The Greek Frontier: Settlers in the South Fayum

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Today it’s a centenary that we celebrate, and it was just over a hundred years ago, in 1893, that at the AHA in Chicago Frederick Jackson Turner gave his famous lecture on ‘The significance of the frontier in American history’. Turner's thesis, as you probably know better than I, was an attempt to explain the character of American society in terms of the unique environment of the New World. Rather than depending on the culture of the lands from where they came - what Turner, somewhat quaintly to the modern ear, terms ‘Germanic germs’ - it was, he argues, the pioneering experience of the frontier, the European's encounter with the wilderness, the constant move westwards and all that the pioneers met there, that fostered the ‘steady growth of independence on American lines’. The frontier experience, the rugged self-sufficiency that environment required, the progress from what he calls savage conditions, and the exploitation of the natural resources - animals, grasses for pasture and fertile soil - were what promoted the formation of ‘a composite nationality for the American people’ with a decreased dependence on the old world, and effects too on both legislation and the nature of American democracy.

It was and is a bold thesis, but today it is not the validity of Turner’s thesis in its original context that I want to discuss but rather the underlying question it raises of the importance of environment over background. And the particular context in which I want to examine this question is the experience of the Greek settlers in Egypt under the Ptolemies, and particularly those in the south Fayum, the home of our Tebtunis crocodiles. For when Alexander of Macedon took Egypt from Persian control in 332 BC it was early on in his expedition of military conquest and exploration. But when on Alexander's death in 321, his general Ptolemy son of Lagos seized the conqueror’s corpse and with this talisman was quick to move to Egypt, many of the men who accompanied him had already been on move for some 10-15 years. They had marched east all the way through the mountains to India, back through the Gedrosian desert and Mesopotamia. They were experienced travellers, used to hardship, familiar with foreign ways. And on reaching Egypt, where Alexander was laid to rest in Memphis, they had at last found a stopping place where now they could make a home. How far, I want to ask, did the Greek experience in Egypt depend on the conditions that they found there and how far did they bring from Greece, or indeed Macedon from where they came, old habits, attitudes and practices that shaped the way they lived in the new environment?

Of course it must be immediately obvious that the frontier thesis is of little direct application when one considers that in Egypt what the Greeks met was not a vast underdeveloped wilderness but rather one of the oldest civilisations in existence. The encounter of Greek and Egyptian was not that of immigrant and native American, and on the whole it was a tamed not a wild landscape - and above all a tamed river flood - that these newcomers found in their rich and fertile new land. Nevertheless there are elements that are common to both these encounters, and questions of identity - new, old, assumed - of cultural resistance or assimilation, of exploitation and adjustment, of city and countryside, of the seaboard - Atlantic or Mediterranean - and further inland, of the sown and the unsown - whether mountains and wilderness or desert and swamp - were all of them important in the experience of those involved, and in what they made of their encounter.

Furthermore, there was at least one area - the Fayum - where the immigrant Greeks did actually come closer to a frontier experience, and in draining and taming what was earlier known as the Marsh, and in bringing it under cultivation, Greek settlers were involved in a real pioneer challenge, the success of which would give them new lands to cultivate, new villages to live in and new homes to build. Far from Alexander's new capital city on the coast, far from the sophisticated urban cityscape of Alexandria, Greeks and Macedonians in the countryside were involved in a challenging project of reclamation, in which their skills were put to the test, their expertise stretched and in which powers of innovation, adaptation and people management were required. In this vast project there were two initial stages, the actual reclamation project - the draining of the marsh, the digging of canals, and the erection of dykes and of extended sluices at the Fayum entrance - and then there was the challenge of clearing the scrub, cleaning the ditches and bringing new land under cultivation, of exploiting the flood and the loam, and growing the crops to feed what was soon a growing population. It’s through the written records of the times, preserved in recycled form as mummy wrapping or cartonnage for both man and animal, combined with archaeology - both surface survey and excavation - and hydrological, geophysical and other studies that we can begin to face these questions.
What, then, I want to do this afternoon, within the wider context of the question of environment versus background, is to look a little closer at this particular frontier experience and at some of its results, and in doing so I hope also to illustrate the potential of those papyri preserved as wrappings to the Tebtunis crocodiles and others like them. There are, necessarily, only a few aspects I can treat and this I think is where we'd better start with a map (shown - as were slides).

