaeological contexts belonging to the chronological range and cultural domain of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, being not limited to the almost absolute dominance of monastic or funerary data and, on the other hand, breaking down the apparent static uniformity of certain regional areas into smaller, locally circumscribed units of artefacts and material remains for analytical purposes.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, archaeologically reconstructed environments are recognised not just as the underlying spatial backdrop and framework where literary artefacts were located and displaced, but as an active social factor that was directly involved in their production (e.g. monastic *scriptoria*), fruition and dissemination (e.g. schools, libraries, tombs). Accordingly, the archaeologically recovered relationship of a manuscript with the material setting of its discovery may provide critical information about the multiple links (production, usage, destitution, etc.) the associated work(s) had with the socio-cultural environment of provenance. Thirdly, places are not just material sites but culturally significant locales invested with meanings and values so that a geography of Late Antique and Mediaeval Egypt cannot exclude the possibility that those (numerous) places that we know from textual and literary sources were recognised by ancient communities as major nodes of political power and religious authority within the landscape. Their inclusion into the dataset, therefore, matches this basic consideration, integrating it with the key fact that, although archaeologically unknown or poorly documented, these sites are indeed identifiable on the ground and their physical location often corresponds to that of earlier centres of pharaonic and Graeco-Roman times, thus setting their cultural identities into a stratified sequence of overlapping phases within a more articulated historical framework of *longue durée*. The issue of diachronicity should be emphasised here as it allows us not just to outline continuities and ruptures in the (modes of) appropriation of a certain space, area or environment between the Coptic communities and their pharaonic forerunners but especially to contextualise such strategies into a broader perspective of dynamic engagement with a highly diversified and stratified surrounding landscape.<sup>5</sup>

The relevance and applicability of the points just highlighted to the situation of Delta will be explored below, but it is worth stressing the advantages of such an integrated approach to historical geography when applied to local or regional contexts so as to get a more reliable, variegated and complex picture of those realities. The focused, inclusive, and material-based catalogue of places in 'PATHs' is programmatically intended to supplement material for this kind of research, and the following discussion of some case-studies from the Delta purposely tries to move along these tracks.<sup>6</sup>

2 Traditionally, the geography of Coptic Egypt has been driven by a strictly textual approach (cf. AMÉLINEAU 1893; TIMM 1984-1992) with limited attention to the archaeological datum. Although these seminal contributions remain fundamental to any reconstruction, scholars' sensibility toward the archaeology of Roman and Late Antique Egypt has grown more and more, as a recent synthesis demonstrates; cf. O'CONNELL 2014.

3 A focused presentation of the methodological and conceptual aspects lying behind 'PATHs' understanding and use of the category "Place", is in preparation by the present author.

4 The case of Western Thebes in 'PATHs' and 'Trismegistos' is especially instructive: at present, 'PATHs' logs 104 different places in that area whereas in 'Trismegistos' there is a unique TM Geo ID 1341, [www.trismegistos.org/place/1341](http://www.trismegistos.org/place/1341), identifying Memnoneia-Djeme (Thebes west). Cf. the contribution of Paola Buzi in this volume.

5 For a recent discussion on the reconstruction of ancient landscape, and the fundamental role played by archaeology in the process, cf. Brooks Hedstrom 2017, with a declared focus on monastic contexts. For an updated overview of the state and advances of Egyptian archaeology of the 1st millennium CE, cf. O'CONNELL 2014, with various contributions on recent or ongoing excavations in different sites and contexts (urban, funerary, monastic).

6 For a different regional context where archaeology can positively be used to construct a better interpretative framework in conjunction with textual sources, cf. BUZI 2015 on Early Christianity in the Fayyum.



Fig. 1. Places linked to manuscripts in the Delta (© 'PATHs' team).

### 3. Perspectives from the Delta

Assuming a northern (Delta) point of view in the study of the cultural geography of Byzantine Egypt, with special focus on the representation of Coptic literary production, is not an easy task, as the analysis is hampered by a number of difficulties and limitations related to the specificity of that environment and its transformations.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, it appears that the criteria designed above only partially fit the evidence available from this region: none of the Delta sites is known to be physically connected to manuscripts, with the partial, though relevant, exception of Alexandria and the western fringe monasteries which, however, represent special cases that will be not discussed here (Table 1; Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> Although Egypt is renowned for the exceptional abundance of textual sources, these come only from very favourable areas while most parts of the country provide no written documents. The damp Nile Delta, which encompasses over half of the ancient settlement and agricultural land of the country, is not a suitable environment for the conservation of papyri so no manuscript comes from this region.<sup>9</sup>

1. Archaeological sites	2. Places linked to manuscripts	3. Episcopal sees
174 (Fig. 3)	8 (Fig. 1)	44 (Fig. 2)

Table 1. Place-types actually mapped in the Delta by 'PATHs'

The severe impact of this situation on modern interpretation is emphasised by Roger Bagnall who, introducing the geographical context and limitation of his analysis of Late Antique Egypt, and commenting on the well-known division between Upper and Lower Egypt, explicitly notes that '[t]he quirks of preservation of papyrus (...) have destroyed this balance in historical perspective, for almost no evidence survives

7 For a general overview of the geographical and historical setting of the area, cf. Wilson 2007. For a valuable assessment of the current state of the Delta archaeological and cultural heritage, with the risks and problems of its management, cf. TASSIE - WATERING - DE TRAFORD 2015.

8 Likewise, three places linked to manuscripts in the Memphite region, i.e. the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah ('PATHs' Place 75), Giza ('PATHs' Place 274), and Babylon ('PATHs' Place 144) are not considered for discussion, but they are nevertheless added to the final figure in Table and shown in Fig. 1.

9 A rare exception is the discovery of some carbonised papyri at Thmuis/Tell Timai; cf. BLOUIN 2014, 45-70, 298-300.



Fig. 2. Episcopal sees in the Delta (© 'PATHs' team).

