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Regionalism in the Religious Landscape of Greco-Roman Egypt

Recent scholarship in Mediterranean archaeology has demonstrated an increased interest in the region as an important locus of inquiry, but seldom has local architecture been utilized in conjunction with documentary sources to demonstrate the applicability of the term *region* to a particular geographic location. This paper will utilize textual and archaeological evidence from the Egyptian Fayum to suggest that local inhabitants regarded the Fayum as a distinct region. I will demonstrate that the religious landscape was architecturally structured by the worship of the crocodile god. Furthermore, I will show that this sacred geography, notable in temple architecture and orientation, is topographically paralleled through the social interactions of the residents outside of the religious sphere.

Of the ten temples known to have been constructed or refurbished in the Arsinoite nome during the Greco-Roman period, nine were dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek, who was often invoked under a local name, such as Soknebtynis at Tebtynis. The *Book of the Fayum*, a Hadrianic text preserved in hieratic and hieroglyphic writing, envisions a religious landscape focused on the crocodile god and structured around waterways, including lake Birkhet Qaran, the lake in the Gharaq Basin and various canals. The archaeology of the Fayum suggests that temples within the region were oriented towards the water sources that dominated the local landscape. The reliance on water as the primary structuring device for the Fayum can be tied to the manifold purposes that the waterways served in the enactment of cult.

On a social level, interconnections between the different towns of the Fayum can be traced through business transactions, intraregional marriages and travel. Papyri contain a wealth of data concerning the movement of individuals between towns and often provide explanations for this movement. By analyzing papyri from Karanis and Tebtynis, it can be demonstrated that movement through the Fayum landscape occurred on both the local and regional level: movement took place between villages that were geographically near to one another, and, to a lesser extent, between villages geographically distant from one another.

The religious topography discernible through temple architecture and recorded in the *Book of the Fayum* suggests a regionalism that is structured around worship of the crocodile god in his many forms. These regional commonalities are further actualized in the movement and interactions of individuals through the landscape of the Fayum. The recognition of the Fayum as a conceptually distinct region is pivotal in the study of community interaction and a necessary prerequisite for both discussions of the larger community of the Fayum and perceptions of local identity.