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The Oases of Egypt's Western Desert from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: Problems and New Perspectives

Once a part of Byzantine Egypt, the oases of Egypt's Western Desert acquired the status of an independent kingdom in the early Islamic period and retained this status at least until the advent of the Fatimid dynasty. As I argue in this article, a nuanced interpretation of a limited dossier of Greco-Latin and Arabic texts (consisting mostly of literary sources) yields insight into the mechanisms behind the political and administrative changes that the Egyptian oases underwent after the collapse of Byzantine rule following the Arab conquest of Egypt.

Introduction

Wide-ranging political and administrative changes occurred in Egypt after the collapse of Byzantine rule, following the Arab conquest of the country. Beginning in 641, a slow process of transformation had gradually affected the Byzantine administrative structure, laying the foundations of the Egyptian Muslim state. Against this historical background, this article aims to examine the specific case of the transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule in the Egyptian oases: from north to south Sīwa, al-Baḥariyya, al-Farāfra, al-Dāḥla, and al-Ḥārġa (Figure 1). Set deep in Egypt's Western Desert, the oases map out an arch of inhabited areas surrounded by a sandy and barren plateau. They lie on the desert frontier between Egypt and the Libyan Sahara acting both as Egyptian western borderland and as gateway to Egypt for travellers along the trans-Saharan itineraries.

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Fig. 1: Byzantine Egypt before the Islamic rule and location of the oases of the Western Desert. The map shows the Byzantine epar-
 chies and the cities mentioned in this article.

Once incorporated into the Augustan *Provincia Aegypti* from the earliest years of its founding,¹ the Egyptian oases remained part of the diocese *Aegyptus* (discussed below). After the Muslim conquest of Egypt, the oases appear as an independent kingdom in early Islamic sources, a political status they retained at least until the advent of the Fatimid dynasty. The history of the oases between the end of Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period is documented by a limited dossier of documents which consists of both Greco-Latin and Arabic sources. A review of this dossier allows us to describe the changes in the politico-administrative structure of the oases.

From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Change and Continuity

Traditionally, modern western historiography has established 641 as the end of Byzantine Egypt,² a date which acknowledges the powerful symbolic value of the siege of the Babylon Fortress (Old Cairo) by 'Amr b. al-Āṣ's Muslim troops.³ Following the capture of the fortress, the Delta region was cut off from the rest of Egypt, making it harder for Constantinople to coordinate and supply military forces on Egyptian territory.⁴

Following the victories of the Muslim army in the Delta and in the Fayyūm, a period of five years ensued during which Lower and Middle Egypt up to al-Bahnasā (Oxyrhynchus) and eventually the rest of the country were subdued.⁵ Finally, under 'Uṭmān b. 'Affān's caliphate (from 644 to 656), an agreement was reached with the Nubians which stabilized the southern border of Islamic Egypt at some point in 651 to 652.⁶ The Arab victories cost Constantinople one of the richest and most productive regions of its empire, ushering in a new historical phase for Egypt and providing the nascent Islamic state with an opening to the Mediterranean and the African hinterland.

The transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule in Egypt has aroused great interest in the scholarly community. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a lively debate has flourished on the issue of continuity and discontinuity between the Byzantine and Arab administration of the Egyptian province.⁷ What has emerged is, first of all, the inadequacy of the continuity-versus-discontinuity

¹ Str. 17.1.42; Plin. *HN* 5.49–50; Ptol. *Geog.* 4.5.23, 33 and 36–37.

² Kennedy 1998, 62–65; Gascou 2012, 409–10.

³ Butler 1978, 238–98; Christides 1993, 154; Sijpesteijn 2007b, 440; Brett 2010, 543. The Muslim general 'Amr b. al-Āṣ, after conquering Egypt, was in charge as first governor of the new Islamic province (641 to 646; he served as Egypt's governor also from 659 to 664).

⁴ Kaegi 1998, 48–50; Sijpesteijn 2007a, 439 note 12; Sijpesteijn 2013, 50.

⁵ For a narrative of the Muslim conquest of Egypt, see Butler 1978; Christides 1993, 153–60; Kaegi 1998, 54–61; Sijpesteijn 2013, 50–58; Booth 2013, 639–70. For a review of the Islamic and Byzantine sources, see Legendre 2013, 78–94.

⁶ Lokkegaard 1986, 966; Christides 1995, 89–90.

⁷ On the debate, see Huebner et al. 2020, 1–2.

juxtaposition:⁸ recording how many changes were (or were not) introduced, and why they were introduced, into the administration of Egypt by the Muslim governors is only one aspect of the problem. There is indeed another issue concerning the kind of rule the Muslims envisaged for Egypt.⁹ From the very beginning, the Arabs aimed at ensuring pragmatic and finely tuned control over the rich Egyptian province. They imposed a governor of Egypt (Arabic, *amīr* or *wālī*; Greek, *symbolos*)¹⁰ directly chosen by the *amīr al-mu'minīn* (literally, the commander of the Believers, that is, the caliph; in Greek, *prōtosymbolos*);¹¹ they reserved the main administrative posts (the finance director, *ṣāhib al-ḥarāğ*; the chief of police, *ṣāhib al-šurṭa*; and the chief judge, *al-qādī*) for an Arab elite, who had limited contacts with the Egyptian and Christian population;¹² and they used the existing Byzantine bureaucratic and administrative system.¹³

The recently augmented documentary evidence makes it possible to highlight how the relations between the different social players were variously affected in the transition from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt, depending on the geographical region and social milieu.¹⁴ This perspective matches up perfectly with the non-unitary territorial condition of Byzantine Egypt, fragmented in its many cities and administrative districts. Having inherited this disjointed administrative geography, the Muslims combined direct administration with a pragmatic *laissez-faire* attitude,¹⁵ which laid the foundations for the Egyptian Muslim state.

A Slow Transformation

At the time of the Arab conquest, the territory of Byzantine Egypt was divided into several provinces (Greek, *eparchiai*): *Aegyptus*, *Augustamnica*, *Arcadia*, and *Thebais*. They were independent of one another, and each was organized around a major city (Alexandria, Pelusium, Oxyrhynchus, and Antinoopolis, respectively). Part of the Diocese of the Orient after the Diocletian's reform in the last decade of the third century, the Egyptian provinces became an independent

⁸ Christides 1991, 53–63; Papaconstantinou 2009, 447–66; Papaconstantinou 2010, 57–74; Sijpesteijn 2007b, 183–200; Zouache 2013, 5–18; Legendre 2015, 235–50.

⁹ Sijpesteijn 2007b, 184.

¹⁰ Morelli 2010a, 158–66. Sijpesteijn 2013, 117–24. The title of *amīr* (literally, “commander”) appears very frequently in seventh- to eighth-century Arabic, Greek, and Coptic texts. Generally, it refers to officials in position of authority in the Islamic army and administration, for instance to the governor of Egypt (in Arabic literary sources, *wālī*; see Huebner et al. 2020, 10), the *duces* of eparchies and the Arab officials who assisted them. As result, the administrative terminology in early Muslim Egypt is quite confusing: “the meaning of administrative terms differ not only in the three languages [Arabic, Greek and Coptic], but within one language the same word could be used to refer different functionaries” (Sijpesteijn 2013, 117).

¹¹ Sijpesteijn 2013, 85.

¹² Morelli 2010b, 14; Sijpesteijn 2013, 83.

¹³ Sijpesteijn 2007b, 187–88 and 190–91; Papaconstantinou 2010, 61.