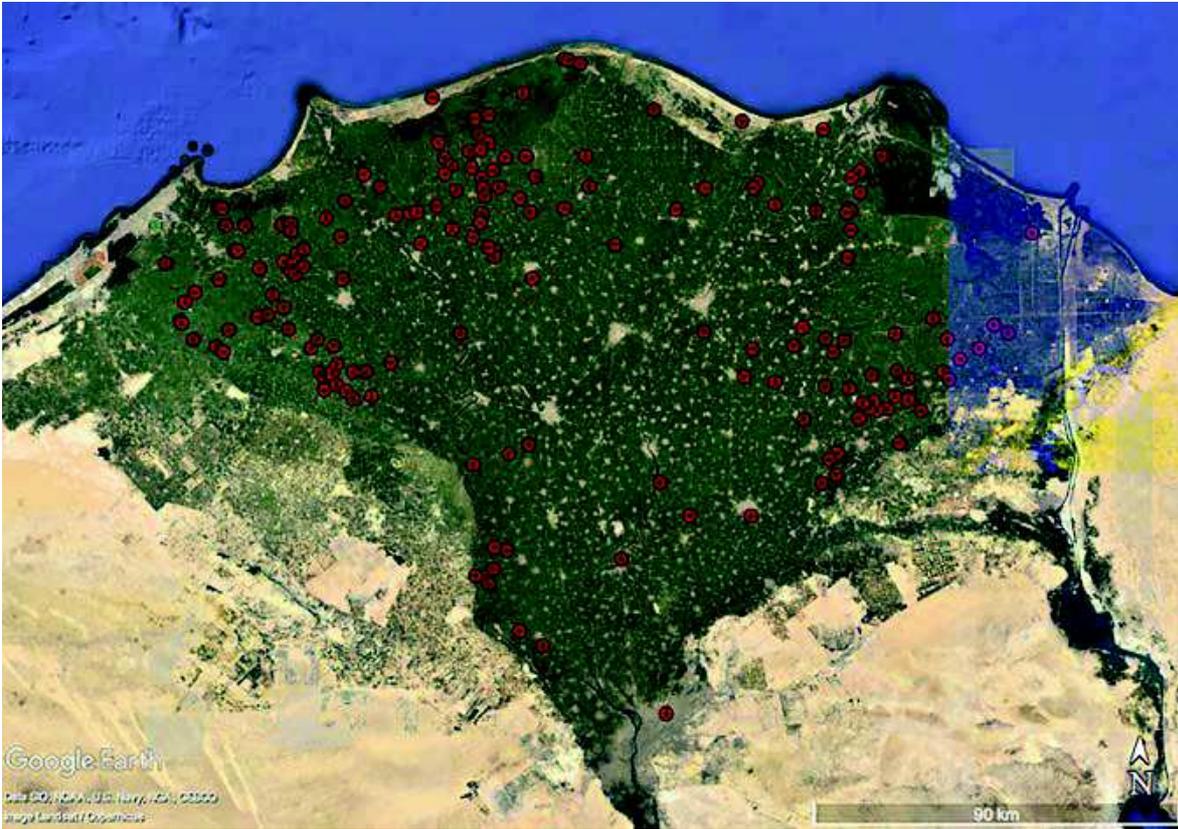


Fig. 3. Archaeological sites in the Delta (© Google Earth).

from the Delta towns and villages. Here and there it is possible to compensate for this loss, but admittedly we do not even know if our picture of ancient Egypt would differ greatly if the evidence were more evenly distributed. To a large degree, then, this is not the story of the entire Nile Valley, but merely of the long ribbon of the upper part of that valley, from Aswan to Memphis'.<sup>10</sup>

Historical reconstruction of this area, therefore, should rely mainly on archaeological data, yet the archaeology of Late Antique Delta is greatly underrepresented for different concomitant reasons, among which:<sup>11</sup> (1) the environmental conditions of the floodplain, (2) the increase of population with the consequent expansion of agricultural activities (land reclamation), (3) the complex stratification of the local tells/koms, continuously occupied since ancient times and usually covered or destroyed by modern towns, (4) the dominating monumental and pharaonic-oriented interests of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars, together with their poorly developed methodologies of excavation and documentation, have critically affected the investigation as well as the preservation of the archaeological contexts and largely obscured our knowledge of their most recent phases. Moreover, the best-known or excavated sites all show exceptional characteristics that make them unrepresentative of the whole region: cities and settlements like Alexandria, Marea, Marina el-Alamein, on the one hand, Abu Mina, Kellia and the Wadi Natrun on the other, appear extraordinary in layout and political relevance, peripheral in location (western edge and desert), highly specialised in functions and organisation (monastic settlements, pilgrimage centres, harbours and port-cities).

Despite such constraints, the growing pace of scholarship on Delta archaeology in the past decades, with refinement of research strategies, and improvements in non-invasive technologies and methodologies, is rapidly changing our perception and implementing the amount and quality of information.<sup>12</sup> A full review of the history and achievements of the Delta exploration is beyond the focus of the present paper,<sup>13</sup> but at least one major survey project should be mentioned here for the scale and amount of data gathered: it is the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) Delta Survey, an ongoing project that aims at mapping and recording, as completely as possible, the lesser-known archaeological sites of Lower Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

While this turn is certainly helpful in redressing the imbalance, one might wonder what kind of contribution the Nile Delta might offer to the ongoing debate on the understanding and representation of Coptic literary manuscripts. The main and only answer to this question, from an archaeological point of view, is *contextualisation* (emphasis mine): setting data into a network of spatial and temporal relationships is the distinctive mark of archaeology and the *conditio sine qua non* for any meaningful historical interpretation. In this perspective, despite the lack of manuscripts and papyri, the material evidence from the Delta can be used to expand the scope of inquiry beyond the traditional field of monasticism and the regional focus of Upper Egypt, substantiating (when possible) textual accounts and, above all, exploring the role of different landscapes and social settings in reframing questions and discussion on the literary milieus of Late Antique and Medieval Egypt.

In order to test and articulate this answer, some sites from the central-western Delta will be presented here as a case-study: Buto/Tell el Fara'in; Koprithis/Tell Qabrit; Sais/Sa el-Hagar; Xoïs/Sakha (Fig. 4). Their choice is motivated by a triple consideration: they are rather peripheral to the general agenda of Coptic archaeology;<sup>15</sup> they have been all surveyed by the EES Delta Survey Project and/or have been made object of systematic excavation projects (Buto and Sais),<sup>16</sup> so that we have a reasonable amount of environmental, material, and historical data; they have been directly visited by a recent mission conducted by

<sup>10</sup> BAGNALL 1993, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Wilson 2014, 43. A more detailed analysis of the environmental, political and cultural risk factors and destructive forces in TASSIE - WATERING - DE TRAFFORD 2015, 112-116

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Trampier 2014, with methodological discussion and analysis of cases-studies from the south-western Delta.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. TASSIE - WATERING - DE TRAFFORD 2015, 104-110.

<sup>14</sup> SINCE 1997, the project, with regular updates, is publicly available at <https://www.ees.ac.uk/delta-survey>. For a presentation of the basic structure, methodology and goals of the research, cf. SPENCER - SPENCER 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the recent work of GABRA - TAKLA 2017.

<sup>16</sup> The site of Buto is under research by the German Archaeological Institute: <https://www.dainst.org/projekt/-/project-display/63537>. Since 2010 a regional survey around the main site has been started by Robert Schiestl: <https://www.dainst.org/projekt/-/project-display/51318>; <https://www.en.ag.geschichte.uni-muenchen.de/research/delta-project/index.html>. Sais has been investigated since 1997 by a joint University of Durham EES project, cf. <http://community.dur.ac.uk/penelope.wilson/sais.html>.