So what was the pioneer experience of Macedonians and Greeks in the South Fayum? The first generation of settlers is little known - most probably because the use of waste paper for mummy-casing had not yet been established. From the start there were at least two major experiences for the new Greeks in Egypt, who now joined the long-established Greek communities of Naukratis, the Delta and Memphis. First there was the urban experience of Alexandria on the coast, a city with Greek political and cultural institutions, a primarily Greek city with a focus north across the Mediterranean to old Greece. But secondly, there were the soldiers who were settled with grants of land up country - probably in the Delta about which we know practically nothing - it's too damp there for papyri to survive - and all along the valley of the Nile. Though we don't have the texts at this date, to judge from those later settlement was well underway in the reign of Ptolemy I. The Fayum was a particularly important area in this respect and land grants were more of a privilege in the narrow valley of the Nile than on the open frontier of North America. The Fayum is where I want to look closer at our settlers.

From the reign of Ptolemy II - that's Ptolemy Philadelphus, the Sister-Loving Ptolemy who married his sister Arsinoe - from this reign, the recycling of papyri gets going and we've much more evidence for the Greek frontier experience. In the Fayum the older name, the Marsh, was supplanted by the name of the queen - it became the Arsinoite nome - and papyri from here enable us to trace the development of the newly reclaimed areas. The Fayum basin had originally been developed under Amenemhet III - later 19th century - so around Krokoediopolis and to the south east of the nome there was already some modest settlement. The fine tomb of a Fayum governor excavated at Kom Khilwa by Bresciani probably dates from this time. This settlement was all in the eastern basin; it was further west in the Gharaq basin that Ptolemaic expansion really took place.

First, work was needed on the barrage at the entry to the Fayum to control the flow of water at different times of the year. Then came the extension of the Polemon canal, also known as the desert canal, probably along the line of the current Bahr el-Gharaq. And with the extended canal system there was drainage of surrounding areas. At Talit, founded in a key position on this canal, a complex under-pavement water-system identified by Rathbone in his recent survey of the area is a small-scale version of that of Alexandria. But it is also reminiscent of the system in the Macedonian city of Dion. Macedonians, of course, from earlier in the fourth century had experience in drainage works; swampy land around Olynthos in northern Greece has been drained under Philip II as had Lake Copais in Boeotia. Among the Egyptians there was high expertise of controlling the flood and it is likely to have been the happy combination of the skills of Macedonian drainage engineers with existing Egyptian techniques that resulted in the success of what was a major project.

Once the canals were dug and the drains put in place, the reclamation area was divided up into plots of 10,000 arouras - that's some 6,750 acres each - which came under the supervision of local nomarchs with the assistance of those named ‘myiarourati’. Sometimes, these large plots were granted as gift estates. The chief financial officer of the country under Ptolemy II, the dioiketes Apollonios, received such an estate in the north east Fayum. From the point of view of the king responsibility for major work was thus off-loaded. Apollonios took the risks - he would also share in the profits. And the widespread use of the newly reclaimed land in the Fayum in smaller grants for military settlers had much the same effect. For most of the third century BC cavalrymen were settled with plots of 100 arouras (just under 70 acres); later grants were smaller (from 54 down to 8 acres) but dispensed more widely - to infantrymen as well as the cavalry, and various groups of desert guards and police. Here in the States, with the Homestead Act of 1862 it was lots of 160 acres that were granted to those who had worked the land for five years. But the rich irrigated land of Egypt is richer than most of the mid West, so very profitable plots could also be smaller.

