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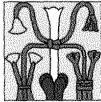
NATURAL AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES IN THE FAYOUM

*The Safeguarding and Management of Archaeological Sites
and Natural Environments*

Edited by
Rosanna Pirelli



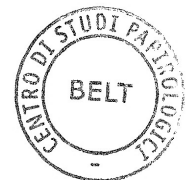
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FOR THE SAFEGUARD OF SOKNOPAIU NESOS

A team of the Centro di Studi Papirologici of the University of Salento, Lecce, has been working at Soknopaiou Nesos/Dime since 2003. Its purpose is to investigate the archaeology of the site and look for papyri, and also to alert the Egyptian government and the international community to the need for safeguarding the site and the surrounding archaeological area and landscape.¹

The modern history of the site of Soknopaiou Nesos has been heavily influenced by its position. It is located in the desert, north of the pseudo-oasis of the Fayoum, about 2 kilometres north of the shore of Birket Qarun, and therefore far from populated areas. There have always been two main ways to get to the site: from the south, across the lake; and from the east, across the desert. The trails leading there from the north are much less passable. Crossing the lake takes about twenty minutes, but it is safe only in good weather. Moreover, after landing on the northern shore, one still has two kilometres of desert to cover before reaching the site. The second solution (from the east) requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle and a fairly good knowledge of the route. The desert road begins near Karanis/Kom Aushim and it takes an hour to cover the 30 kilometres between this site and the ruins of Soknopaiou Nesos. Nowadays there is a third way to get to the site: from the west, across a comfortable new asphalt road running northwest of the lake.

The distance of Soknopaiou Nesos from populated areas has been both an advantage and a disadvantage for its conservation. It has sheltered the fragile structures of the site, mainly built of mud-brick, from deterioration caused by factors that normally pose serious threats to the conservation of the archaeological sites, such as agriculture, sewer systems, the expansion of settlements and modern cemeteries, traffic pollution, and the removal of old building materials for recycling in modern buildings. Furthermore, the area is blessed with not excessive humidity levels, despite the relative proximity of the lake – although humidity is presently increasing all over the Fayoum depression. On a negative note, a high level of salinity has been measured both in the sand and in the limestone blocks used in the construction of the stone temple dedicated to the god Soknopaios (ST20).²

At the same time, this isolation has always facilitated undisturbed tampering by desert tourists and clandestine excavators. Soknopaiou Nesos is indeed, for its undoubted beauty, one of the favourite destinations for the (mainly foreign) tourists who, usually on Friday and Saturday, swarm down from Cairo to the site: veritable caravans of off-road trucks that disgorge vociferous and sometimes ill-behaved families armed with picnic baskets. The real problem is the absence of guards. Visitors will actually drive onto the *kom* with their vehicles and run about the site, inevitably damaging the fragile structures that often emerge from the sand. Tire tracks left by tourists are clearly visible on the site, particularly on its eastern and western sides. Moreover, these visitors have the bad habit of taking away with them pieces of broken pottery and other sundry

¹ For a description of Soknopaiou Nesos and the main results of the eight seasons of work carried out by our mission at this site (2003-2008) see P. Davoli, *New Discoveries at Soknopaiou Nesos* in this volume. See also M. Capasso-P. Davoli (eds.), *Soknopaiou Nesos Project I*, Pisa-Roma 2012.

² The measures were taken by Ali Taha of the Centro Italo Egiziano per il Restauro e l'Archeologia in Cairo.

objects they come across on their excursions. Furthermore, they often leave remains of their meals (plastic bags, drinks, cans etc.) and other litter on the ruins or immediately around them. This trash, if it is not immediately collected, is obviously destined to become a permanent part of the landscape. It should be noted that these tourists often come with their Egyptian guides, who can be even more insensitive and destructive than the excursionists themselves. We ourselves have often had trouble dealing with them.

There is also another kind of tourists, those who merrily set up camp there, having learned about the site from websites suggesting the possibility of spending a romantic moonlight night under canvas among the ruins of Soknopaiou Nesos. Early one morning, arriving at the site, we happened to run into one of these families: the night before, with the generous consent of a guard, they had pitched their tent right on top of the *dromos*, the paved road that leads from the southern boundary to the sacred area. When we explained to them that they had committed an offence and invited them to leave, they replied rather peevisly that there were no notices forbidding camping at that particular archaeological site. This, of course, is not true. Since 2004 there have been four gigantic posters, placed by our mission, at the four cardinal points of the site.

Just as undisturbed, but of course more harmful, are the illegal excavators, who take advantage of the little or no surveillance of the site. The Supreme Council of Antiquities asked us to find two private security guards who, once our mission closes the excavations and goes back to Italy, would take turns watching over the site, at least during the day. Our mission thus engaged two private guards and built a small building for them to live in. At the end of each season of work, it gives their year's wages in advance to the Fayoum Inspectorate of Antiquities. These two guards are (or are supposed to be) assisted by guards from the Inspectorate, who should be regularly present at Soknopaiou Nesos to help with the supervision of the site. The main problem, again, is the remoteness of the site, which the Inspectorate guards can apparently reach only by crossing the lake by boat, if a boat is available, and weather permitting. The fact that the Inspectorate guards are not constantly present at the site inevitably implies that our two private guards do not go there regularly either, because nobody checks on them.