¹⁴ Huebner et al. 2020, 2.

¹⁵ Papaconstantinou 2005, 173.

diocese around 381. At that time, the two provinces of *Libya* (*Libya Superior*, which included Cyrenaica, and *Libya Inferior*, which included the Marmarica Plateau) are attributed to Egypt (Figure 1).¹⁶ The *praefectus Augustalis* managed the civil government of the entire Diocese of Egypt, and supervised the governors (*praesides*, singular, *praeses*) of each eparchy. Both the *praefectus* and the *praesides* were assisted by numerous functionaries with fiscal and judicial tasks. The military power was in the hands of the *comes limitis Aegypti*, responsible for northern Egyptian provinces (*Aegyptus*, *Arcadia*, *Augustamnica*). The *dux of Thebais* was subject to him. From the mid-fifth century CE the military commander of Thebais was promoted to *comes Thebaici limitis*.¹⁷ After the fifth-century decline of both the central and civic administrative apparatus, Justinian's reform (529) reestablished order. The Diocese of Egypt disappeared as administrative unit, and Egypt was divided in duchies (*Aegyptus*, *Augustamnica*, *Thebais* and *Libya*) subject to *praefectus praetorio Orientis*. Each duchy was governed by a *dux*, who acquired civil and military powers to preserve internal security.¹⁸ The entire Egyptian territory was divided into districts known as pagarchies, which were organized around urban centers and divided into smaller territorial units, such as rural villages, monastic communities, and towns.¹⁹

After the Arab conquest, the four Egyptian eparchies (in addition to the one of Barqa, annexed to Egypt in 645)²⁰ continued to exist both as geographical and administrative units. They were led by *duces* with administrative and financial duties. A Muslim *amīr* initially assisted them in supervising administrative matters and probably held military responsibilities.²¹ Besides eparchies, the Byzantine pagarchies also continued to exist in the sixty or so Arabic *kuwār* (singular, *kūra*). Each pagarchy, named after its main city, were administered by a pagarch (Greek, *dioikētēs* or *pagarchos*; Arabic, *ṣāhib al-kūra*) subordinated to the *duces*.²²

A first change to this administrative structure started during the reign of the first Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (reigned 661–680), when Iordanes served as *dux* of the two provinces of *Arcadia* and *Thebais* simultaneously.²³

¹⁶ Gascou 2012, 421; see also Palme 2007, 246–47 and Falivene 2009 521–40.

¹⁷ Montevecchi 1988, 166–67; Carrié 1998, 108–115; Palme 2007, 247.

¹⁸ Carrié 1998, 115–16 ; Montevecchi 1988, 171. The unification of civil and military power in the hands of the *duces* (singular, *dux*) started with Justinian reform as a tailor-made solution, and was probably definitely affirmed when Byzantines reconquered Egypt after the Sassanid interlude (619 to 629); see Palme 2007, 248–49.

¹⁹ Palme 2007, 246; Falivene 2009, 521–40; Legendre 2013, 81.

²⁰ Brett 2010, 544; the province of Barqa corresponded to the eastern coastal region of present-day Lybia. It included the territories around the city of Barqa (the Byzantine Pentapolis).

²¹ Sijpesteijn 2013, 86–87.

²² Sijpesteijn 2013, 85–86; Ducène 2019, 197–98.

²³ Legendre 2013, 139 and 2014, 108; *P. Apoll.* 9, 5–6 (from 675 to 676, or from 660 to 661); *P. Mert.* 2.100, 2 (669); the title of *dux* of *Arcadia* and *Thebais* appears also in the titling referring to Flavius Atias, the last *dux* of *Thebais* (CPR 8.82.4 = SB 6.9460, 699 or 700).

The region encompassing these two provinces appears in late seventh-century documents as *anō chōra* (Upper District).²⁴ Its equivalent in northern Egypt, the *katō chōra* (Lower District, including both the provinces of *Aegyptus* and *Augustamnica*), is attested subsequently.²⁵ The new administrative denomination, however, did not entirely cancel the previous one, which is attested in Greek and Coptic papyri up to the first decade of the eighth century.²⁶ The back-and-forth between the names used for the administrative divisions of Egypt in the first thirty years of Islamic rule highlights a transitional phase in which two systems of organizing the provinces (and their respective administrative hierarchies) ran side-by-side.²⁷ In the first system, of Byzantine derivation, the Nile Delta was divided between *Aegyptus* and *Augustamnica*, the Middle and Upper Nile Valley between *Arcadia* and *Thebais*; the *duces* who administered these provinces answered to the Muslim governor of Egypt. In the second system, the entire Egyptian territory—divided between the *katō* and *anō chōra*—answered directly to the Muslim governor.²⁸ The latter administrative system gradually took hold during the eighth century. Around the middle of that century, the *duces* were phased out and consequently the pagarchies/*kuwār* and their chiefs became more central under the Umayyads and their successors, at least until the eleventh century.²⁹

Finally, from the reign of the fourth Umayyad caliph Marwān b. al-Ḥakam (reigned 684–685), administrative reforms were implemented in the Egyptian provinces. As result, Muslim governors imposed a stricter control over the whole country.³⁰ The daily life in the Egyptian countryside, which had remained mostly unchanged until then, was from the late seventh to early eighth centuries affected by a progressive Arabization and an Islamization of the bureaucratic apparatus through a more widespread presence of Muslim officials in all hierarchical levels of the administration.³¹

In the context of the wide-ranging historical changes described thus far, this article has focused on the specific case of the transition between Byzantine

²⁴ SB 3.7240, 14 (697); SB 6.9460 (699 or 700); P. Lond. 4.1447, 137 and 144 (685 to 705); P. Sijp. 25.2 (698 or 713).

²⁵ P. Lond. 4.1379, 7–8 (711); P. Lond. 4.1447, 138 and 188 (685 to 705); P. Lond. 4.1462, 10 (eighth century CE); P. Ross. Georg. 4.2, 3 (710).

²⁶ Legendre 2014, 108–109.

²⁷ Legendre 2013, 141–43.

²⁸ Legendre 2013, 138–44. The new denomination (*katō* and *anō chōra*) corresponds to the subdivision of the Egyptian territory into *Aṣfal al-arḍ* and *al-Ṣaʿīd* (Lower and Upper Egypt respectively), attested in Arab sources beginning with Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam’s account of the conquest of Egypt (*Futūḥ Miṣr*, ed. Torrey 1968, 9).

²⁹ Ducène 2019, 198–200.

³⁰ In 714 and 724, large-scale land surveys took place in Egypt (Sijpesteijn 2013, 94–95); they allowed more precise tax assessments, collection, and forced land assignments to Muslim and non-Muslim farmers.

³¹ Starting from the eighth century CE, some Muslims served as districts’ administrator pagarchs (Grohmann 1959; Sijpesteijn 2013, 102–3).

and Islamic rule in the Egyptian oases. This aspect of the history of the area has remained rather marginal in the historiographical debate, mainly due to the abundance of Greco-Roman evidence for the oases as well as the archaeological findings that document a diffuse Muslim presence only from the tenth century onwards.³²

What was the political-administrative structure of the oases before and after the Arab conquest of Egypt? What elements of continuity and discontinuity emerge in the history of the oases with the advent of Arab rule? What new political balances were achieved at the end of the Byzantine era?