100-aroura settlers are found in the South Fayum in villages of both the Tutun and the Gharaq basins. In the Gharaq basin earlier lakes has been partially drained, though fisherman remained a regular occupation and Rathbone’s survey has turned up net-weights, catfish bones and installations. Traditional Egyptian agriculture and occupations continued - most villages had their brewers - but as the land was drained and irrigated new crops were sown - especially oil crops which grow well on the marginal land. Vines were
introduced to the area, for wine was what the Greeks preferred to drink. A recently published text from Cologne records an account
for an enormous quantity of locally produced wine - some 2 million 900,000 US gallons was the annual production of the nome that
year; of this, 5,000 gallons were destined for the army camp at Theogonis in the south where, no doubt, demand would be strong
(P.Köln V 221). In this case drinking tastes from the old world remained unchanged and the settlers of the Fayum grew the crops
they knew under a new agricultural regime. Besides the vine and the olive there were other new crops. The village of Oxyrhyncha in
the South Fayum, for instance, became a centre for the cultivation of garlic. Texts from the cartonnage of Tebtunis mummies
specify this as the crop to be sown in a couple of land leases; specialist garlic sellers are recorded from this village. Garlic was
another of the crops introduced to Egypt by the Greeks, and the area around Oxyrhyncha served to meet the Greek demand.

So much for the land. What of the people? In this section of my paper I am drawing on a group of unpublished papyri written in
Greek and demotic, in the main from the Fayum - some specifically from the south Fayum - and all from the reigns of Ptolemies II
and III. This is a group of tax registers that I’ve recently been working on with my colleague Willy Clarysse in Leuven which record
adult taxpayers grouped by both household and occupational category. From these it is possible to calculate the size of various
groups of the population, so for the Arsinoite nome we now have a much clearer picture of the units in which people lived and
worked. We are able now to gain a clearer picture of early Hellenistic Egypt which may be compared with what comes later; we are
at the start of the changes that took place over the three hundred years before the Romans came and conquered.

First the Arsinoite nome. Based on these records from the mid third century BC we find that villages ranged in population from just
over 2000 (1387 adults is the largest on record) to under 60 in total; there was also very small hamlets with just 3-12 adult
inhabitants. The Arsinoite nome was divided into three divisions - merides - named, we assume, after their early developers.
Villages in the Heraldeides meris, which we've already noted as partially developed from much earlier, were on average larger than
those in the Themistos and the Polemon meris of the south Fayum. Overall, we calculate the total population of the nome as being
in the range of 85,000-90,000, of whom some 85% were civilians and 15% in the military, either serving under arms or on reserve
as settlers with land grants. Of this total, some 3,500 civilians lived in the capital; how many of the army were also resident in the
city of Krokodilopolis is unsure, but it's striking that the evidence that we have from this period is for military cleruchs settled amidst
the rural population of the villages. Some 16% of the civilian population came under the tax-category of Hellene; the majority of
these would be those whom we would consider as ethnic Greeks - those of immigrant origin who had settled in the area. And in the
third century BC the army, of course, would also be largely Greek. At this date, the capital was not even double the size of the
largest village we know. It was certainly not yet the urban centre that it later became. Most military settlers with land grants
probably lived in the villages where their land was located and it is clear that in some of the villages, the proportion of Greeks was
much higher than for the nome as a whole.

So much for numbers. What about the villagers themselves and how they lived together? Here all I can do is present some
conclusions from what's quite complex evidence. In describing the frontier experience, Turner noted the effects of outback living.

‘The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel and thought. It takes him
from the railroad car and puts him in a birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilisation and arrays him in the hunting shirt and
the moccasin. It puts him in a log cabin . . . and runs an Indian palisade around him’.

