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John P. Cooper, *The Medieval Nile: Route, Navigation, and Landscape in Islamic Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2014. xvii + 421 pp. ISBN 9789774166143

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Reviews

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The old adage has it that ‘the Nile is Egypt, and Egypt is the Nile’, a statement which was never truer than in the medieval period. Almost all cultivation — and consequently, settlement — in Egypt was located within a mile either side of the river’s main channel, or in the Delta into which it split north of Cairo. The fertility of these cultivated areas depended on the level of the Nile’s annual flooding, which determined whether the country’s population would have plenty, sufficiency or famine. The river was not only fundamental to Egypt’s internal economy, but it was also the key vehicle in its international trade. Spices, textiles and other high-value goods were shipped across the Indian Ocean to ports on the Red Sea, carried by camel caravan across to the desert to the Nile, and then transported to Alexandria and other cities on the Mediterranean coast where they were traded to Italian merchants for sale to Europe.

The central aim of this ambitious book is to reconstruct the courses of the Nile as they existed during the nine centuries following the Islamic conquest. This is no easy undertaking, given the huge amount of change in the geography of the river and its many branches since the time when these were first named and described by ancient geographers such as Herodotus. Some courses silted up, while many new channels were formed either through natural processes or by human attempts to facilitate navigation or secure water supplies. Likewise, over the centuries settlements have been constructed, abandoned or shifted along with the changing access to drinking water and possibilities for irrigation and communications. Cooper’s methodology starts with the typological descriptions provided by medieval geographers, notably Ibn Hawqal and al-Idrisī, who describe each watercourse as a linear progression along a series of toponyms, most of which can be identified with modern settlements. These initial identifications are then backed up and verified with a wide range of additional evidence from archaeology, geology, aerial photography and remote sensing imagery to build up a series of detailed snapshots of the Delta, whose results are presented in Part I. This shows how in place of the seven mouths famed in Antiquity, by the end of the first millennium AD the river had developed two main courses, each with two main branches: an eastern course with one branch reaching the sea at Damietta and another flowing into Lake Tinnis, and a western course which debouched at Rosetta with a separate canal leading to Alexandria.

Part II investigates the practicalities of navigation of the river itself and the ports with which it connected on the Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts, highlighting how sailing was

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scarcely possible for merchant shipping in the period March to June, when the river was low; the peak sailing season came in the months from September to January, when the annual flood raised the water level. Part III surveys the characteristics of the ports of the western and eastern Delta, as well as Cairo and its neighbour Fustat, and the harbours of the Red Sea. Together these two sections reveal a kind of hierarchy of ports, whose utility and prosperity were affected by both geographical and political factors. Prevailing winds and currents diminished the importance of Rosetta, while favouring Alexandria, despite its location on the westernmost extremity of the Delta. One can easily grasp why successive governments put so much effort into maintaining the canal which connected Alexandria with the Rosetta branch of the river, since it had both an excellent harbour and a more defensible position. Similar factors explain the significance of Tinnis, a tiny island situated in a lagoon east of Damietta, containing hundreds (if not thousands) of shops and workshops manufacturing and selling luxury goods. Its position meant that it was protected from storms and difficult currents, but had constant access to the Delta and the sea; nevertheless, it was eventually abandoned on the orders of the Ayyūbid authorities because of vulnerability to attacks by Christian powers.

These are only some of the salient findings within a wealth of detailed research which cannot be adequately described in a short review. Much of this detail is presented in the form of over 40 diagrams comprising schematic representations of historical cartography, satellite imagery, and reconstructions of the Nile's courses at various points in history up to the present. There is also considerable tabulated information dealing with types of vessel, sailing seasons, travel distances, journey times, sea and river currents, wind speeds and directions, placenames and much more. This book is a fundamental resource not only for historians of medieval Egypt, but also for specialists in cartography, navigation, commerce and the crusades. It is a work of great forensic ingenuity and a major milestone in the historical geography of the Levant.

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