The Oases in the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods

The last known description of the Egyptian oases in the late Roman period comes from the historian and poet Olympiodorus, who lived between the second half of the fourth and the first half of the fifth centuries.³³ His Theban upbringing and his extensive description of the oases make him an extremely important witness. Further details emerge from some juridical and literary texts, which mention the oases as places of banishment and areas exposed to the raids of the Mazices people.³⁴ Finally, the oases are mentioned in the lists of the eparchies of the Byzantine Empire reported in the geographical works of Hierocles (early sixth century) and George of Cyprus (early seventh century). A review of the aforementioned texts will be provided in the following sections.

The Oasite Districts

After Diocletian introduced a bipartite division of the Augustan *Provincia Aegypti* between *Aegyptus* and *Thebais* (298), Egyptian territory underwent several organizational changes during the fourth century CE.³⁵ The eastern part of the *Notitia Dignitatum* (dated to ca. 401)³⁶ reports that the *Diocesis Aegypti* consisted of six provinces: *Aegyptus*, *Augustamnica* (341), *Arcadia*

³² For overviews on early Islamic pottery (mostly dated to the tenth century CE and onwards) and archaeological remains in al-Dāḥla Oasis, see Hope 2019, 432–38 and Leemhuis 2019, 440–47. On al-Qaṣaba (al-Dāḥla Oasis), see Gayraud and Décobert 1982, 284–85; Gayraud 1984, 146. On al-Qaṣr (al-Dāḥla Oasis), see Kucera 2019, 450–56. Some archaeological evidence of Islamic occupation come from al-Baḥariyya Oasis: Qaṣr al Bāwīti, Qarat al-Tūb (Colin and Labrique 2001, 161 and 167), and Ġanūb Qaṣr al-Aḡūz (Ghica 2010, 604–6 and 2019, 239). Last but not least, Arabic graffiti dated from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries CE are found at Baḡawāt in al-Ḥārḡa Oasis (Haggari 1978, 271–87 and Ghica 2013, 31–38).

³³ Detailed citations of Olympiodorus's account on the oases and of the other texts mentioned in the present paragraph will be provide in the following sections.

³⁴ Moderan 2010, 4799–810.

³⁵ Bagnall 1993, 64; Palme 1998, 124–30. An overview is in Palme 2007, 246.

³⁶ The *Notitia Dignitatum* is a list of the principal civilian and military officials of the Roman Empire as divided in 395. The *Notitia* is divided into two parts describing eastern and western halves of the Empire, respectively. On the date of the *pars Orientis*, see Zuckerman 1998, 146–47.

(397), *Thebais*, *Libya Superior*, and *Libya Inferior*.³⁷ Within this administrative repartition, the Siwa Oasis (Greek, *Ammōniakē*) was included in the province of *Libya Inferior*; the administrative district of the Small Oasis (Greek, *Mikrā Oasis*) belonged to the province of *Aegyptus* and included al-Baḥariyya Oasis and probably al-Farāfra Oasis;³⁸ the two oases of al-Dāḥla and al-Ḥārġa, were united in the district of the Great Oasis (Greek, *Megalē Oasis*), incorporated into the province of *Thebais* (Figure 1).

Throughout the fifth century, the overall administrative structure of the oases remained mostly unchanged.³⁹ This is confirmed by Hierocles's *Synecdemus*, a geographical survey of the Byzantine Empire written in the early sixth century (based on official documents of the fifth century) and featuring a list of the sixty four eastern Byzantine eparchies and their respective major *poleis*. Among the twenty-three *poleis* of *Aegyptus*, mention is made of Oasis,⁴⁰ which is different from the *Megalē Oasis* that is listed among the ten *poleis* of *Thebais Engista*; *Ammōniakē* (Siwa Oasis) is one of the six *poleis* of *Libya Inferior*.⁴¹

Moreover, the penalty of forced banishment to an oasis, imposed from the third century to at least 529,⁴² demonstrates the full political and administrative integration of the oases into Roman and Byzantine Egypt. Since the

³⁷ *Not. Dig. Or.* 23.8–14 (ed. Faleiro 2006, 229).

³⁸ The organization of the province of *Aegyptus* underwent several changes during the fourth century CE. In 341, the province of *Agustamnica* was created. It included the Delta east of the Phatnīte branch of the Nile and the *Heptanomia* (Middle Egypt nomes). As consequence, the boundaries of *Aegyptus* were reduced to the western part of the Delta surrounding Alexandria. In 374, the *Heptanomia* and a portion of Delta were ceded from *Agustamnica* to *Aegyptus*. In 381, *Aegyptus* was reduced to its old boundaries and *Agustamnica* regained portions of Delta and *Heptanomia*. Around 397, the *Heptanomia* was separated from *Agustamnica* and reorganized as the province of *Arcadia* (Palme 1998, 124–30 and particularly figures 1–4). Because of the strong political and economic bond with the cities of Oxyrhynchus and Herakleopolis (both in Middle Egypt), the *Mikrā Oasis*'s administrative arrangement probably followed that of the Middle Egypt nomes. However, during the fifth century CE, the *Mikrā Oasis* was associated once again with *Aegyptus* (Wagner 1987, 263; Gascou 2012, 421).

³⁹ Wagner 1987, 262–64; Gascou 2012, 421–22.

⁴⁰ Here the toponym Oasis probably correspond to *Mikrā Oasis*.

⁴¹ Hieroc. *Synec.* (ed. Honigmann 1939, 46–48).

⁴² Schwartz 1966, 1484–88; Vallejo-Girvés 2004, 691–93. References to oasis deportation are found both in legal texts—*Dig.* 48.22.7.5, Ulp. *De off. proc.*10; *CTh* 9.32.1 (409 CE); *CJ* 9.47.26.5 (529 CE)—and literary texts. The latter often mentioned the oasis where the exiles were banished. *Megalē Oasis* is mentioned explicitly as a place of exile in Athan. *Apol. de fuga* 6 (*SCh* 56: 140); Athan. *Ap. Const.* 32 (*SCh* 56: 127); compare Soc. 2.28 (*SCh* 493: 128); Theod. *HE* 2.14 (*SCh* 501: 394); Jo. D. *Artem.* 39 (*PG* 96: 1288). In Athan. *Hist. Ar.* 72 (*PG* 25: 780) the denomination of Upper Oasis (Greek, *anō Oasis*) is attested; in Thdr. Lect. fr. 500 (*GSC* New Series 3.2: 143) and Theoph. *A.M.* 6005 (ed. De Boor 1883–1885, 157) the Oasis of Thebaid (Greek, *Oasis tēs Thēbaidos*) is attested. For direct mention of *Ammōniakē* as a place of forced exile, see Athan. *Ap. Const.* 32 (*SCh* 56: 127) and Athan. *Hist. Ar.* 72 (*PG* 25: 780).

oases could harbor forced exiles, we can deduce that they were firmly under Byzantine control.

Some changes in the oasis administrative geography are reflected in George of Cyprus's *Descriptio orbis Romani*, an early seventh-century list of cities, towns, and administrative districts organized by provinces. George of Cyprus's list, while still including Ammōniakē in the eparchy of *Libya*, mentions four *poleis* in Upper Thebaid (Ibeōs, Mathōn, Trimounthōn, and Erbōn). Three of these are oasis settlements:⁴³ Ibeōs is identifiable with the city of Hibis in al-Ḥārġa Oasis; Mathōn and Trimounthōn are variants for the more common toponym Mothis (modern Mut) and Thrimitis (Amheida), respectively, both cities of al-Dāḥla Oasis.⁴⁴ The location of the fourth city, Erbōn, is unfortunately still unknown.⁴⁵ It should be noted that no reference is made to either of the two districts of the Small (*mikrā*) and Great (*megalē*) oases.

