3. WATER, TOPONYMY, AND THE IMAGE OF THE CITY IN GRAECO-ROMAN EGYPT[1]

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The main aim of this study is to analyze how urban toponyms, on the one hand, and urban water infrastructures, on the other, are related to the perception of the city in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Some important issues need to be addressed when trying to connect "objective" physical realities, like canals or fountains, with a linguistic reality, such as toponyms, where denotative and connotative (i.e. symbolic) meanings are often simultaneously present. One of these concerns the ambivalent, hybrid character of the cultural context under study, i.e. Graeco-Roman Egypt. The composite reality of Egypt in this period means that the cultural patterns valid in Pharaonic times continued to a large extent to be relevant, albeit in a new, very complex and shifting relationship with other cultural patterns, mainly Greek, Roman, and Jewish. Here, the question of the nature of this relationship arises: is symbiosis, coexistence, or conflict the most appropriate term for it? Whatever the case, in this context the analysis of any cultural phenomenon must contemplate the very real possibility of a double (or triple) meaning, or rather a single meaning obtained through different readings, connections, or interpretations, according to the Greek or Egyptian cultural code being used. In this paper I will argue for some instances of this in the construction of a shared image of the city in Graeco-Roman Egypt.[2]

Another methodological issue to consider is related to the very status of the analysis of written sources and their contribution to our research object. To what extent do the texts (documentary and literary) or the words (e.g. toponyms) inform us of existing, objective realities, or of subjective perceptions, symbolically charged notions? Here again there is a double level of meaning that must be acknowledged in the interpretation of texts, i.e. the information they give us about what we would call the factual reality (as for instance the names of town districts as administrative realities or the existing water supply infrastructures) and, on the other hand, the information they may contain about the subjective idea of the city, the perception of the urban space at a symbolic level, as a cultural construct. Of course, the dichotomy is ultimately a false one, in that these symbolic notions also underlie and fashion the reality of the city, so that in a certain sense its apparent factual matter-of-factness can easily turn out to be a misleading, only apparent transparency or familiarity. Among the papers in this volume, written sources are approached by classicists and specialists on documentary papyri and the history of Greek and Roman Egypt. Our approaches and results will of course be different, and there is no point in trying to blur or confuse two distinct levels of reality. On the other hand, however, neither should we consider them to be completely isolated from each other, as they spring from the same historical reality, even sometimes from the same document under study, and the comparison of these two sides of that same reality can help us achieve a better, more complete understanding of it.

These two approaches often correspond to two equally different kinds of written source: on the one hand, documentary texts, such as administrative documents, tax receipts, legislation, contracts, etc.; on the other hand, symbolically articulated texts, such as literary works, or religious documents. Apart from the fact that there are other types of texts whose classification would be more difficult or lie in between, such as private letters and most paraliterary documents, it must be remembered that even documentary texts can, at least sometimes, be subjected to a more general, anthropological analysis, which could study, for example, the modes of describing or naming space as betraying some cultural, constructed images, concepts or patterns that go beyond or lie beneath their declared, explicit functional use. I intend to discuss here one such – specific case, which can be obtained from the study of the urban toponymy of Oxyrhynchus, and particularly the way in which it reflects the presence and function of water in fashioning an urban landscape, but one which may lie as much in the imaginary perception as in the material reality of the city.

Thus, for example, in a third century letter giving instructions to find the address of the person who should receive it, several place names are mentioned, toponyms in some cases, the rest being common names (though sometimes it is difficult to decide which): the Moon Gate, the Public Baths, some granaries (or is it the Granaries?), a precinct (presumably of a temple), a seven-storey house, and so on.[3] From the perspective of the perception of the urban space, such a document could be studied first as a source for the individual landmarks that can be taken as points of reference by a person moving around the city, depending on their physical visibility or their perceived importance (for instance, if they can be easily recognized by native local inhabitants who could be asked to identify them for the carrier of the message). The text can also be approached as an urban itinerary, which gives us information about the connection of urban spaces in a sequence, presumably selected as the easiest way of reaching the intended spot, not necessarily from an objective point of view, but primarily from a subjective perspective based on the visibility of the landmarks and/or the perceived highlighted axes of urban movements through the city. As Alston observes, the image conveyed by the tortuous itinerary proposed here is of a complicated network of alleys and passageways, probably in sharp contrast to the ordered image offered by the main thoroughfares.[4]

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[2] Another example of this issue can be found in the study by T. Whitmarsh, in this volume.