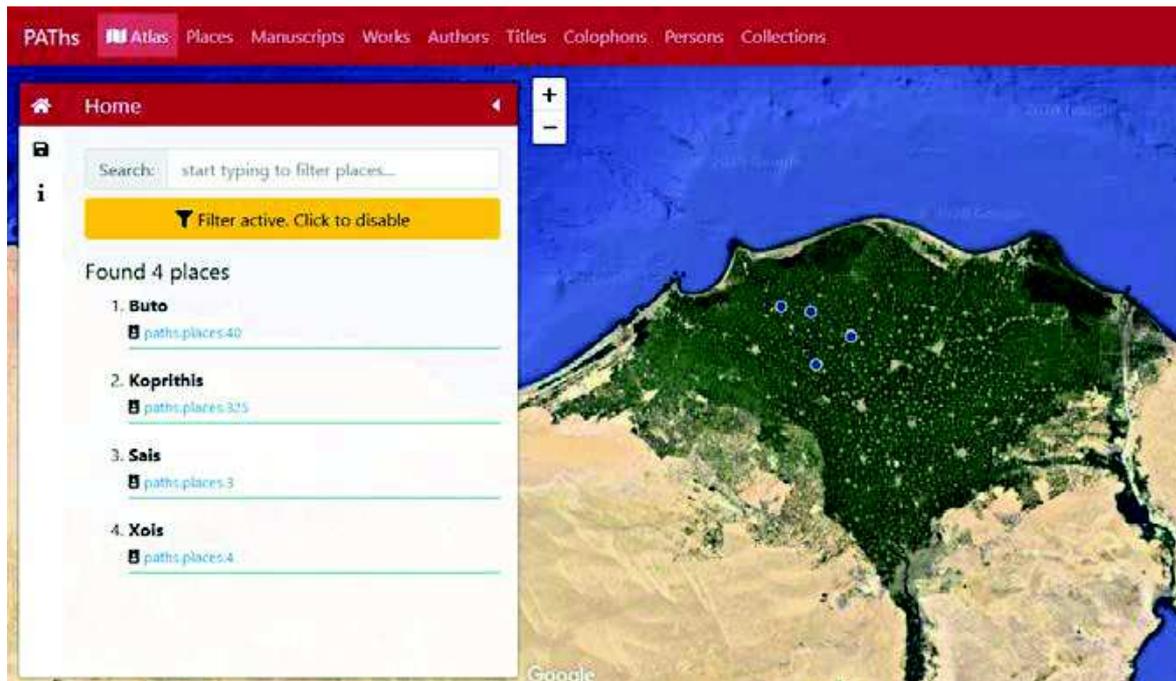


Fig. 4. Map of the Sites discussed in the text (© 'PATHs' Team).

'PATHs' in order to acquire updated information on their status and preservation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the preliminary and very tentative reappraisal proposed here is intended to stimulate a more critical sensibility towards archaeological contexts and material data as instrumental in building an integrated, holistic, and well-balanced model on the cultural landscape of Christian Egypt.

The strategy suggested is quite simple and consists in reviewing first how these places feature in the textual record, contrasting then the information against archaeological remains and material culture in order to assess their position within the broader framework of the Delta geography and occupational pattern.

### 3.1 Textual perspective: the new semantic of religious landscape

As already noted, none of these places has actually yielded manuscripts. Still, they are mentioned in Byzantine and Medieval sources of different character, scope, language, and dating, which sometimes provide interesting indications on their cultural characterisation and re-appropriation within the contemporary imagined geography.

In this perspective, without going into details, three important dimensions might be addressed of the Christianisation of Egyptian settlements in the Delta that stress a marked political-religious sensibility and an active (re)configuration of local contexts and urban experience: (1) the establishment of a network of bishoprics; (2) the conceptualisation of a mythic landscape; (3) the implementation of religious infrastructures.<sup>18</sup> The first point concerns the status of these places as episcopal sees.<sup>19</sup> Their occurrence in lists of bishops, which is often the main reason for their inclusion in the data set, reflect an important process of transformation and illustrate a general pattern of historical significance: about 44 bishoprics were located in the Delta (out of 100 in the whole of Egypt, including Libya and the Pentapolis of Cyrenaica)<sup>20</sup> and they usually repre-

<sup>17</sup> The mission took place in May 2018: <http://paths.uniroma1.it/mission-to-egypt-alexandria-the-mediterranean-coast-and-the-delta-second-topographical-survey-of-the-sites-related-to-late-antique-period>.

<sup>18</sup> For a knowledgeable cultural perspective on the transformation of Egyptian sacred landscape in Late Antiquity, cf. FRANKFURTER 2018, 233-256. Developing on literary sources, the analysis focuses on well-known Upper Egyptian localities like Abydos and Dendera.

<sup>19</sup> For the Byzantine period, cf. WÖRPF 1994, 298 (Buto), 301 (Koprithis), 306 (Sais), 308 (Xois).

<sup>20</sup> Twenty-nine bishoprics were located in the Valley, the rest in Libya and the Pentapolis. The figure and distribution refer basically to the fourth-fifth centuries CE and are based on the analysis of WIPSZYCKA (1983, 183-186) and MARTIN (1996, 17-115). Cf. BAGNALL 1993, 285.

sent a major focus of discussion on the organisation of the region (Table 1; Fig. 2). Such an uneven distribution certainly relates to the geographical and political position of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, and possibly shows that '[a]s the center of gravity in the country shifted to the north, the Delta's political, economic, and religious importance grew, camouflaged though it is by the defective surviving documentation'.<sup>21</sup>

With the exception of Koprithis, all the bishoprics are *metropoleis* with a long history as capitals of nomes and important political nodes already in the Graeco-Roman and pharaonic periods. Evidently, the new religious network largely overlaps and coincides, in terms of geographical articulation, with the earlier administrative structure.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, each one of these sites is mentioned in liturgical and hagiographical sources as places associated with crucial, foundational episodes of the Coptic religious tradition. The story of the Flight of the Holy Family and the dramatic accounts about local martyrs were especially effective in this process of semantic appropriation and transformation of ancient sites and their spaces. Koprithis features in the martyrdom of Didymus of Tarschebi as the place of provenance of a local priest named Arapolon, suggesting that there was a church there by the end of the fourth century. Sais appears twice in the *Synaxarium*, being mentioned in relation to the deaths of St Dabamon (10 Paonah), as the place 'where the priest of the idols told the governor that a woman named Dabamon from Degwah had cursed the gods', and of St Apakir (6 Amshir) as 'people from the city of Sa came and took the body of St. Apakir, built for him a church, and laid his body inside it'. The double reference clearly but briefly illustrates the memory of the older topography and customs of the city as well as its resignification through church-building and the blessing of the martyrdom. Sakha is listed among the places visited by the Holy Family during their wandering through the delta and specifically with the miracle of the stone stepped upon by Jesus, from which a well sprang, and permanently impressed with his footprint.<sup>23</sup> The fundamental character of the episode, which displays a recurrent narrative pattern, is also evident in the Christian toponym, Bikha Issous, after which the city was known in literary sources like the Homily of Zacharias, the well-educated bishop of Sakha. In this regard, the biographical note of this famous individual in the *Synaxarium*, which emphasises his scribal education and literary production, also gives us a valuable hint about the intellectual activity within the city.