Life in the Oases: A Glimpse

The maximum development of the oases of Egypt's Western Desert dates back to the period from the end of the third to the end of the fourth century. The increase in the settlement and population shown by the archaeological evidence at the end of the third century is probably linked to Diocletian's fortification of the Egyptian borders.⁴⁶ The construction of forts and fortlets and the deployment of auxiliary military units to the oases⁴⁷ reflect the imperial efforts to maintain control over the oases, whereas the extensive agricultural development⁴⁸ and the more intense exploitation of water⁴⁹ and mineral resources are markers of local prosperity.⁵⁰

An optimistic picture of the Egyptian oasis life is given by Olympiodorus, who describes the flourishing agriculture of the place called Oasis, equipped with many wells (Greek, *phreata*) dug for 200 or 300 cubits, sometimes even

⁴³ Georg. Cypr. *Descr.* (ed. Honigmann 1939, 80–81).

⁴⁴ Bagnall and Tallet 2019, 83.

⁴⁵ Wagner 1987, 192 argues that the city might be located in al-Dāḥla Oasis, or at least in the area of the Great Oasis.

⁴⁶ Rossi 2013, 334–35.

⁴⁷ Kucera 2013, 312–14; Bagnall 2015a, 187–90; Rossi et al. forthcoming.

⁴⁸ For the agricultural development of the oases in the fourth century, see Bagnall 2015b, 167–72; Aravecchia 2015, 172–84; Rossi et al. forthcoming.

⁴⁹ An example of water resource exploitation is the *qanawāt* aqueducts, which were draining tunnels that collected underground water circulating in the fissures of the rocks at the junction of different geological layers and brought it by gravity to the areas to be cultivated; this is closely linked to areas cultivated in the fourth century: Umm al-Dabadib, Ain al-Lebekha, and the Gib/Sumayra Complex (northern al-Ḥārġa Oasis). See Rossi and Ikram 2018, 45, 49, 65–67 with 161–64 and 264–67.

⁵⁰ Ikram et al. 2020, 319–25; Rossi et al. forthcoming.

500 cubits.⁵¹ The gushing water was used to irrigate the fields of the farmers who made the excavation works:

Concerning the Oasis the historian tells many wonderful tales. [. . .] He tells of the vast amount of sand there and says that the wells, which are dug to a depth of two, three and sometimes five hundred cubits, actually pour water out from their openings. From there the farmers who have started the labour of digging the well draw water in turn and irrigate their field.⁵²

The irrigation system described by Olympiodorus was not used in all parts of the oases' depressions; for example, in al-Ḥārġa Oasis artesian wells mainly served the area of Hibis (the center of the depression), while drainage canal systems (*qanawāt*) were used to the south and north of it. Olympiodorus's account may refer to a section of the oases where artesian wells were still in operation in his time.

It is not clearly stated to which oasis Olympiodorus refers—it may be an area in the district of the Great Oasis, given the high topographical accuracy of the description: “He [Olympiodorus of Thebes] says that there are three Oases: two great ones, an outer and an inner, lying opposite and separated by a distance of about one hundred miles. There is also a third one small a great distance from the other two.”⁵³ The two large oases—the outer one (Greek, *hē men exōterō*, literally “the more outside one”) and the inner one (Greek, *hē de esōterō*, literally “the more inside one”)—can easily be identified with the two oases in the administrative district of *Oasis Megalē*. The inner oasis is probably al-Dāḥla Oasis, mentioned in two documents dated from 376 to 378, as the Interior Oasis (Greek, *hē esō Oasis*⁵⁴ or *hē esōtera Oasis*).⁵⁵ The outer oasis is the present-day al-Ḥārġa Oasis. The identification of the third oasis is more controversial. If the adjective *mikrā* is read as a reference to the official name

⁵¹ The depth of the oasis wells reported by Olympiodorus (200, 300, and 500 cubits, which is roughly 100, 150, and 250 meters, respectively) can be compared with the depth of the wells described at the beginning of the twentieth century by Beadnell in the account on his journey in al-Ḥārġa Oasis. Beadnell reported that the ancient wells in the area of al-Deir were about forty meters deep but that others reached a depth of 120 meters (Beadnell 1908, 8 and 129).

⁵² . Olymp. fr. 33: “Ὅτι περὶ τῆς Ὀάσεως ὁ συγγραφεὺς πολλὰ παραδοξολογεῖ [. . .] Καὶ περὶ τῆς ψάμμου τῆς πολλῆς ἐκείνης καὶ τῶν ὀρυσσομένων φρεάτων, ὡς εἰς διακοσίους καὶ τριακοσίους, ἔσθ' ὅτε δὲ καὶ εἰς πεντακοσίους πήχεις ὀρυσσομένα ἀναβλύζουσι τὸ ρεῖθρον αὐτοῦ τοῦ στομίου προχέομενον· ἐξ οὗ κατὰ διαδοχὴν ἀρυόμενοι, ὅσοις κοινὸν γέγονε τὸ ἔργον, τὰς οἰκείας ἀρούρας ποτίζουσιν οἱ γεωργοί. Translation from Blockley 1983, 195.

⁵³ Olymp. fr. 33: Τρεῖς γὰρ φησὶν Ὀάσεις καὶ αὐτὸς εἶναι, δύο μεγάλας, τὴν μὲν ἐξωτέρω, τὴν δὲ ἐσωτέρω, καταντικρὺν κειμένας ἀλλήλαις, συντείνοντος εἰς ἑκατὸν σημεῖα τοῦ μεταξύ διαστήματος. Ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἄλλη τρίτη μικρά, πολλῶν διαστήματι τῶν δύο κεχωρισμένη. Translation from Blockley 1983, 197.

⁵⁴ *M. Chr.* 78.

⁵⁵ *M. Chr.* 77.

of the administrative district, then the oasis can be identified as the *Oasis Mikrā*.⁵⁶ If, however, we consider that Olympiodorus's account focuses more on the topographical features of the oases rather than on the official names of the oasite districts, then Siwa can be identified as the third oasis. In the latter case, the *Oasis Mikrā* district would be left out of the description. This interpretation is, in my opinion, more convincing due to the characteristics of the description of the three oases in Olympiodorus's account.

The composition date of Olympiodorus's *Histories* unfortunately provides no clue to the chronology of his information about the oases. What this Theban historian wrote about the oases may have been learned in his later years, or just as well in his youth. Nevertheless, the archeological evidence of the late fourth to early fifth centuries shows clear signs of a general decrease in size and population.⁵⁷ Sites such as Umm al-Dabadib and Qaṣr al-Labaḥa⁵⁸ in al-Hārġa Oasis or 'Ain al-Ġadīda in the al-Dāḥla Oasis were abandoned.⁵⁹ Occupation dropped significantly in major sites such as Qarat al-Ṭūb (al-Baḥariyya), Thrimitis and Kellis (al-Dāḥla), and Kysis (al-Hārġa). Still, life in the oases did not completely stop. Some inhabited clusters as well as Christian monastic communities are documented up to the sixth century, and, as we saw above, at least three oasite cities were mentioned among Upper Thebais urban clusters at the beginning of the seventh century by George of Cyprus.