This example offers a good starting point to address one of my main concerns: the value of toponymy for obtaining a picture of the perception of urban space. This picture will no doubt be blurred by the incompleteness of our information, but it is also important to note that, by their very nature, imprecision, subjectivity and polysemy are necessarily an integral part of it. We have seen in the document just mentioned the landmark importance of the Moon Gate, probably the main western entrance to the city, as in Hermopolis Magna. We may go on now to consider the names of streets and districts. To what extent were they informative or relevant to contemporary citizens? Toponyms tend to remain long after the disappearance of the reality they originally referred to (we wouldn't necessarily look for actual pines in Pine Street). Still, I would argue that this being so, place names often tend to draw at least a symbolic image of the city, to construct a shared perception of it that can work even on a subconscious level, beyond its purely functional meaning in everyday speech. This is especially true of names related to important historical, political, or military figures or events, as well as of religious names (gods, sanctuaries, or rites), as they inscribe in the space of the community the main features of its history, beliefs or identity in the space of the community.

The situation in the cities of Graeco-Roman Egypt in this respect is far from homogeneous and raises many important questions.[5] Administrative districts seem to date from Roman times, with at least two important moments of change in the system: c. 20 BC, and c. 300 AD. In some cities they are either simply numbered (e.g. at Antinoopolis, Tmouis, or Mendes), or named according to compass quarter points (e.g. "Polis E" "Polis W", "Phrourion E", and "Phrourion W" at Hermopolis Magna), whereas in other cities (e.g. Oxyrhynchus or Ptolemais Evergetis) they bear toponyms, presumably inherited from earlier traditional usage (some of them are already attested in Ptolemaic times). This raises the question of the nature of our sources, which are mainly administrative documents, and the relationship between those districts and the local social units, i.e. the neighbourhoods. Of course, these social realities, with their traditional names, probably also existed in those cities with numbered districts, except that they are not so well attested as when they are at least partially taken up by the administrative division. It is not clear either whether there is a connection between numbered districts and regular urbanism, though we can assume this at least for Antinoopolis.

Even the most cursory look at the names of districts in Oxyrhynchus[6] allows us to see the heteroclity of the attested toponyms. This I believe to be indicative of their validity as popular names, a system kept alive in the perception of the city by its inhabitants going about in their daily lives, and not only an official, purely administrative system. Among them we find, as is to be expected, many names referring to the religious system of gods and shrines sanctuaries, others to important public buildings, and yet others to ethnic groups. Even if these do not necessarily correspond to an actual situation, the fact that the Jewish district is only attested for the first and second centuries AD, and not later, seems to indicate that at least in this case there was indeed some matching reality behind the name, as the chronology seems to correspond to the visibility of Jews and their almost total disappearance after the revolt of 117.

The toponym often suggests that there is a building functioning as a spatial focus around which the reality of the district tends to articulate. One interesting indication lies in the frequency of the reference in the attested toponyms, not to the temple or to the building itself, but to the avenue leading to it, i.e. the Dromos.[7] I would argue that this is an indication of the dynamic, progressive character of the process of spatial definition the toponym reflects, as the articulating motor of the district is not so much the building itself as a static landmark, but rather the communal performance taking place and giving sense both to the building and the space around it, i.e. the procession or the sacred festival leading to the temple or taking place outside it.[8] Other written sources, scant as they are, tend to confirm this notion: Plutarch tells us of the festival in honour of Isis taking place annually in Egyptian cities on the 9th of Toth, when people ate fish before the *auleion*, probably the outdoor space in front of the temple.[9] This shows, from both the Greek and the Egyptian point of view, a continuity with the traditional dynamics of space articulation in the city since at least the Archaic and Classical periods (Pharaonic times, in the Egyptian case). This can be seen if we bear in mind the importance of the processional ways acting as the main axes defining urban space and rural territory alike, such as in Athens the Panathenaic Way inside the walls, or its prolongation as the Sacred Way leading to Eleusis.[10] This processual, performative aspect also gives sense to other toponyms referring to Greek public spaces and buildings, always with a strong component of communal gathering, *in primis* the *agora*, of course, etymologically meaning the place where *ageírô*, "gathering", is done. We can also include the Plateia, the Gymnasium, the Hippodrome and the Public Baths.[11] In some cases, this aspect is even redundantly emphasised by district names containing both the buildings themselves and the avenue or square leading to or lying in front of them: "Plateia of the Theatre", "Dromos of the Gymnasium".[12] As for the term *agora*, apart from the allusion to the main, usually central square in a Greek *polis*, it can also be qualified by a trade name, as in the late district name "*Agora* of the Cobblers" (Ἀγοϱὰ Σκυτέων), referring –even more than to the gathering there of members of that trade– to the gathering of citizens attracted to that particular business. Again, at least in some cases, even where the term *agora* is not explicit, we can postulate the primary perception of this "processual" notion in toponyms alluding to a group of people concerned with a common economic or functional activity (e.g. Χηνοβοσκῶν, the Goose-Sellers).[13]