How Egyptian did our Greeks go as they built their houses on the desert edge in the South Fayum? On dress, I have nothing to
report - though that question needs further research. For transport I’m sure that the donkey was used, as indeed it was in Greece.
In this period too the camel was increasingly employed, particularly in this area where it's found in registers of livestock, and the
occupation of camel-driver is also recorded.

Housing in the Fayum was closely grouped together at the edge of the cultivation where it didn't encroach on irrigated land. A
house by house record from the village of Berenikis Thesmophorou, near to Kerkeosiris, provides us with some details. In this
register it is the houses themselves and other constructions - the goose-pens, the temples, the baths or the brewery - that form the
guiding principle of the record, as it proceeds from structure to structure. Some houses contained a number of separate units - the
house, for instance, owned by two sisters with four apartments that were rented out to different Jewish families. Next door the
houseowner was an Arab, who lived in his own house with his father, described as a shepherd. Elsewhere the brewer and his family lived in the royal brewery, and close to the baths were various shops - a greengrocer and his wife lived in one and, close by, a second couple, the husband of whom is described as a shopkeeper. Many of the houses had a courtyard, some were two-storeys high one house with nine apartments contained two mills and one had two storerooms attached. One of the houses was a dower-house, and some were shared or under split ownership. Some of these homes were inhabited by their owners, but others were occupied by tenants. A large enclosed garden lay in the village; an enclosure of date-palms is also recorded. The house close to the Isis shrine was owned by a woman, though lived in by the (male) Isis priest together with his parents. An altar is registered (no inhabitants) as is a house or property of the great god Phemnoeris (a crocodile god), with at least one family living there. Next to an empty apartment lay an empty lot, a sign perhaps that there was property to spare.

Berenikis Thesmophorou was not so very different from the village of Abousir on the screen, or it can be compared with nearby Kerkeosiris, recorded in a Tebtunis papyrus, where the village itself and immediate surrounds of 48 acres represented just 1.5% of the total village land. Living quarters were close and crowded, and the Greeks, it is clear from these surveys, lived cheek by jowl with their Egyptian neighbours.

But they did on the whole live in bigger households with more family and non-family dependents living with them - slaves and slave-girls, shepherds, swineherds and cowherds, and agricultural labourers. From the evidence of 427 households that we have recorded, it is clear that 2 adults - 75% of them conjugal couples - formed the most common unit, and over 50% of the population lived in units of 1-3 adults, 67% in units of 1-4. Most of the rest lived in units of 5-9 adults, and households with over 10 adults formed a very small proportion of the whole (1.4%) with just 7% of recorded adults. The most striking feature of all, however, is the difference to be found between households where the name of the household head was Greek and those where it was Egyptian. For Egyptians - and here for the sake of argument I’m assuming a correlation between name and ethnic group - households of 1-4 counted for 90% of households, containing 79% of individuals. For Greeks in contrast, the figures are 81% of such households, with only 53% of adults in them. And whereas of Egyptians, no one lived in a household of more than 8 adults, of Greeks 16% of recorded adults lived in households of over ten, with 31% in households of 5-9. Like their larger plots of land, the larger households of the Greeks are very noticeable and illustrate well their position within third century society, a position of predominance that is found reflected also in the number of household slaves and other dependent staff contained within these households.

This privileged status clearly serves to complicate the simple dichotomy of background and environment with which I began. Indeed, for all the pioneering aspects of the settlement of the Fayum, it is the contrasts - the differences - between the Greek experience in Ptolemaic Egypt and Europeans’ experience in North America that are most striking. Far from being a thinly populated new territory where they could construct their own society, as it were from scratch, Egypt was a well populated land with deeply rooted traditions and institutions. Much depended on the possession and exercise of power - which derived, ultimately, from Ptolemy in Alexandria. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that students of Hellenistic Egypt are not, like Turner, concerned to explain the development of individualism and democracy. In an eastern monarchy, it was the king who decided how things were.

Select Bibliography