The Oases and the Mazices People

Around 390 Palladius visited the monastic community of Nitria (northwestern Delta) and recorded that the desert that stretched from there reached Ethiopia, the Mazices people, and Mauritania.⁶⁰ In his *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom*, he reported that in 404 Demetrius of Pessinus, one of the bishops loyal to John Chrysostom, was banished to an Egyptian oasis located near the Mazices.⁶¹ An account preserved in the collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, known in the Latin version compiled by the presbyters Pelagius and John (future popes in 556 to 561 and 561 to 574, respectively) before the

⁵⁶ See Blockey 1983, 219; Wagner 1987, 130.

⁵⁷ An overview can be found in Boozer 2020, 172 and 179.

⁵⁸ Rossi and Ikram 2018, 521.

⁵⁹ Aravecchia 2015, 180 and 182.

⁶⁰ Pall. *Hist. Laus.* 7.2 (ed. Bartelink 1974, 38): Ὡς ὅρει [τῆς Νιτρίας] παράκειται ἡ πανέρημος παρατείνουσα ἕως Αἰθιοπίας καὶ τῶν Μαζίκων καὶ τῆς Μαυριτανίας (“Next to this desert [of Nitria] the great desert opens up, stretching as far as Ethiopia, the region of the Mazices and Mauretania”).

⁶¹ Pall. *Dial.* 20 (*SCh* 341: 396): Οἱ μὲν ἐπίσκοποι [. . .] εἰς ἐξορίαν ὑπερόριον ἀπεστάλησαν [. . .] Δημήτριον ἔσω εἰς ὄασιν, τὴν γείτονα τῶν Μαζίκων, εἰσὶ γὰρ καὶ ἄλλαι ὄασεις (“The bishops [. . .] were sent to a far-off place of exile [. . .] Demetrius, in the interior, to an oasis, the one close to the Mazices; there are indeed other oases”).

middle of the sixth century, may help to identify the place. In fact, we are told that a bishop of Oxyrhynchus, who wanted to go to the oasis to evangelize the Mazices, had prepared water supplies for only a four-day journey.⁶² The starting point (Oxyrhynchus) of the bishop's itinerary and the duration of travel to there (four days) suggest that the oasis where the Mazices were located is modern-day al-Baḥrariyya. This may be the same oasis mentioned in Palla- dius's account, and the attempt of the bishop of Oxyrhynchus may date back to the early fifth century.

Deposed by the Ephesus council in 431, the Constantinopolitan bishop Nestorius failed an attempt to secure imperial clemency, and in 435 he was exiled to the Oasis of Hibis. After some time, a group of nomads compelled him to leave the Oasis for Panopolis (Aḥimīm) to escape the incursions of the Mazices, who soon after reached the oasis and took it over.⁶³ This last detail may reflect the situation of the oases at the time of Evagrius Scholasticus.

Moreover, as early as the first half of the sixth century, a group of monks living in al-Ḥārġa Oasis were imprisoned by some marauders called Mazices.⁶⁴ The episode was recorded at the time of Tiberius II (578–582) by John Moschus, when he journeyed to al-Ḥārġa Oasis. We do not know exactly how often these episodes occurred.⁶⁵ The account likely sheds light on a general perception of the ever-increasing importance of the nomadic group originating from the Libyan Desert in the life of the oases, first in the north and later to the south.⁶⁶

The first attestations of the Mazices in the Western Desert and the phase of decreasing settlement and population in the oases are dated to the late fourth to early fifth centuries. Both were probably two sides of the same coin: an increased marginalization of the oasis districts in Byzantine Egypt, leading to less investment in them, ran parallel to a progressive shift of the balance of forces in the Western Desert—to the advantage of the Saharan nomadic groups. Among these, the Mazices are the best known from Greek and Latin sources.

The Western Desert Oases from the Arab Conquest to the Fatimids

The Arabic-language records of the Western Desert oases (generally designated with the toponym *al-wāḥāt*; singular *al-wāḥ*)⁶⁷ in the first centuries of

⁶² *Apophth. Patr.* (PL 73: 1010).

⁶³ Evagr. *HE* 1.17 (*SCh* 542: 124–40).

⁶⁴ Joh. Mosch. *Pratum* 112 (*PG* 87.3: 2976–78).

⁶⁵ Bagnall 2001, 3–9.

⁶⁶ De Troia 2020, 172.

⁶⁷ The Arabic word for “oasis” comes from the Coptic *ouah* (Sayyid 2005, 32–33). The Arabic variant *awāsīs*, a loanword from the Greek *auasis* (in Ptolemy's *Geography* as a variant for the

Muslim domination in Egypt were first collected in 1982 by Christian Décobert.⁶⁸ This scholar chose the Egyptian oases as a case study for the progressive characterization of the frontier space in Arab geographical literature. Located on the Saharan edge of the territories under Muslim sovereignty, these oases could act, geographically speaking, as the ideal border between the territories either subjected or not subjected to the power of the nascent Islamic state. From a political point of view, however, their status as an independent country made the oases a *sui generis* border. Neither a part of Egypt nor a totally deserted space of separation, the oases were, according to Décobert, an ideological space whose representations were sometimes subordinated to the need to delineate an ordered representation of the Arab-Muslim oikumene. Moreover, based on Décobert's considerations and following a brief excursus on the very first mentions of the oases of the Western Desert after the Islamic conquest of Egypt, the descriptions of *al-wāḥāt* presented below highlight the internal organization of the Land of Oases as well as its relationship with the neighboring Arab province of Egypt.

First Attestations

The first Arabic-language attestation of the oases dates back to the work of the geographer and astronomer al-Fazārī (mid-eighth century),⁶⁹ who mentioned them in a list of states and kingdoms which also describes their sizes.⁷⁰ Known in quotation from al-Mas'ūdī,⁷¹ al-Fazārī's list begins with the territories ruled by the *āmīr al-mu'minīn* and located between Fargānā (Fergana in today Uzbekistan) and Ṭangir (Tangier) and those between the western coast of the Caspian Sea and Ġidda (Jeddah); all the *a'māl* (singular '*amal*, a sovereign-appointed territory)⁷² are listed from east to west. Included in the group of African countries is the '*amal wāḥ* (the reign of Oasis), extending sixty parasangs from east to west and forty from north to south (about 360 by 240 kilometers, respectively). It is preceded by the '*amal Naḥla* (the region encompassing the city of Ngala)⁷³ and is followed by the '*amal al-Baḡa* (the

more common Greek form *oasis*) is also attested, referring to the Egyptian oases in the *Kitāb šifat ḡazīrat al-'arab* (*The Book of Geography of the Arabic Peninsula*; ed. Müller 1884–1891, 42; Décobert 1982, 102) written by al-Hamdānī (died in 945), whose work was influenced by the Alexandrine geographer Ptolemaeus.

⁶⁸ Décobert 1982, 95–114.

⁶⁹ Samsó 2016, 91–93.

⁷⁰ On the size of the countries listed in al-Fazārī, see Lewicki 1962, 517–18; he concludes that the measurements given by the Arab geographer cannot be considered realistic.

⁷¹ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb al-murūḡ* (ed. Pellat 1965, 520).

⁷² Lane 1968, under root '*m-l*.