A final aspect concerns the church-building programme and the re-contextualisation of religious activities into new architectural forms and spatial relations. Apart from the few allusions quoted above, two passages appear particularly indicative of both the extent and the impact of this phenomenon of 'mushrooming of churches'<sup>24</sup> in the Delta. They both belong to Mediaeval accounts of Arabic authors and contain valuable details on the state of Sakha and Sais during their time: on the one hand, Ibn Hauqal (980 ca.) reports on Sais as a city containing one mosque and many churches, together with markets a bath-house and the so-called 'Fountain of Moses'<sup>25</sup>; on the other hand, in the thirteenth century, Abu al-Makarim refers to five churches in Sakha.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, from this textual survey, the sites at issue emerge as meaningful spatial foci in a religious geography that, through negotiation with earlier memories, monuments or institutions, had been reshaped and reintegrated into a new cosmological framework so as to ingrain the values of Christianity into the real world of both local landscapes and Egypt as a whole country.<sup>27</sup> Thus, as aptly remarked by David Frankfurter, 'in multiple dimensions, and multiple social worlds, the landscape became narrated and memorialised as sacred, powerful, and linked to 'us': *our* villages, *our* hills, and the river that integrates *our* territory'.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.2 Archaeological perspective: urban contexts and regional landscape

Although data from excavations and survey works are preliminary and partial, they can stimulate new reflections and might be used to positively qualify two issues so as to complement textual-based narra-

21 BAGNALL 1993, 20.

22 ALSTON 2002, 2, 187.

23 SADEK 2017, 89-90.

24 WIPSYCKA 2007, 333.

25 WILSON 2006, 41.

26 Cf. SADEK 2017, 89.

27 Cf. ALSTON 2002, 319-322, and *passim*.

28 FRANKFURTER 2018, 255.

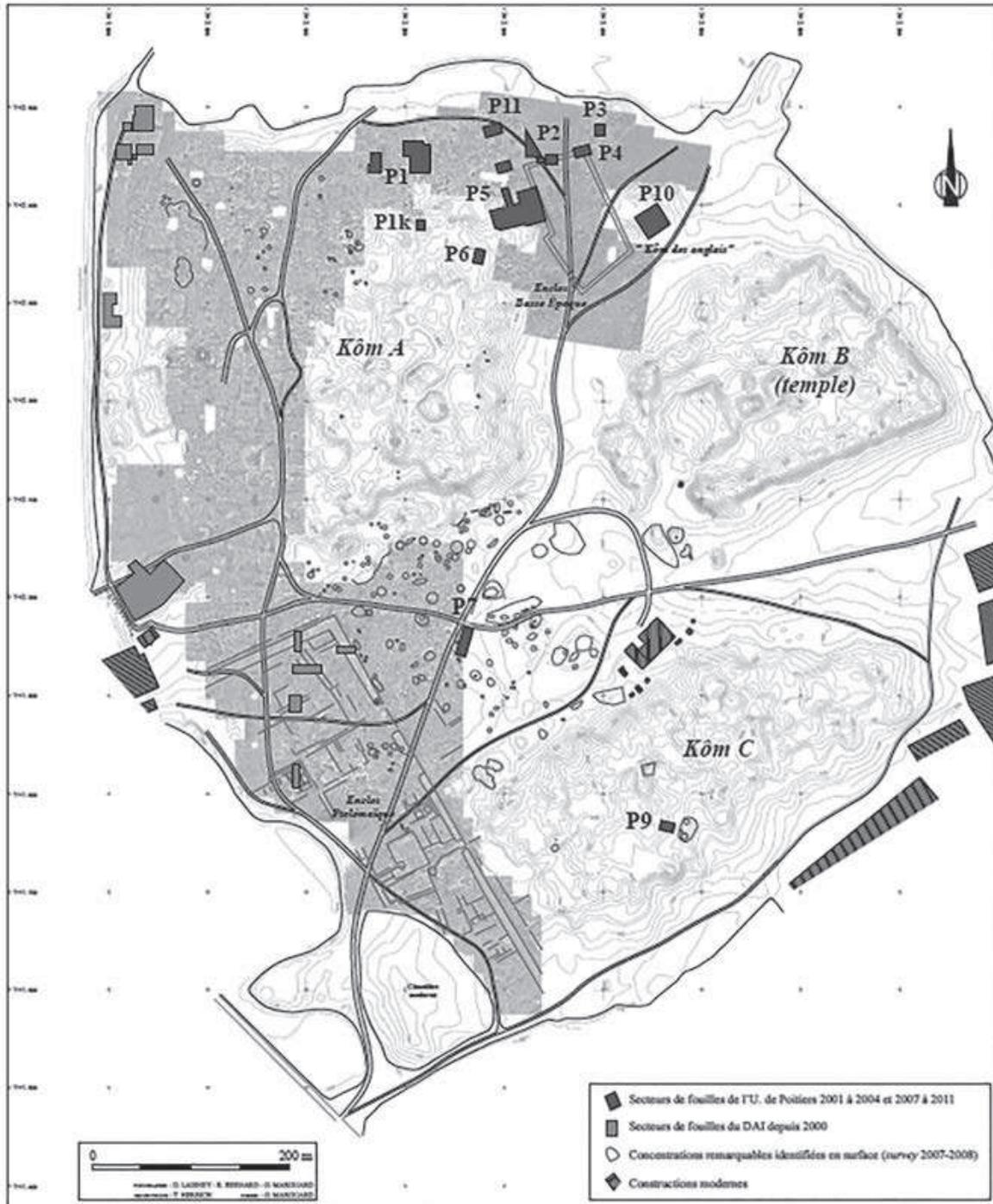


Fig. 5a. Map of Tell el Fara'in/Buto (after BALLETT *et al.* 2011, p. 76).

tives: (1) the impact of the new ideology (Christianity) and institutions (church) on the material, urban configuration of the sites, with a particular focus on the processes and dynamics of re-use, abandonment, and substitution of temples as focal cores of the urban community; (2) the changes and development in the settlement pattern of the area, with a special focus on the integration of different types of site in the Delta landscape.

Regarding the replacement of temples and reconfiguration of the urban setting, the process might remain elusive in its details but the material traces of such activities are rather apparent. At Buto/Tell el-Fara'in ('PATHs' ID 40; Fig. 5a-b), the *temenos* of the great temple on Kôm B had already been transformed into a productive area by the end of the Ptolemaic period, while Roman houses and buildings were



Fig. 5b. View of the Temple Area, Kom B (© 'PATHs' Team, May 2018).

installed in the eastern part of the walls as well as in the area of the Sacred Lake (time of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius).<sup>29</sup> Late Roman structures are attested in this sector in the fourth century, with wells and ditches cut down through the foundation levels of the temple.<sup>30</sup> The latter seems to be removed from the inside out, as demonstrated by the fact that the new industrial and housing areas developed around it, while its central core was progressively filled by the rubble of the spoliation process. More importantly, fragments of Byzantine pottery (fine ware and amphorae) have been collected from the surface of Kom A and ranges from the fifth to the seventh centuries.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, a small sounding in the depression between Kom A and C (sector P7) has brought to light some pits and installations for the calcination of limestone indicating an activity of re-use of architectural fragments. The associated pottery dates to the seventh-ninth century and includes fragments of Islamic production. It is difficult to assess the reconfiguration of the city from such scanty evidence but it would appear that, at that time, part of the site was still in use for industrial activities, while the settlement reduced and possibly shifted to the nearby village of Ibtu, outside the boundaries of the archaeological site, and probably encompassed other peripheral sites around Tell el-Fara'in.<sup>32</sup>

At Tell Qabrit/Koprithis ('PATHs' ID 325; Fig. 6a), ca. 11 km north-west of Buto, excavations carried out by the SCA (2000-2001) have discovered a series of Late Antique structures to the south and a red-brick church building in the central area of the site.<sup>33</sup> The former group is generally assigned to the Arabs, as it is constructed of brown burnt brick, and although it displays a well-organised layout, its functional characterisation remains uncertain. The church building was associated with pottery of the fourth-seventh centuries CE (Fig. 6b). It is made of red-bricks and has a rectangular outline, with east-west orientation.