The ideal solution to prevent incursions by off-road vehicles into the archaeological area would be to fence it off, but such a solution would be quite difficult to put into practice and would also have quite a nasty landscape impact. First of all, the perimeter of the site is about 3 km, so the fence would have to be at least 3.5 km long. Besides, the fence would have to be particularly sturdy, since visitors would be easily tempted to knock it down at some points to get into the site with their vehicles. One could envisage, for example, a fence of blocks of concrete or stone with metal railings on top, but such a solution would be very expensive and would hardly fit with the archaeological surroundings.

Our mission has put up a series of signs immediately outside the excavation area giving brief information about the site and, most importantly, alerting visitors to the prohibition under Egyptian law of driving onto the ruins with vehicles. We have also produced an illustrated brochure for visitors, in both Italian and English. Along with a brief description of the Fayoum, and of Soknopaiou Nesos and the history of its archaeological exploration, it contains a recommendation to park all vehicles in an area designated for the purpose east of the site, and to visit the site following certain recommended paths. At the moment we are working, together with the Archaeological Office of the Italian Cultural Centre in Cairo, on the Arabic version of this brochure. The publication of this brochure is, in our opinion, a first step towards an intelligent regulation of tourism at Soknopaiou Nesos and other sites in the Fayoum, something which cannot be further delayed. However,

we need the full collaboration of the Fayoum Governorate, which should undertake to adequately educate the Egyptian travel agencies and their guides (who are often Egyptian, as I mentioned above), and should also match the efforts of our mission, which can do nothing more than paying for two guards every year, put advertisements and publish guides, also on our web-site (www.museopapirologico.eu/snp.htm). A new road that is under construction will allow an easy trip to Dime from the east, but at the same time it will pose a further threat to the safeguard of the ancient vestiges north of Lake Qarun.

Ensuring adequate and continuous surveillance of the site is of course fundamental to stop incursions by clandestine excavators. Since 2003, the year when our mission started to excavate the site, some unidentified individuals have dug holes at various spots on at least four separate occasions. In 2005, someone dug a hole in the courtyard between the two temples, damaging some walls of ST18. In 2007, the same spot was dug into again, and another pit was dug in one of the houses lying south-east of the *temenos*, damaging the cellar's ceiling. In 2009, three very heavy lintels, which we had left inside the *naos* of ST20 during the excavation, were removed and placed behind the *naos*, which was then dug out. At an unknown time, although certainly after 2003, someone dug into cellar D of room ST200A, a Roman-period building situated in the courtyard between the two temples. Furthermore, many pits have been dug in the necropoleis: every year there are new ones, with fresh traces of bivouacs. The raiders do not have any knowledge of excavation techniques: they usually dig in areas where they naively – and wrongly – believe treasures, or at least important artefacts, may lie. The only concrete result of their action is the alteration of the ancient stratigraphy or damages to the stability of the ancient structures.

Adequate and continuous surveillance of the site would certainly discourage raids by thieves. Still, as long as the antique business remains booming, Egyptian archaeological sites will be at the mercy of clandestine excavators. The same concern applies to papyri: the Association Internationale de Papyrologues (AIP) set up a commission (General Meeting in Ann Arbor 04/08/2007) “to study the complex legal, ethical and scholarly questions connected with the commerce of papyri and make recommendations... [concerning] measures that may appropriately serve the purpose of scholarship, support the development of papyrological studies in Egypt, and further the preservation of the documentary heritage of Egypt and other countries”. After three years' work, the commission drew up a series of recommendations, approved by the General Meeting held in Geneva (21st August 2010), which can be consulted on the AIP website [<http://www.ulb.ac.be/assoc/aip/>]. Among other things, it was recommended that each member carefully observe not only the 1970 UNESCO Convention (which forbids the illegal import and export of cultural heritage) but also the laws of his or her own country, and those of Egypt and other countries from which ancient written artefacts come. Furthermore, each member of the Association was invited “to consider seriously the possibility of excavating sites in Egypt where written texts may be found, particularly where these sites are endangered by rising ground water or property development”, “to identify material for sale or held in private collections as having been stolen from Egyptian museums or magazines”, and to “advise its owner and urge the owner to return it to the Egyptian authorities”; members were urged not to “assist in the marketing of such material in any way”.