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[3] *P. Oxy.* 2719. Translation: "From the Moon Gate walk as if towards the granaries and, if you will, turn left at the first street behind the Thermae, where (there is a…), and go westwards. Go down the steps and up… and turn right and after the precinct of the (temple) on the right there is a seven-storey house and on top of the gatehouse (a statue of Fortune?) and opposite a basket-weaving shop. Inquire there or from the concierge and you will be informed."

[4] Alston 2002, 262.

[5] For what follows, cf. Krüger 1990, 77-80; Daris 2000, *passim*; Alston 2002, 128-184.

[6] Listings of the *amphoda* at Oxyrhynchus in Rink 1924, Calderini 1935-66, Krüger 1990, Daris 2000, and Alston 2002, 147. Cf. also Turner 1975, n. 50; Krüger 1990, 82; Bowman-Coles *et al.* 2007, 141-181.

In all these cases, a picture seems to emerge of urban space perceived as a living organism made up of groups or subgroups of people mobilized in collective actions that also define landmark buildings or similar features as significant spatial units, such as neighbourhoods. In this respect, earlier Egyptian and Greek traditions offered a model of continuity and a ground of convergence in naming and thence symbolically constructing the space of the city. And the process is taken on by the Christian redefinition of that space, with a network of churches being put in place, some of which occupied or substituted replaced ancient temples, and again occasionally also functioned as a district name (e.g. St. Euphemia). There were probably some forty churches in the city of Oxyrhynchus, but what interests us here is the continuity of the dynamic process of gathering people in certain places being the driving force behind the configuration and denomination of urban space. This is evident in the very name of the word ἐκκλησία chosen for these buildings, once again emphasising their being nothing more than the spatial concretion of the primary action of gathering, just as the old ἀγορά had done. The notion is further confirmed by an extraordinary document, an early sixth-century calendar of places where the bishop of Oxyrhynchus was to officiate during the year.[14] For the period of c. 150 days contained in the papyrus there are some sixty festival days in some forty different churches across the city which should be attended by the bishop. Thus, the spatial network of churches is not merely a series of buildings, but a sequence of communal gatherings taking place regularly throughout the year, so that space is cyclically redefined through the annual repetition of this circuit re-enacted by the bishop. As this example shows, there is an important link between the spatial network of places highlighted by toponyms and the temporal sequence of special days highlighted by important collective rituals or festivals.

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[7] At Oxyrhynchus, the most important seems to have been the Dromos of the Temple of Thoeris, the hippopotamus goddess, whose temple is one of the major sanctuaries in the city (*P. Oxy.* 171.8; 478.15, 25; 479.9; 1029.17, etc.). Others are the Dromos of Sarapis, the Dromos of the Gymnasium and, without indication of any building, the North Dromos. In other cases (e.g. Ποιμενικῆς, Ἰουδαϊκῆς), a feminine adjectival form (whereas ἄμφοδον is a neutre noun) points to a shortened version of the toponym, where a name meaning "avenue", "street" or the like (δϱόμος, ὁδός, ἀγυιά, or λαῦϱα, which significantly could also be used to mean "district"; cf. Daris 2000, n.4) must be understood. In the case of Ἡϱακλείων τόπων, these *topoi* probably allude to altars, implying again an allusion to ritual and to gathering of people for that purpose.

[8] Cf. a striking example of this in the article by Paola Davoli in this volume: the great Dromos in Soknopaiou Nesos.

[9] Plut., *De Iside et Osir.*, 353d.