29 For an updated synthesis on the Late and Graeco-Roman phases of the city, cf. LECLÈRE 2008, 197-232. The later stages, from the Ptolemaic to the early Arab period, are addressed in detail by BALLETT 2011; BALLETT *et al.* 2011.

30 LECLÈRE 2008, 212-213; WILSON 2014, 51

31 BALLETT - VON DER WAY 1993, 6-8, fig. 3.

32 BALLETT *et al.* 2009, 154, 158; BALLETT 2011, 1588.

33 WILSON - GRIGOROPOULOS 2009, 202-208; WILSON 2014, 52-54.

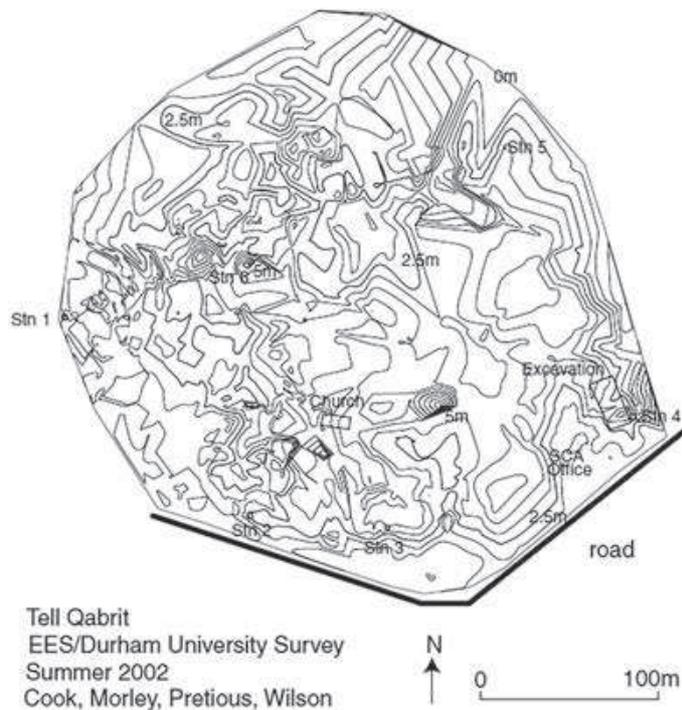


Fig. 6a. Map of Tell Qabrit/Koprithis (after WILSON - GRIGOROPOULOS 2009, fig. 75).

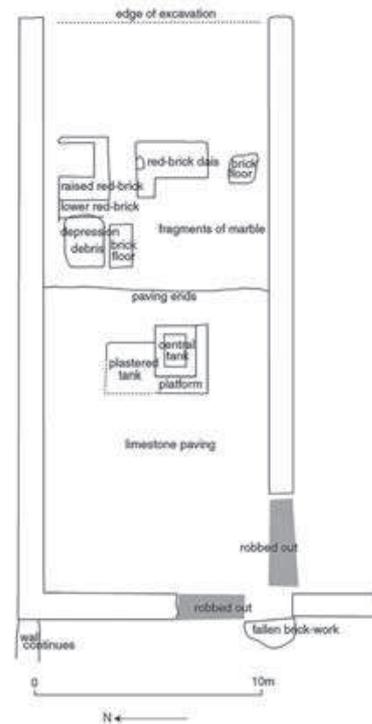


Fig. 6b. Plan of the church building excavated at Koprithis (after WILSON - GRIGOROPOULOS 2009, fig. 77).

There remains a marble-lined font in the centre, but the apse (if present) appears to have been completely removed. Similarly, traces of limestone and marble paving have only survived at the west and east ends of the building respectively. The walls of the church were originally plastered and founded upon layers of crushed limestone chips and earlier pottery. The shape and size of the building compares with other churches in Upper Egypt and the Fayyum, such as the one at Hawara, and may not even have had an apse, like the seventh century church C at Tebtynis.<sup>34</sup> Among the debris, a block inscribed with hieroglyphs in raised relief was found, suggesting that a pharaonic site (possibly Buto?) nearby may have provided the stone building material, or that there was an earlier phase at the site. A limestone block and seven large red granite grindstones are visible on the surface, probably having been uncovered during the *sebakh* digging and left behind as they were too heavy to take away. This type of artefact is relatively common on Delta sites, and is often associated with ecclesiastical institutions (churches or monasteries). Overall, the evidence is rather sparse but it might indicate a gradual development of the new urban community as early as the fourth century right through the Mediaeval period.

At Sa el-Hagar/Sais ('PATHs' ID 3; Fig. 7a) a reconfiguration of (and shift in) the urban setting seems likewise appreciable, with the northern *temenos* enclosing the early temple of Neith being abandoned after the pharaonic period.<sup>35</sup> The pharaonic city and the southern monumental areas were largely overbuilt by Roman buildings, which reused materials from older structures. Despite the pillaging, a glimpse of the new arrangement is evident in the material resulting from the trench (Excavation 10) excavated by the Durham University in 2007 on the east side of the so-called 'Great Pit'.<sup>36</sup> A dense area of red brick was located in the south-east corner, which comprises a straight outer wall plastered on the outside and a curving, more substantial wall on its western side. The two walls had collapsed, but the area between them was filled with brick and pottery rubble including fragments of Saite and Ptolemaic dating mixed with Roman

34 Cf. GROSSMANN 2002, respectively 427-428, fig. 49 (Hawara), and 426-427, fig. 48 (Tebtynis).

35 General overview in LECLÈRE 2008, 159-196. Reports and updates on the survey work and excavations conducted by Durham University available at <http://community.dur.ac.uk/penelope.wilson/sais.html>.