⁷³ The city of Ngala situated immediately south of Lake Chad (Borno State); Lewicki, 1962, 517; Cuoq 1975, 43.

kingdom of the Beja)⁷⁴ and the *‘amal al-Nūba* (the kingdom of the Nubians).⁷⁵ These regions were designated by the ethnonyms of the peoples inhabiting them and corresponded to the area between the Nile and the Red Sea and to the area of Nubia, respectively.⁷⁶ The country of *wāḥ*, then, can be roughly located west of the Nile, in the current Libyan Desert. Little is known about its size except that, according to al-Fazārī, the *‘amal wāḥ* stretched farther east-west than north-south.⁷⁷

The oases are next mentioned in an anonymous list of Egyptian *kuwār* reported by al-Maqrīzī.⁷⁸ Likely dating to the period of Ibn al-Taḥtakān’s governorship over Egypt (809–810) during the last year of Hārūn al-Rāšīd’s caliphate,⁷⁹ the anonymous list mentions the toponym *al-wāḥāt* under the entry for the *kūra* of Abšāya (ancient Abydos). However, the mention of *al-wāḥāt* with the *kūra* of Abšāya shows that the two locations were closely linked.⁸⁰ This is also attested in the accounts of *al-wāḥāt* by the geographers al-Ya‘qūbī and Ibn Ḥawqal, who mention a desert route from Abšāya-*al-wāḥāt* (see below).

The Land of Oases and Its Subdivisions

A native Iraqi, al-Ya‘qūbī (late ninth century) served the families of provincial governors of the Abbasid empire in Armenia, Khurāsān, and probably Egypt, where he worked for the Tulunids (868 to 905). The *Kitāb al-Buldān* (“The Book of the Lands”) dates back to the Egyptian period, perhaps the last decades of the ninth century.⁸¹ As a work of pragmatic administrative geography, the *Kitāb al-Buldān* is arranged as an orderly collection of information addressed most likely to the officials of the regional administrations for the exercise of their functions.⁸² In this framework, we find the account of Egypt, its *kuwār*, and their major cities. In the description of Abšāya, the main city of the eponymous *kūra*, we find a digression on *al-wāḥāt*:

⁷⁴ The Beja tribes lived between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea Coast occupying a vast area from Upper Egypt (south to the Qīnā to al-Quṣayr route) to Axum (the capital city of the Axumite Kingdom); see Holt 1986, 1157–58.

⁷⁵ The frontier between Egypt and the kingdom of the Nubians lay at first cataract of the Nile river in the neighbourhood of city of Aswān in the Nile Valley (Hilleson 1995, 88–89); for the history of Nubia in the early Arab Era, see Christides 1995, 89–90.

⁷⁶ Décobert 1987, 97.

⁷⁷ Décobert 1987, 98.

⁷⁸ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā‘iz* (ed. Wiet 1911, 307–9); Maspero and Wiet 1919, 173.

⁷⁹ Maury 1986, 168.

⁸⁰ Maury 1986, 163.

⁸¹ Gordon 2018, 2–3.

⁸² Gordon 2018, 6.

From Abšāya, also called Bulyanā, the Oases can be reached following a six-stage itinerary through desert (*mafāza*) and mountains with nothing but sand and stones (*ǧibāl ḥašīna*). One then reaches the Outer Oasis (*al-wāḥ al-ḥārīǧa*) [. . .] One then reaches the Inner Oasis (*al-wāḥ al-dāḥila*) which has a town called al-Farfarūn, whose population is a mix of Egyptians and other peoples.⁸³

Al-Ya'qūbī's is the first actual description of the oases after the Islamic conquest of Egypt. Despite its schematic nature, the account paints a thoroughly detailed picture, including the length of the itinerary from Abšāya to *al-wāḥāt*, and the features of the places crossed along the way, the subsequent enumeration of *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīǧa* and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila*, the ethnographic details, and references to an oasis city named al-Farfarūn. The itinerary between Abšāya and *al-wāḥāt* is comparable to the desert route between Abydos and the first oasis known from Strabo's description of Egypt: "Lined up with Abydos and a seven-day walk across the desert from it is the first of the three oases that we have said to be in Libya [the Egyptian area west of the Nile]."⁸⁴ The common starting point of the itinerary towards the oasis region shows how the desert route from Abydos/Abšāya was consistently and extensively in use. However, while the oasis in line with Abydos mentioned by Strabo is identifiable with the administrative district of the Great Oasis,⁸⁵ more questions arise concerning *al-wāḥāt* in al-Ya'qūbī.

Al-Ya'qūbī mentions a distance of six stages between Abšāya and *al-wāḥāt*, and crossing a desert indicated by the Arabic term *mafāza*—that is, a desert with no water supply—points to a distance of two or more nights' travel.⁸⁶ The direction of the route, however, is not given. Moreover, in the Arab geographer's travel-report style account, *al-wāḥāt*, *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīǧa*, and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* are presented as three consecutive places. The first is designated by a plural toponym, the second and third each by a singular toponym accompanied by an adjective. According to Décobert, the compositional scheme of the account and the first plural toponym suggest that *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīǧa*, and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* are two of the most numerous *wāḥāt* in the region called *al-wāḥāt*.⁸⁷

⁸³ al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān* (ed. de Goeje, BGA 7: 332):

دينة أبشاية يقل لها البليتنا ومن أبشاية تسلك إلى الواحات في مفازة وجبال خشنة ست رحلات ثم إلى الواح الخارجة [. . .] ثم إلى الواح الداخلة. ولها مدينة يقال لها القرقرون وأهلها إخلاط من الناس

⁸⁴ Str. 17.1.42: Κατὰ δὲ τὴν Ἄβυδον ἔστιν ἡ πρώτη οὔασις ἐκ τῶν λεχθεισῶν τριῶν ἐν τῇ Λιβύῃ, διέχουσα ὁδὸν ἡμερῶν ἑπτὰ ἐνθένδε δι' ἐρημίας.

⁸⁵ Strabo's account focuses more on the oases' administrative division rather than their geographical features; see Wagner 1987, 124–38.

⁸⁶ Lane 1968, under root *m-f-z*.

⁸⁷ Décobert 1987, 99.

So far, I fully agree with the hypothesis. What I find less convincing is the subsequent development of Décobert's reflection that identifies al-Ya'qūbī's *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīġa* and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* with the current oases of al-Ḥārġa and al-Dāḥila. If one were to accept the *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila*/al-Dāḥila identity, one has to admit, with Décobert, that al-Ya'qūbī made a mistake in locating the city of al-Farfarūn at *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila*/al-Dāḥila, but postulating an error or mix-up due to a lack of knowledge of the area does not seem necessary to me.⁸⁸

Décobert's interpretation has a precedent in the work of Jean Maspero and Gaston Wiet. In their monograph, *Matériaux pour servir à la géographie de l'Égypte*, Maspero and Wiet correlated the toponyms *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīġa* and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* with the names of the two great oases known from Olympiodorus's account.⁸⁹ However, while al-Ya'qūbī's *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīġa* (literally, "the Outer Oasis") and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* (literally, "the Inner Oasis") correspond to Olympiodorus's characterization of the two major oases (Greek, *hē men exōterō* and *hē de esōterō*), the location al-Farfarūn (al-Farāfra) at *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* shows that the "inner oasis" of al-Ya'qūbī did not correspond to the "inner oasis" of Olympiodorus. For Olympiodorus, the "inner oasis" was the modern al-Dāḥila oasis (separated by a distance of about one hundred miles from the "outer oasis"/al-Ḥārġa; see above). For al-Ya'qūbī, the "inner oasis" was at least al-Farāfra Oasis (plus probably al-Baḥariyya Oasis), which suggests that al-Ya'qūbī's "outer oasis" was at least al-Ḥārġa Oasis reached by a desert route from Abšāya/Abydos. More controversial is if the present day al-Dāḥila Oasis was part of al-Ya'qūbī's *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīġa* or of al-Ya'qūbī's *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila*. A comparison with Ibn Ḥawqal's description of *al-wāḥāt* from the late tenth century may suggest some insights (see below).