[10] Cf. de Polignac 1995.

[11] From the absence of the *dromos* in the district names referring to Greek (or non-Egyptian) temples (*Hermaion*, *Herôon*, *Metrôon*), we could perhaps assume that this processual definition of urban space was carried out, from the Egyptian perspective, mainly through religious realities and, from the Greek point of view, through predominantly political and economic references. But examples such as Δϱόμου τοῦ Γυμνασίου and Θοηϱείου Θενεπμόι, as well as the possibility of the existence of double versions of a toponym (cf. nn. 7, 12), suggest caution in this respect.

[12] Inversely, as in the case of the feminine adjectival forms mentioned above, we should perhaps understand this longer version as the primary denomination, and consider the toponyms with only the name of the building as a shortened form, allowed by the implication of that notion, through metonymy, in the function of the building named. If the district Θοηϱείου Θενεπμόι is to be considered as an alternative name for Δϱόμου Θοηϱείου, it would be a further confirmation of this phenomenon (Daris 2000, 216; Krüger 1990, 87).

[13] It is significant in this context that the verbal noun παϱεμβολή, suggesting a concentration of soldiers, has been selected for the district names Ἄνω Παϱεμβολῆς (the Upper Camp), Ἱππέων Παϱεμβολῆς (the Cavalry Camp) and Λυκίων Παϱεμβολῆς (the Lycians' Camp), instead of the term κάμπος, which is attested for the Cavalry Camp in three papyri from the 1st c. AD (*P. Mich.* III, 171.16; 179.13; *P.Oxy*. 247.21). The last named of these documents presents a composite version: ἄμφοδον Ἱππέων Παϱεμβολῆς ἐν τῷ Κάμπῳ. It is especially interesting here to note how the two terms are used to distinguish the processual term naming the camp (with the plural genitive of the concerned group) from the *Campus* as a purely spatial reality (as shown by the preposition ἐν), and how it is the first one that has finally been established as the name of the district.

It is interesting to note in this respect that the new name for a district to be attested by a recently published papyrus conforms neatly to this pattern: the ἄμφοδον Ἐξαγορείου.[15] Although the name Ἐξαγορεῖον, probably related to a specific building or a public space, is unattested elsewhere, we have in Oxyrhynchus itself a mention of the ἐξαγορεῖα of Thoeris.[16] In his edition of the new papyrus, R. Gonis has interpreted it as a proclamation place or building. I would like to call attention to the ἀγορά element present in the name, even if it is to be read through the verb ἀγορεύω (and not directly alluding to the *agora* as the market-place), since it still implies a public speech act (ἀγορεύω) before an ἀγορά, i.e. in the etymological sense, a gathering of people for a special occasion. Whatever the exact meaning of the name, it is again a festival day, a significant collective performance, more than the building itself as such, which constitutes the defining focus of a specific spatial unity of the city.

Another case study is the water supply network inside the city, reflected in the toponymy through allusions to urban waterways, public baths, or, implicitly, to gardens (*paradeisos*) or sacred groves (*alsos).* From a methodological perspective, this is an interesting example of the relationship between the physical reality and the symbolically constructed image of the ancient city. An efficient water supply is a major concern for many other cities of the Roman Empire, like Pompey with its network of public fountains that functioned as a focus for a spatial unit of roughly 80 houses. In Egypt, the water supply system in the city has been studied, notably by D. Bonneau.[17] I would like here to raise the question not so much of its functional value, but of its visibility and how it affected and fashioned the image of the city in Graeco-Roman Egypt. One of the most detailed pictures of this water network within the city is conveyed by a long papyrus from Arsinoe, in the Fayum.[18] In it we find a wealth of terms concerning the structures for supplying water; from the *castella* (*aquae*), one of them at a place significantly called Alsos (the Grove), to all sorts of variously named reservoirs, conduits and pipes. In the first part of his book, which is devoted to an analysis of the terminology of water supply in Egypt, Bonneau has made a thorough study of all these terms. But the fact I wish to highlight here is the importance of open air installations. This is apparent from the repeated mention of canals of different kinds and sizes (ἀμαραί, ὀχετοί, διώρυγες). The recurrent word προβολή, sometimes followed by the genitive διώρυγος, seems to allude equally to an open air reservoir in the form of a pond where channels and conduits run into or come from (ἐκχύσεις).[19]