36 WILSON 2015, 51-52. Cf. also the full report at <http://community.dur.ac.uk/penelope.wilson/3q2007.html>.

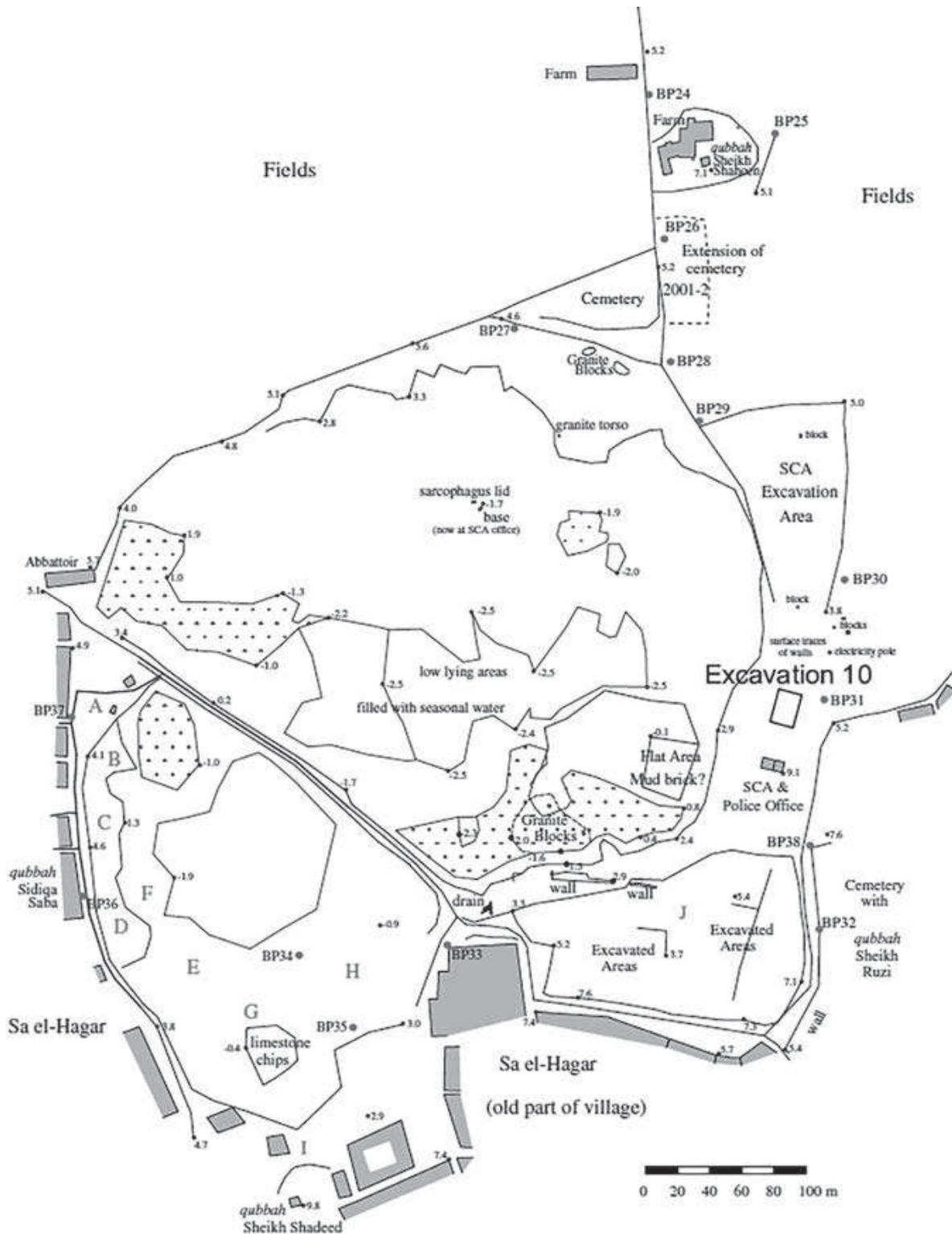


Fig. 7a. Map of the area of the 'Great Pit' at Sa el-Hagar/Sais showing the location of the excavations (© Egypt Exploration Society and Durham University).

and Late Antique material; a large limestone block was added to the wall, likely as a supporting foundation (Fig. 7b). Approximately half-way along the curved wall there was a mass of brickwork which appears to be a sort of base of some other feature (a column or vault springing). Outside the building, an industrial area [10.005] with traces of burning has been identified, which contained a group of Late Roman amphorae (Fig. 7c). The curved wall inside a straight retaining wall and the possible presence of a vault springing



Fig. 7b. Church building excavated at Sais (© Egypt Exploration Society and Durham University).



Fig. 7c. Industrial area [10.005] outside the church building at Sais (© Egypt Exploration Society and Durham University).

suggest an interpretation of the remains as a church building,<sup>37</sup> while the industrial zone outside may support the identification, churches being also centres of production. Columns, capitals and reworked granite shafts have also been discovered around the modern village<sup>38</sup> substantiating the picture and confirming the literary account of Ibn Hauqal. The church was built over pre-existing mudbrick structures possibly Ptolemaic, and the recovered pottery assemblage confirms the presence of underlying Saite layers that have been subsequently destroyed. Overall, one might outline a whole sequence of overbuilding of the late pharaonic and Hellenistic structures, which were reused as rubble core of Roman and Late Antique buildings from the fourth to fifth centuries onward.

The site of Sakha ('PATHs' ID 4; Fig. 8a) is the most difficult to evaluate due to the limited and poorly contextualised evidence. The site has been levelled and is covered by the south part of Kafr es-Sheikh city, except for a small area of the ancient mound, so that almost nothing survives *in situ*. Moreover, a systematic archaeological investigation has yet to be undertaken. Excavations carried out in 1960-1961 brought to light the agora of the Graeco-Roman town, characterised by two bath installations and a workshop area with ateliers for pottery production – a pattern similar to what is documented at Buto. The nearby church, on the other hand, displays some traces of the later occupation: apart from the famous stone-block with the alleged Jesus' footprint (which some take as evidence for identifying this place with Bikha Isous), the excavations carried out (1994) on occasion of the renovation of the edifice, has brought to light some architectural elements exhibited at the entrance of the church (capitals and shafts of columns Fig. 8b). Despite the scanty material, the site apparently reveals a sequence of urban arrangement similar to that attested in other Roman-Late Antique centres (Buto, Sais, Athribis), with bathhouses as an important focus in the (Roman) topography of the site and (possibly) a shift in the location of the church with respect to the earlier public area.

Broadening perspective, survey works and some focused excavations have produced a valuable set of archaeological, geographical, environmental data to model a more articulated and material-based framework in which these individual cases can be placed, thus shifting discussion to a regional, landscape level. In this regard, two aspects are worth noting: (a) the chronological focus and (b) the variety of site-types and dimensions.

<sup>37</sup> Obviously, this edifice, which has been only partially unearthed in recent years, does not appear in the study of Grossmann (GROSSMANN 2002).

<sup>38</sup> WILSON 2006, 227-229.



Fig. 8a. View of the archaeological area at Sakha/Xois (© 'PATHs' Team, May 2018).



Fig. 8b. Architectural elements displayed at the modern church of Sakha (© 'PATHs' Team, May 2018).

Taking advantage of the impressive work of the EES Delta Survey, 'PATHs' has collected over 150 sites that can be archaeologically dated to Late Antiquity, mostly on the base of surface pottery, though some of them have also yielded more substantial evidence (Table 1; Fig. 3).<sup>39</sup> This crude figure is already remarkable – it is more than three times the sum of the other two types of relevant places (sites with manuscripts and bishoprics) – and requires a brief comment: the chronological units and the related nomenclature used by the EES Delta Survey distinguish a Late Roman assemblage of fourth-seventh century from an Early Arab phase including evidence of eighth-eleventh century.<sup>40</sup> The sketched periodisation signals changes in the set of collected materials but the underlying cultural patterns certainly overlapped and were more fluidly amalgamated.<sup>41</sup> That is to say that, while not all the surveyed sites may necessarily display tangible or evident traces of an established Christian occupation, they all positively contribute to chart and adjust our understanding of the cultural and religious transformations occurring in the region during those centuries.