Apart from the different political conditions in which Olympiodorus and al-Ya'qūbī lived, the two authors describe the oases from different perspectives: the former from a topographical point of view, the latter within the coordinates of administrative geography. The different definitions of the geographical space depend on their different points of view. Rather than topographical subdivisions of the *al-wāḥāt* region, I find it more convincing to consider *al-wāḥ al-ḥārīġa* and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* as names of subdivisions pertaining to the administrative organization of the oases. It is not surprising, then, that multiple oases are united in a single apportionment, nor is it surprising that the name of the region itself, *al-wāḥāt*, reflects the plurality of the oases. This interpretation seems to find further support in the description of *al-wāḥāt* in Ibn Ḥawqal's *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* ("The Book of the Picture of the World"), dating in its final version to the end of the tenth century.

⁸⁸ Décobert 1987, 100.

⁸⁹ Maspero and Wiet 1919, 223.

Ibn Ḥawqal states that the Land of Oases (*balad al-wāḥāt*) is divided into two districts (dual, *nāḥiyatāni*, singular *nāḥiya*)⁹⁰—*al-dāḥila* (the inner one) and *al-ḥariġa* (the outer one)—separated by a three-day journey (*marāḥil*, singular *marḥala*). He adds that the physical center of the country is in the *al-dāḥila* region, as is the residence of their kings and lords (*mulūk wa-aṣḥāb*), as well as al-‘Abdūn (a fraction of the Lawāta, a Berber tribe). The description of the two districts includes a list of their main centers:⁹¹ Qalamūn and al-Qaṣr (both in modern-day al-Dāḥila) in the *nāḥiya al-dāḥila*; Biḥīṭ and Bīrīs (both in today’s al-Ḥarġa) in the *nāḥiya al-ḥariġa* that is described as the part of the Land of Oases closest to the Nile. Bahnasā al-wāḥ (literally, “the oasis of al-Bahnasā”), probably the al-Baḥrariyya oasis, was also located in the *nāḥiya al-dāḥila*. At Bahnasā al-wāḥ and at al-Farfarūn there were the palaces of al-‘Abdūn. Finally, writing about the oasis called Santariyya (present-day Sīwa), Ibn Ḥawqal specifies that it was inhabited by Berber peoples and that it was the first on the way from the Maġrib (Figure 2).⁹²

Ibn Ḥawqal’s account suggests that the oases were a country divided into an inner and an outer district (*nāḥiya al-dāḥila* and *nāḥiya al-ḥariġa*, respectively). The former was the physical and political center of the country and included both modern-day al-Dāḥila and the northern oases (in fact, in *nāḥiya al-dāḥila* were the centers of Qalamūn and al-Qaṣr—both today in al-Dāḥila—and of al-Farfarūn and Bahnasā al-wāḥ). The *nāḥiya al-ḥariġa* included at least present-day al-Ḥarġa. Moreover, the oases were an autonomous country led by rulers descended from the Berber Lawāta tribe.

More details about the rulers of the oases and their political position in terms of the Arab authorities emerge from a passage in *Kitāb Murūġ al-dahab* (“The Book of the Meadows of Gold,” from the early tenth). Probably composed during the years of al-Mas‘ūdī’s Egyptian sojourn (after 941), the *Kitāb Murūġ al-dahab* contains a description of the *balad al-wāḥāt*, which states that:

In the present year 332 [943 CE], the chief of the oases (*ṣāḥib al-wāḥāt*) is called ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān; he is of the Lawāta tribe but is of Marwanid observance. [. . .] In 330 [941 CE] at the court of al-Iḥšīd Muḥammad b. Ṭuġġ I met this lord’s agent for *al-wāḥāt*; I asked him many things about his native country⁹³.

⁹⁰ Lane 1968, under root *n-ḥ-w*.

⁹¹ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (ed. Kramers, BGA 2.1: 153–54).

⁹² Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (ed. Kramers, BGA 2.1: 155–56).

⁹³ Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-murūġ* (ed. Ch. Pellat 1965, 333–34):

صاحب الواحات في وقتنا هذا وهو سنة اثنتين وثلاثين وثلاثمائة عبد الملك بن مروان وهو رجل من لواتة إلا أنه مرواني [. . .] وقد رأيت صاحب هذا الرجل المقيم بالواحات بباب الأخشيد حمد بن طعج وذلك سنة ثلثين وثلاثمائة فسألته عن كثير من أخبار بلدهم



Fig. 2: The Land of Oases (Arabic, balad al-wāḥāt) and its subdivision in Ibn Ḥawqal's Kitāb šūrat al-ard. The map shows also the cities mentioned by the geographer describing the itineraries between Egypt and the Land of Oases.

The country of *al-wāḥāt* has its own *šāḥib* whom we know to be of the Lawāta tribe (of Berber origin) and of Marwanid observance. This last detail is of great importance: the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II, was killed in 750 by Abbasid groups, which then took power. Nevertheless, in the following years minorities supporting the Umayyad side still existed in Egypt,⁹⁴ and one of these minorities must have still been present in the Land of Oases in the 940s. Moreover, as al-Mas'ūdī claims to have met one of the agents for *al-wāḥāt* at the court of the Egyptian governor Muḥammad b. Ṭuġġ,⁹⁵ we can see how the Land of Oases, although enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy, fell within the political horizon of Egypt, and relations between the two must have been rather consistent.

All the accounts examined thus far date back to before the advent of the Fatimid dynasty. On the other hand, the description of the region of *al-wāḥāt* by al-Musabbiḥī (977–1030)⁹⁶ reported in the first version of the encyclopedic work by Ġamāl al-Dīn al-Waṭwāt (died 1318), *Mabāhiġ al-fīkar wa manāhiġ al-ibar* (“The Joys of Thought and Lessons”),⁹⁷ dates to the first Fatimid period, precisely to the caliphate of al-Ḥākīm (reigned 996–1021). The region called *al-wāḥāt* is listed after the *kuwar* of Lower and Middle Egypt, and is described as a highly agricultural region. Once a separate kingdom (*al-mamlaka*) directly linked to Fuṣṭāṭ, it would later become a region united to Egypt and designated as a *kūra* with its own governor and tax official. The text also states that there were three oases: the first, *al-ḥāriġa*, was home to the main city (*qaṣaba*), al-Madīna; the two cities of al-Qaṣr and Handaw were in the second, *al-wasaṭā*; and the cities of Arīs and Manmūn⁹⁸ were in the third, *al-dāḥila*. Unfortunately, the location of the cities mentioned by al-Musabbiḥī is still undetermined. His account does, however, suggest that, with the incorporation of the oases into the *kuwar* of Egypt, the region of *al-wāḥāt* was reorganized into three parts: *al-wāḥ al-ḥāriġa* (the outer oasis), *al-wāḥ al-wasaṭā* (the middle oasis), and *al-wāḥ al-dāḥila* (the inner oasis). Due probably to its proximity to Egypt, the first of the three oases was chosen as the seat of the district's *qaṣaba*.

The Land of Oases and Egypt

Although not under control of the al-Fuṣṭāṭ governor until the Fatimid dynasty, the Land of Oases was closely linked to Arab Egypt: for instance, according to

⁹⁴ Kennedy 1998, 75–79; Décobert 1987, 107.