The presence of *castella*, pipes (σωλῆνες) and fountains (κρῆναι) draws a picture that is common to other ancient cities, but the importance of open air installations seems a more specifically Egyptian feature of the urban landscape. This is confirmed by the frequent allusion in papyri to several kinds of traditional mechanisms used to raise water from a canal or a pond to a higher level, such as an adjacent building or simply the street, most notably the water-wheel (μηχανή) and the water-crane or *shadouf* (κηλώνειον).[20] These constitute a well known feature of the Egyptian landscape from Pharaonic times down to the present day. They are very common in the rural landscape as an essential piece in the irrigation network, but, as in the example mentioned above, papyri also show them inside the city, a clue to the visibility of water in open air channels and watercourses in general across the city. Arsinoe is in the Fayum area, but we also have written references to this peculiar feature of the urban landscape in Oxyrhynchus. In a third-century papyrus, an individual asks to be discharged from his duties (no doubt a liturgy) of raising water for the public baths.[21] The verbal noun ἀνίμησις, i.e. "raising water", implies the existence of an open air watercourse from which water is drawn up, probably by means of a water-wheel, as the feeding of animals is mentioned in this context. A passing observation in this document adds a significant element: the importance of the annual flood. Since in that year it had been uncommonly slow, it had been especially difficult for the man to carry out his duties.

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[14] *P.Oxy*. 1357. Cf. Alston 2002, 302.

[15] *P.Oxy*. 4789.

[16] *P. Mert.*, Vol. 1, 26, 5 (276 AD): … θεαγίσσης Θ̣ο̣η̣[ρ]ε̣ί̣ου ἐξαγορείων.

[17] Bonneau 1993.

[18] *P. Lond.*, 3.1177 (113 AD) (= Chrest. Wilck. 193).

[19] Ibid., 78, 88, 96, 189.

[20] Bonneau 1993, 93-115, especially 93-97 and 105-115. Another hint of the presence of open air canals in the city may be the term ἀναβατηρία in a third-century papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (*P.Oslo* 111, FrC, r, 1, 127 and 129), probably meaning a bridge with steps crossing a canal.

The visibility of water as an important part of the urban landscape of Oxyrhynchus can also be sensed in *P. Oxy.* 43v, one of the main sources for our knowledge of the urban topography. It is a distribution of guards across the city, following a roughly anti-clockwise sequence and using important urban landmarks as points of reference to the assignation of guards charged with the maintenance of public order. Among these landmarks (e.g. the Serapeion, the Thoereion, the Agora, etc.) we find the toponym Κριός ποταμός, i.e. the Ram River.[22] As the existence of a real river inside the city is to be excluded, it must refer to a kind of channel, probably, as generally agreed, an important canal derived from the river (here, the Bahr Yussuf) and entering the city as a particularly important waterway, probably navigable, a condition to which it presumably owed its denomination as a river. As for its puzzling name, the Ram River, several explanations are possible, which, it must be emphasised, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There is a specialized use of the term κριός, designating a particular kind of channel, in some papyri concerning repairs being carried out on them, always in a rural context.[23] According to Bonneau, the denomination here could allude to a particular form of channel, similar to the horns of a ram, which in Egypt were almost horizontal. It would thus allude to a bifurcation of the channel in two opposite directions (another kind of bifurcation, probably involving twin bridges or tunnels, receives the equally metaphorical name of ζυγός, the yoke).[24] As a well known toponym for an urban "river" in the city of Oxyrhynchus, however, this meaning of a technical term of rural water engineering seems somewhat more improbable, and even if there was indeed an allusion to a peculiar form of the course of this waterway, its importance as a landmark seems to require a further symbolic connotation of the name. A sacred allusion, in an Egyptian context, is obviously possible. In this context, we may pause to mention the name of the whole city, the City of the Sharp-nosed Fish, as providing the clearest witness both to the visibility of urban waterways and/or ponds, where the sacred fish could presumably be seen, and to their symbolically emphasised signification, at least in this case as a sacred entity. This function could of course have been carried out simply by the urban tract of the Bahr Yussuf, but the attested presence of a Potamos *within* the space of the city (and presumably also of other canals and ponds, as the allusion to a *paradeisos* in a district name suggests) seems to qualify much more plausibly for that role.