Once mapped, these sites arrange into large clusters that, while certainly reflecting the status of modern archaeological and surveying activities,<sup>42</sup> might however be indicative of ancient settlement patterns and configurations. In particular, the north central Delta, between Buto and Sebennytos, emerges as an area densely settled and populated in this period.<sup>43</sup> Overall, it seems that there are many sites, whose life-cycle does not fit the model of a Ptolemaic and early Roman development followed by decline into the Late Antique period, but rather corresponds to a pattern of Late Antique reconfiguration, continuation or displacement well into the Arab period.<sup>44</sup> It is remarkable that, on the basis of the pottery material surveyed, Late Antiquity is the best represented phase at most sites, and that, while those in north-western Delta mainly display a continuity of occupation from the Ptolemaic to the Byzantine period, until the seventh-eighth century CE, the majority of the settlements in the northern central part of the Delta appear to have developed from the Roman times into the early mediaeval period, up to the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>45</sup> The case of Buto and its hinterland is particularly instructive in this regard: the ancient

39 Cf. WILSON 2014, 49. An Excel file listing all the sites at which Roman, Late Roman/Coptic or early Islamic material has been recorded by the EES Delta Survey project has been kindly shared with 'PATHs' by Jeffrey Spencer, to whom I am grateful for the generous support (personal email communication 06/07/2019). The list is actually being processed and all the relevant sites will be included in the Atlas, receiving a 'PATHs' ID and displaying a cross-reference to the corresponding entry on the EES Delta Survey website.

40 Cf. the chronological summary and the full discussion on the pottery material collected from the Western Delta in WILSON - GRIGOROPOULOS 2009, 268-288, and Tables 2.1-2, 3.

41 Cf. MIKHAIL 2014, 1-4, in particular 2.

42 In particular, the central part of the Delta shows a striking lack of sites, a fact explained more by the limited investigation of the area than by the actual absence of evidence. Cf. WILSON 2009, 142-143, fig. 9.2.

43 WILSON 2014, 44-45, fig. 2; 2017, 348-352, fig. 1.

44 WILSON 2017, 348.

45 According to the data of the EES Delta Survey, pottery dating to the Late Roman (fifth to mid-seventh) accounts for 37% of the total assemblage, thus representing 'the single largest period-group amongst all the ceramic material collected' (WILSON -

pharaonic centre, the origins of which date back to the prehistory of Egypt, was still active in the eighth century, when it had become part of a regional system of highly diversified sites distributed along channels and waterways up to the northern shores of the lake Burullus, with an occupation ranging (mainly) from Roman times until the eighth-ninth centuries.<sup>46</sup> Some of them, like Tell Foqaa, Kom Sidi Selim, and Kom Abu Ismail,<sup>47</sup> also extended into the ninth-tenth centuries, well after the Arab conquest, as indicated by the specific type and fabric of their pottery assemblages.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, a typological and functional assessment of the numerous sites might illustrate the variety of forms and modes of exploitation and occupation of the Delta, allowing us, on the one hand, to move beyond a dominant (biased) monastic perspective and, on the other hand, to reassess the value of Byzantine and Mediaeval urban sites within a dynamic regional context. In this perspective, the preliminary classification proposed by Penelope Wilson, which tries to combine the morphological, topographical and environmental features of the sites with the archaeological evidence recorded from their survey into a basic functional interpretation, could provide a valuable, though tentative, material counterpart to integrate documentary information as well as to outline a settlement system on large territorial scale.<sup>49</sup> As a result, one could use her typology to test, articulate and refine theoretical models like the multi-layered structure (megalopolis, urban and proto-urban settlements, villages, hamlets, farmsteads) conjectured by David Alston.<sup>50</sup> The bishoprics and great cities (like, presumably, the sites described above) were certainly urban poles of significant administrative-economic activities, as well as the places where the Christian elites operated as political and religious representatives of the community, mainly responsible for building and renovation projects (like churches).<sup>51</sup> In the countryside, however, a full range of different urban(ised) and agricultural settlements (towns, villages, farms, estates, and monasteries included) were involved in the management of the rural hinterlands and engaged in multiple and (more or less) hierarchical connections between them and with the city-cores relying on their productivity.<sup>52</sup>

The archaeology of the Delta, therefore, offers ample room for framing the great centres of the Coptic tradition into a wider and more nuanced picture of historical transformation, socio-economic interaction, and cultural reorganisation of the local landscape. In Late Antiquity, the ancient Egyptian cities, with their monumental temples and their high prestigious status retained from pharaonic (nome capitals) and Graeco-Roman times (metropoleis), further enhanced their position as key-places of religious authority (episcopal sees), while the advent of Christianity affected their urban profile and appearance. Evidence from Buto and Sais shows that, although temples were no longer prominent topographical foci, the modes and strategies of their removal fit better with a transitional rather than conflictual process, where ancient structures were gradually abandoned and dismantled for recycling building material, while apparently a shift occurred in the location of the public area with (at least some of) the new edifices of cult (churches), as the case of Xoïs possibly indicates. In this regard, despite gaps and limitations, data from Delta contexts could enter the crucial debate on the passage 'from temple to church' in Egypt, the relationship between the decline of traditional cults and the rise of the new religion, and the general problem of urban planning.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the presence of bath installations dating from the Ptolemaic to Roman period (Buto, Sais, Xoïs), besides matching a contemporary widespread pattern of urbanistic arrangement (cf. Athribis, and Thmuis in the Delta), gives support to literary testimonies like that of Ibn Hauqal on Sais, suggesting

GRIGOROPOULOS 2009, 276), while the Early Arab group (eighth to eleventh centuries) makes up another 13%; full analysis and discussion in WILSON - GRIGOROPOULOS 2009, 276-284.

46 Cf. BALLETT *et al.* 1993, 21; WILSON 2014; WILSON 2017.

47 Respectively EES sites 254, 282, 387. Individual files in Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009, 233-236 (Tell Foqaa), 240-244 (Kom Sidi Selim), 156-157 (Kom Abu Ismail).

48 WILSON 2017, 361-362.

49 WILSON 2014, 45-49, especially 49. The hierarchy includes: 'Twin mound' sites; lagoon shore sites; high, square sites, 'levee' type sites; 'Mutubis' type mounds; island sites; smaller villages and hamlets.

50 WILSON 2002, 330-331, Table 6.2.

51 Cf. MIKHAIL 2014, 37-50.

52 WILSON 2014; WILSON 2017.

53 The topic is extensively discussed and analysed, from different perspectives and in relation to different examples, in the various contributions edited by HAHN - EMMEL - GOTTER 2008. A strong emphasis on the archaeological record and an integrated approach on regional scale are advocated by DIJKSTRA 2011.

that this kind of public space could have remained an important social arena well into Byzantine and Arab times. Indirectly, this fact also points to the existence of other, now vanished spaces of social and cultural interaction. In this regard, the textual reference to the scribal training and intellectual background of Zacharias of Xoïs/Sakha also serves to remind us how much of the original materiality of such contexts has been lost or left no recognisable trace on the ground but were, nonetheless, certainly a tangible component of local townscapes, and should not pass unnoticed in modern reconstructions, if only as negative evidence.