Moreover, the AIP made a plea to public institutions that might have the intention of disposing of some or all of their papyri to sell or transfer them to other public institutions that would be able to guarantee access to them for teaching or research purposes. Perhaps they should have also resolutely urged the Egyptian

authorities to reinforce, possibly in collaboration with foreign archaeological missions, the surveillance of archaeological sites in order to stop or drastically reduce clandestine excavations. The recommendations of the AIP should be nevertheless regarded as an important step forward, because they have contributed to set a code of conduct for the papyrologist, who from now on will hardly be able to ignore or violate it.³

An important aspect of the safeguarding of Soknopaiou Nesos, as well as of other sites, is its restoration. The considerable distance of the site from populated areas creates serious organisational difficulties for an adequate restoration of its fragile structures, mostly built of mud-brick; so, at least for the moment, we have chosen to only carry out limited strategic restoration actions. For example, we have restored a few selected local limestone blocks of temple ST20 that had cracked once brought to light. This kind of limestone, which is often found in the archaeological sites of the Fayoum, is very fragile indeed and prone to shatter as a result of diurnal temperature variations and increases in atmospheric humidity. It is not possible to apply chemicals to strengthen it because both the sand and the blocks themselves are particularly rich in salt; for this reason, the specialists of the Centro Italo-Egiziano per il Restauro e l'Archeologia in Cairo, directed by Prof. G. Fanfoni, have advised us to first wash the limestone to desalinate it. This operation, however, would require large amounts of water, which would be particularly difficult to transport to the site and very dangerous for the surrounding vestiges. Even the large-scale restoration of mud-brick walls by the addition of new courses of bricks is, for economic, practical and logistic reasons, a particularly difficult task.

Another serious threat the site is facing comes from the numerous on-going building and tourism-related projects in the Fayoum region and the Birket Qarun area. These projects are often conducted in disregard of the need to preserve from massive and unregulated urbanisation both the site of Soknopaiou Nesos and its surrounding area, especially the northern shore of the lake, which is rich in vestiges of settlements dating between prehistory and the middle ages, and in landscape and geological features. The reclaimed land is extending eastward and has reached the northern shore of the lake. Many of the Neolithic sites discovered by G. Caton-Thompson and E.W. Gardner in that area have been destroyed or covered over by new industrial sites or new farmland. In the recent past nothing has been done to safeguard this important and unique historical heritage, despite the alarm raised by the UCLA mission directed by W. Wendrich.

Many of these building and tourism-related projects are being promoted on the Internet, some by private entities, others by the authorities, still others by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Unlike the projects promoted by private operators, the government and NGO projects share the laudable aim of "sustainable ecotourism". I will just mention two examples: the "Fayoum Governorate Environment Action Plan", set up by the State Ministry of the Environment in collaboration with the Fayoum authorities; and the "Fayoum Ecotourism Development Plan 2005-2015", promoted by the Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo, the Cooperazione Internazionale Sud Sud and the Fayoum Tourism Authority. The first project is divided into two phases; the first one was carried out in 2002-2007, the second will be completed in 2012. It is an extremely ambitious project, founded on the indisputable idea that environmental protection is the best way to preserve our

³ For a detailed analysis of the problems encountered in safeguarding the archaeological sites of the Fayoum, cf. C. Gallazzi, *Will we still find papyri in 2042: continuation*, in *Actes du 26^e XXV^e Congrès International de Papyrologie*, Genève 16th-21st August 2011, forthcoming.

heritage for future generations. One of its objectives is "to plan the governorate resources, cultural heritage and manage them in a sustainable manner (land, water, air and development of monumental and tourism attractions)". As regards this last, which is more directly related to the archaeological situation of the region, the project aims to:

1. "contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction through generation of ecotourism based on economic activities undertaken by the local population";
2. "transform environmental, social and cultural resources and heritage of Fayoum into sustainable economic assets";
3. "ensure economic development for the poor as well as protection of traditional values, cultural and natural environmental conservation".

These projects, like other similar ones, have worthy aims, but also raise some serious questions: in what measure will the necessary economic development of the region and the fight against poverty respect its important archaeological and historical heritage? Will a Sharm el-Sheikh of sorts arise on the northern shores of the lake, as many fear, with obviously devastating consequences for sites like Soknopaiou Nesos, Qasr es-Sagha, Deir Abu Life? I would like to mention the commendable activity of two private associations, Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) and Friends of Lake Qarun (FLQ), which are struggling to defend the natural, historical and archaeological "jewels" of the Fayoum Oasis against unregulated and aggressive building projects.

In my opinion it is possible, if we really want it, to reconcile development needs with cultural heritage preservation. We know there exists, at least on paper, an official archaeological park in the area north of the lake; however, its director, having no resources, can do little or nothing for the protection of the area. Like other parks already successfully established in the Fayoum (for example Wadi al-Heitan, "Valley of the Whales") or currently being set up (for example the Karanis Project, financed by the ARCE and carried on by the University of California, the University of Los Angeles and the Groningen Rijksuniversiteit), this archaeological park should become a concrete reality. With the contributions of the local Governorate, the Supreme Council of Antiquities, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and possibly the foreign archaeological missions working in this region, the park should provide suitable promotion for the sites of geological, archaeological and historical interest in the area, and better protect them from indiscriminate building development, unregulated tourist incursions, and the raids of clandestine diggers. It is however fundamental, as a first step, that the Egyptian authorities speed up and support the application to UNESCO for the inclusion of the archaeological sites of the Fayoum in the list of World Heritage Sites (which already includes, since 2005, Wadi al-Heitan).