From the Greek perspective, it is probably no coincidence that there are at least two other rivers named *Krios*, in Achaea and in Asia Minor, as mentioned by Pausanias.[25] This suggests there was also a Greek connoted meaning to that toponym. According to Pausanias, the Peloponnesian Krios was said to be so named on behalf of the Titan Krios. This mythic association with a violent figure of the pre-Olympian order seems to allude to the occasional violence of these seasonal, torrential rivers, a very common feature in Mediterranean countries that often cause catastrophic floods along their short courses from the mountains to the sea at the coming of the rainy season. It is surely significant that the next such stream found by Pausanias along the coast (and described as a *pendant* to the Krios in that they define, respectively, the western and eastern frontiers of the *chōra* of Pallene) is fittingly named Suthas, i.e. the Impetuous. In this respect, we might add – although this is not explicitly stated by the sources – that the alternative reading of the toponym Krios, alluding not to a mythic primordial figure but to a simple animal, equally offered the connotation of violence, since the popular notion of the ram as a charging, potentially dangerous beast gave rise to the metaphorical naming of a widely known poliorketic device with that function.

At first glance this geographical situation seems quite out of place in Middle Egypt. We should be cautious, however, before jumping to negative conclusions. As the study by Subías, Fiz and Cuesta in this same volume shows, despite the very different geographical and meteorological conditions of Greece and Egypt, a comparable phenomenon, very common in desert environments, was also verified in the Nile Valley, and particularly in the Oxyrhynchus area, in the form of seasonal *wadis* running to the Bahr Yussuf, even, conceivably, crossing the city in their course. The Krios Potamos at Oxyrhynchus could thus be an urban waterway, a dry waterbed the best part of the year that turns into a torrential stream for short periods of time.[26] However, while this possibility cannot be excluded, in the absence of clear material evidence, the picture we have drawn, as suggested by the written record, seems rather to point to a more important watercourse, artificially built and maintained, and fed by the waters of the Bahr Yussuf, from which it entered the city. Contrary to what this would seem to imply, a seasonal, even drastic variation in the amount of water could also in this case be a defining feature, thus justifying, at least in Greek eyes, its peculiar name.

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[21] *P. Oxy.* 2569 (265 AD).

[22] *P.Oxy.* 43v. 3,24 = Chr. Wilck., 474 v. 3,24 (295 AD).

[23] *BGU* 1, 14, 3; *P. Tebt.* 352.7.

[24] Bonneau 1993, 71.

[25] Paus., 7.27.11.

In rural Egypt, the crucial role of the Nile's seasonal flood in feeding the channel irrigation system is widely known, and this event could often take the form of a sudden, violent flood on the opening of the dykes. In an urban *milieu* we find a similar situation described in a literary text, albeit in a military, non-agricultural context. It is an episode of Heliodorus' *Aethiopika*, a Greek novel set in Egypt and Ethiopia: the description of the siege of Syene in Book 9.[27] The strategy of the attacking army consisted of digging a channel from the Nile to the city walls and then breaking the dyke at its mouth on the river. The water suddenly flooded the channel and charged with tremendous violence against the city, turning it into an island and undermining its walls. The defence of the besieged citizens was to dig another channel inside the city itself, thus hoping to drain the water from the exterior channel flooding the city when the walls collapsed. Several elements of this admittedly literary description point to some underlying constant features of the image of the Egyptian city, even since Pharaonic times; notably the image of the city as an island surrounded by the waters of the flood.[28]

In the less dramatic, everyday reality of a city like Oxyrhynchus we can also assume an important seasonal factor, probably involving a conspicuous variation in the appearance of the network of canals and ponds within the city, even perhaps with a dramatic moment of change if an opening of the dykes suddenly allowed water to enter the city through the Krios Potamos. Such a picture, which could be read between the lines of the dramatized, catastrophic episode of the siege of Syene, is indeed well attested, albeit for a much later date, in a description of the opening of the dykes in eighteenth century Cairo:

> «The Nile immediately rushes into the canal with great violence, and then flows into the other canals of the suburbs and the walled city. As a result, on that day Cairo resembles the city of Venice.»[29]

A similar description, a century earlier, by the French consul in Egypt, presents much the same situation, not concerning the canals themselves, but the ponds they fed in a wealthy residential quarter:

> «Nothing is more pleasant than this place [i.e. the pond] filled with water during the eighth month of the year, while during the remaining months, it turns into a smelling garden.»[30]