⁹⁵ Bacharach 1993, 411: he lived from 882 to 946, and in 939 he was given the title of *al-iḥšīd* by caliph al-Rāḍī and was governor of Egypt during the transition from the Tulunid to the Fatimid age.

⁹⁶ Bianquis 1993, 650–52.

⁹⁷ An extensive bibliography on Ġamāl al-Dīn al-Waṭwāt and his work can be found in Maury 1986, 155 notes 1 and 2.

⁹⁸ Arabic text ed. Maury 1986, 158.

al-Ya‘qūbī, the oasite population was half Egyptian. The strict link between Egyptian oases and Muslim Egypt is evident also from the expression *wāḥāt Miṣr bi-Malsāna* (literally “the Oases of Egypt in *Malsāna*”),⁹⁹ which describes the last stage of the Ġānā-Miṣr (that is, Egypt) itinerary in Ibn- al-Faqīh’s (flourished around 903) *Kitāb al-Buldān*.¹⁰⁰ The expression emphasizes that the Oases belonged to Egypt (*wāḥāt Miṣr* is grammatically an *iḍāfa*).¹⁰¹ Moreover, the fact that *wāḥāt Miṣr bi-Malsāna* is the stage before Miṣr shows that the oases were the gateway to Egypt for the trans-Saharan route from Ġānā to the Nile Valley.¹⁰²

The account of al-Iṣṭaḥrī provides further indications of the relationship between Egypt and the oases. As the tenth-century geographer and author of *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (“The Book of the Routes and Realms”), al-Iṣṭaḥrī championed a form of geography in which physical and natural elements are mostly reduced to the bare minimum in favor of a broader focus on cities, political divisions and borders.¹⁰³ In the context of this political geography, the reference to the oases can be read in the description of the borders of the *balad al-sudān*. One of the borders consists of an arid and wild desert (*barrīyya*)¹⁰⁴ extending beyond Egypt, south of *al-wāḥāt*. Al-Iṣṭaḥrī also specifies that Upper Egypt (*al-Ṣa‘īd*) and *al-wāḥāt* are separated by a three-day journey in the desert (*mafāza*), and that there was a desert between *al-wāḥāt* and Nubia extending as far as Sudan (*barrīyya*). The first desert is designated by the Arabic term *mafāza*, the second by *barrīyya*.¹⁰⁵ The difference is substantial: the former is *mafāza*, a desert in which water points are located at roughly regular (albeit broad) intervals, hence it can be crossed in multiple stages, while the latter is *barrīyya*, a mostly arid, wild region. It is essentially an “empty” space marking a clear separation between areas. There is no clear dividing line between the oases and Egypt.

In the space between the Nile Valley and the Land of Oases there was indeed an extensive network of routes. Ibn Ḥawqal gave a detailed account of it in the *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*. In his account of *balad al-wāḥāt* he refers, for instance, to connections between Upper Egyptian centers such as al-Bulyanā (an alternative name for Abšāya), Aḥimīm, Asyūṭ and al-Ašmun, and the

⁹⁹ *Malsāna* can be probably identified with al-Gilf al-Kabīr plateau (Lewicki 1939, 51–52).

¹⁰⁰ Ibn al-Faqīh, *Kitāb al-Buldān* (ed. de Goeje, BGA 5: 68).

¹⁰¹ The *iḍāfa* is an Arabic construct case expressing close association between nouns; the first noun, the *mudāf*, is “added” to the second noun, the *mudāf ilayhi*, which receives an adjunction; see Fleisch 1986, 1008–1009.

¹⁰² Décobert 1987, 104–105.

¹⁰³ Miquel 1990, 222–23.

¹⁰⁴ Lane 1968, under root *b-r-r*.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Iṣṭaḥrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik* (ed. de Goeje, BGA 1: 52).

place of Biḥīṭ in al-Ḥarġa oasis. Another itinerary goes from Aswān to Dunqul and Bīrīs (al-Ḥarġa Oasis); a four-day road connected al-Qays (ancient Cynopolis) al-Bahnasā, and Bahnasā al-wāḥ (al-Baḥariyya Oasis); finally, a caravan road connected Santariyya and Bahnasā al-wāḥ (Figure 2).¹⁰⁶ Based on Ibn Ḥawqal's mapping, in addition to the connections between the Valley and the Oases there were other, farther-reaching connections stretching as far as the Western Desert Oases from Nubia and Maġrib; the former arrived at Bīrīs, the latter at the oasis of Santariyya. In addition, Ibn al-Faqīh mentions a route from Ġānā. The numerous routes through the entire Western Desert are a further detail of the bond between the oases and Egypt, which was likely based mostly on trade. The oases could be reached not only via desert routes from the Nile Valley, but also via trans-Saharan routes to the Nile Valley.

Conclusions

The main discontinuity in the administration of the oases of Egypt's Western Desert between Byzantine and Islamic rule lies in the different political organization of the oases. Formerly territories included in the Egyptian eparchies, they acquired the status of independent kingdoms comparable to the territories administered by the Muslim Governor of Egypt. This change did not happen overnight, however. From the end of the fourth to the beginning of the fifth century, a progressive decrease in the settlement and population of the oasis districts and a more widespread presence of nomadic groups point to diminished Byzantine control over Egypt's Western Desert compared to the phase of maximum development of the oasis settlements (and their natural and mineral resources) during the fourth century.

The shifting political balance in the Western Desert probably favored nomadic peoples, particularly the Mazices, who extended their influence over the oases (now increasingly on the fringes of Byzantine Egypt). At the beginning of the fifth century, the Mazices occupied an oasis (probably the al-Baḥariyya Oasis); they are then identified as inhabitants of an oasis four days away from Oxyrhynchus (probably the same oasis toward which they already gravitated); from the beginning of the sixth century, they are also mentioned near the southernmost Oasis of Hibis (al-Ḥārġa).

The achievement of political autonomy went hand-in-hand with the restructuring of the internal geography of the country of *al-wahat*, as the oases comprising it were organized into an inner and an outer district; an especially detailed description is found in Ibn Ḥawqal's account. The inner district included the northern oases of al-Bahnasā and al-Farāfra and al-Dāḥla

¹⁰⁶ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-ard* (ed. Kramers, *BGA* 2.1: 155–56).

Oases; the second district included al-Ḥārġa Oasis, the closest oasis to Egypt. The palaces of the kings of Berber origin may have been at al-Bahnasā and al-Farfarūn, while the physical center of the country was in the inner district. Later, after the oases had been organized as *kūra* of Egypt under the Fatimids, the seat of the main city of the entire oasis district was located by al-Musabbihī in al-Ḥārġa Oasis, which must have been considered of great importance for the control of the oases' *kūra*, most likely on account of its proximity to the rest of the country.

Although independent, the country of *al-wāḥāt* maintained close commercial and diplomatic ties with Egypt. The commercial ties are evident in the dense network of routes from the Nile Valley to the oases, with many of the routes following itineraries from pre-Islamic times. The early Arab geographers' accounts also reveal a dense network of long trans-Saharan routes from Nubia, Maġrib, and Ġānā that passed through the country of *al-wāḥāt*. These long-distance routes highlight the crucial function of *al-wāḥāt* as a corridor to and from Egypt and are a new development compared with the late Roman and Byzantine periods, and a marked growth of the network of routes to and across the oases in the early Arab period is indeed discernible.

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