Leaving aside monumental features mostly surviving at larger sites, pottery assemblage is certainly the best represented class of material culture, and may reflect cultural trends and aspects of the lifestyle in Late Antique towns and settlements. Of course, this is not the place for a full discussion and conclusions drawn from survey evidence remain inevitably partial and limited, but still they can offer us some basic clues.<sup>54</sup> Fine tableware and amphorae prevail both as locally made and as imported pottery from North Africa and eastern Mediterranean: the first group includes imports of Cypriot Red Slip and African Red Slip from Tunisia, alongside regional products like the Aswan Red Slip and Egyptian Red Slip B. Amphorae, mostly associated with the transportation of wine and oil, are well represented by local types (Carthage LRA 7 and, less frequently attested, LRA 5/6), and by imports of eastern provenance (Carthage LRA 1 and LRA 4 or 'Gaza amphorae'). This pattern elicits at least two brief remarks: (1) the circulation of vessels, both as containers of goods (wine and oil) and as final products (tableware) shows a higher degree of integration of the western Delta into the economic dynamics at both regional and Mediterranean level, with many sites functioning as active markets and centres of exchange;<sup>55</sup> (2) imports and local imitations of fine tableware suggest that certain forms were invested with social or aesthetic values and might be broadly indicative of common tastes and rather homogeneous modes of presentation of food in urban milieus, while also alluding to another important context (house and domestic spaces) of social life and cultural interaction that is scarcely documented in Delta archaeology.

The picture sketched above is no more than guesswork, and gives only an (admittedly intuitive) impression of what might have been the urban situation at the sites described, as well as of how they could have been integrated into a network of differently-sized settlements within a well-inhabited and dynamic deltaic environment. Evidence is still rather patchy and variable, but Delta archaeology is progressing rapidly and so are the possibilities of expanding and adjusting our knowledge/view of the historical and cultural development of this area.

#### 4. *Conclusions*

To resume, in guise of conclusion, the opening question: how can Delta archaeology participate in the study of Coptic literature? The answer – contextualisation – is both negative and positive. The negative side concerns the limitations in the data available as well as the difficulties in acquiring such information, and prospectively indicates promising lines of inquiry. The positive results can be articulated more in detail, being aware, as a general theoretical remark on the correlation between archaeological evidence and textual information, that positive does not mean positivist: material data cannot be used uncritically and straightforwardly to confirm or reject literary sources. The remains from the contexts described do not match the textual descriptions but allow us to outline an urban environment that sources evoke or exploit for ideological purposes. Certainly, we are not supposed to use accounts, homiletic and liturgical texts to 'read' the extant structures on the ground; rather, the architectural features and the localisation of church

54 A detailed analysis of the pottery data from the western Delta Survey, cf. WILSON - GRIGORPOULOS 2009, 276-282 (specifically on Late Antique evidence), and the final catalogue reviewing the material for each surveyed site. For an attempt to set this data within a wider historical and socio-cultural framework, cf. WILSON 2014, 54-55. For a targeted examination of the specific case-study of Buto and the surrounding region, cf. BALLETT - VON DER WAY 1993, 6-22.

55 In this regard, the comment of BALLETT - VON DER WAY (1993, 22) on the pottery assemblage from Buto that '[c]ette céramique tardive traduit bien des affinités avec celle des franges occidentales du Delta (Kellia, Abou Mina) (...) ces céramiques participent-elles d'un courant commercial ou s'agit-il d'apports ponctuels de voyageurs et de pèlerins' perfectly illustrates the point, highlighting the structural connections that linked, spatially and economically, cities, towns and specialised settlements like monasteries.

and temple buildings at these sites, with the shifts and changes that can be inferred from them, suggest a complex process of re-use of earlier material and of urban reconfiguration that literary texts formulate through the topical motive of the victory of Christianity (its ideology, institutions, and architectural forms) over the earlier, 'pagan' counterpart. Both types of sources (archaeological and textual), therefore, concur to elucidate the material, symbolic and cultural dynamics underlying the Christian appropriation of local contexts and regional landscapes. Incidentally, the diachronic stratification of the sites appears as an important aspect to acknowledge inasmuch as the cultural memory of their past history comes to play a part in the literary discourse of some Christian sources.

Archaeological evidence and survey information from the Delta can also be used proficiently to build better arguments, raise new issues, and suggest different perspectives in the field of literary studies: (1) they reassess the complexity of Late Antique geography, complementing and integrating the monastic landscape with its urban counterpart, which in the Delta was a widespread context of economic, intellectual, and religious activity. The image of the monk secluded in the solitude of the desert is now largely recognised as a hagiographic fiction,<sup>56</sup> and archaeological-geographical data can positively contribute to the debate – so far almost exclusively based on sources and materials from Upper Egypt (cf. the Nag Hammadi case) – about the relationships between literature, urban and monastic milieus. Accordingly (2), the city can be reconfigured as a potentially vibrant context of literary production and/or fruition. Despite the paucity of primary data on literary manuscripts from the Delta, its urban landscape still might work as a valuable comparative framework against which the richer information coming from Upper Egypt could be contrasted. This might result in a constructive incentive to reconsider literary problems like the assumption that '[i]n late antiquity, centers of book production were primarily if not exclusively in monasteries.<sup>57</sup> It has been recently objected, on a critical-historical basis, that this shared idea is rather a biased impression: while a more careful consideration of textual material seems to indicate that 'at least until the 5th century, but also later, monastic and urban contexts were much more tangential than one might think', it is also a fact that monasteries are a well-established object of study, far better than urban settlements, although the latter largely outnumber the former.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the stratification, expansion and transformation they have experienced over time make it difficult to understand the topographical layout of a site, let alone to identify specific spaces. The survey and topographical data gradually emerging from the cities and towns of the Delta (but not only from there) point to a complex socio-economic interaction between urban, rural and monastic landscape, and seem to suggest that cities – at least some of them – could have been relevant intellectual foci and possibly important contexts of dissemination and circulation of literary ideas and products. Ultimately (3), for 'PATHs', archaeology and geography represent a valuable source of data that offer a tremendous intellectual stimulus to historical and literary studies expanding both the vertical (chronological) and horizontal (landscape) dimension of the analysis. They help us to reconceptualise places as dynamic historical entities, spatial palimpsests we could say – venturing to adopt a philological-codicological metaphor –, within a wide, multi-tiered geographical context where physical spaces, literary products and religious paths overlap and relate to each other in a variety of meaningful ways. Making intelligible such a dense scenario for Byzantine and Medieval Egypt is the ultimate goal of the *Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature*.

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. WIPSYCKA 1994.

<sup>57</sup> KOTSIFOU 2007, 55, 50.

<sup>58</sup> BUZI 2018, 23, 24.

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