Taking into account the hints and allusions we have found in the ancient sources, I am inclined to take these descriptions as attesting to a typological continuity of an urban landscape across the centuries, characteristic of the image of the Egyptian city in its relationship to a specific and unique natural phenomenon, the Nile flood. This phenomenon fashioned people's lives in Egyptian cities until the 19th century and captured the imagination of foreign peoples, especially the Greeks, from the earliest times, with Herodotus or Euripides as conspicuous examples.[31]

This image of the city is closely linked to the metaphor of the garden, both in the Greek and Egyptian imaginations. Already in classical the Classical period, Euripides' *Helen* presents Egypt, identified mainly with the Delta region, as a huge garden watered by the myriad branches of the Nile,[32] and the image extends to the whole of Egypt and Ethiopia as the scene of Heliodorus' *Aethiopika*. Thus, Meroe, simultaneously described as a city and an island watered by three rivers, is seen as a huge *paradeisos* with a bewildering exuberance of plants and a variety of animals.[33] For that matter, the connection between the image of the irrigated garden and the city where water enters through one or more channels seems to be a recurrent motif in the Greek novel as a genre, and, although there are important Greek precedents for it (e.g. Alcinous' garden in the *Odyssey*), this does not exclude a connection with an Egyptian narrative tradition.[34]

On the other hand, as C. Ragazzoli has shown in her study of the Egyptian genre of the praise of the city, the motif of the ideal city as a garden, as a space flooded by water and marked by exuberant vegetation, where houses are not organized in a regular pattern but scattered in a seemingly natural, non-urban landscape, was already a topic of Egyptian literature in the Old Kingdom.[35] In Roman times, the existence at Oxyrhynchus of a district called the Paradeisos of Pammenes and, in other cities, numerous toponyms and references to urban plots, orchards, trees and groves (e.g. the Alsos of Arsinoe) attest to the continuity of this image of the city in Graeco-Roman times, when it connected and merged with a similar perception of Egypt in traditional Greek thought and literature. It is important to remark that this image, which in many cities, as in Oxyrhynchus, could easily be related to at least some real features of the urban landscape (e.g. the open air channels and ponds), does not exclude other situations that are well attested by archaeology, such as regular orthogonal urban patterns, that could easily have coexisted with it.

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[26] Compare this description of Mecca: "[The city] lies in a sandy wadi (…). Destructive floods often tear down the narrow valley, inundating the city, destroying or damaging everything in their path. The great mosque, *Mesjid el Haram*, lies in the bed of the wadi, in the center of the city, and all the unpaved streets slope toward it so that it stands as it were, in the pit of a Greek theater." (Shaffer 1952, 198).

[27] Heliod., 9, 2 ss.

[28] Cf., in this same volume, the study of the topography of Memphis by J. Bunbury. On this image in the Egyptian literary genre of the praise of the city, cf. Ragazzoli 2008.

[29] Wiet 1964, 118. Echols and Nassar 2006, 207.

[30] Quoted in Echols and Nassar 2006, 206.

[31] On the Nile flood in Antiquity, cf. Bonneau 1971. On Greek perceptions of Egypt in pre-Hellenistic times, cf. Vasunia 2001.

[32] E., *Hel.*, 1ss.

[33] Heliod., 10, 5, 1.

[34] On the motif of the garden in the tragedy and in the novel as an element of genre definition, cf. Carruesco 2010.

This image of the Egyptian city, probably projected through the model of Alexandria, finds an impressive expression in Late Republican and Imperial Rome, first in wealthy urban gardens (*horti Sallustiani, horti Maecenatis*, etc.); then, under the Julio-Claudians, in the huge complex of Nero's *Domus Aurea*, proclaiming with its gardens, ponds and pavilions, an ideal of *rus in urbe* that threatened to take over and become identical to the whole city; and, finally, outside the city itself, at *Villa Hadriana*, with the explicit reference to the Canopos, the Egyptian canal, as an important symbolic axis of this *urbs in rure*. Here, at the centre of the Empire, far from the Nile, we find a powerful representation, through imitation and amplification, of a fundamental aspect of the image of the city in Graeco-Roman Egypt.

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[35] P. Lansing, 12; P.Anastasi (= P. Rainer 53); P. Sallier IV, edited and translated in Ragazzoli 2008.