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Already in the fifth century, an Egyptologist might say, Herodotus was late to the party when he wrote about how the Nile shaped the land and the people of ancient Egypt, so a reader could be forgiven for thinking there is little new to be said on the subject today. But Katherine Blouin’s original and highly useful study of the Mendesian Nome in the Nile Delta has brought the ideas of New Environmental History to bear on evidence from Roman Egypt, putting in the foreground the human response to the Delta environment—a region underemphasized in many other papyrological studies—and the human-caused changes to that environment.

Drawing primarily on the papyri of the Carbonized Archives of Thmouis (CAT), the book contextualizes the social and economic evidence from the Roman-period Nile Delta within the thousands of years of human interactions with the Delta environment. As Blouin describes it, New Environmental History seeks to study “interrelationships among human societies and the various components of the ecosystems in which they live and…to which they themselves belong” (p. 7). Reading the evidence from the Mendesian Nome through the lens of New Environmental History, she “investigates the complex networks of relationships between local environments, socio-economic dynamics, and agro-fiscal policies” (p. 6) of the Delta. Blouin effectively marshals the papyrological evidence to emphasize the reciprocity and resilience of the relationship between the Delta environment and the social, agricultural, and fiscal practices of the humans living there. She complements this papyrological evidence with a variety of sources, notably libation tables from Mendes-Thmouis and Greek novels.

The book divides into four sections and nine chapters. Section I introduces evidence and provides diachronic, regional context. We are taken through the Nile’s changes over a geological timescale, and then shown how human responses to the environment changed the shape of the Mendesian nome (Chapter 1). Blouin surveys
evidence from the Mendesian nome: archaeological material first; then the documents comprising the CAT and the archives’ “museum archaeology” (Chapter 2). Finally, we get an overview of the human history of the Mendesian Nome from the Pre-dynastic to the Arab period. This diachronic survey permits an evaluation of the extent to which evidence from the Roman Period represents a continuation of or departure from earlier and later practices. To this end, the author examines three relevant areas in detail: the third-century BCE Zenon archive; the Mendesian perfume industry; and the second-century CE transfer of the nome’s metropolis from Mendes to Thmouis (Chapter 3).

Section II offers a systematic definition of topographical and administrative terms. The section begins with cartographic information, a catalog of toponyms, their locations, the nome’s extent and borders, and its hydrography and water management strategies (Chapter 4). Blouin next looks at land typology in the papyri from the Mendesian nome and its relationship to land tenure under the Principate. Typology, she finds, is determined primarily by an area’s juridical status (public or private), its use, and the fertility of the soil. Blouin catalogues in detail the various possibilities in each of these categories (Chapter 5).

Section III discusses evidence of agricultural strategies in the papyri by looking at the diversity of Mendesian agricultural output (Chapter 6), and at the ways and reasons different types of marginal land in the nome were made productive (Chapter 7).

Section IV examines disruptions in those strategies and their connection to the crisis of the 3rd century. Special attention is given to the environmental, social, and fiscal factors that contributed to rural depopulation, especially indications of anachoresis—taxpayers’ flight from their land—in the CAT (Chapter 8). The book concludes with a revision and translation of an earlier article connecting the literary Boukoloi (Delta outlaws) to the historical insurgent group the Nikochites, attested in the papyri, in light of the rural depopulation discussed earlier (Chapter 9).

Blouin’s results show convincingly that the means and motivation behind the human activities meant to deal with the hazards and opportunities posed by the Delta environment were not entirely new to the Roman period. Like the work of Bowman, Monson, and Rathbone, Blouin finds that the strategies of private investment, landholding, and commerce in Roman Egypt “were not introduced by the Romans, but rather managed within and, when needed, adapted to the wider geopolitical context of the Roman Empire” (p. 6 and n. 24 for refs.). This continuity is a testament to the resilience of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the Delta environment. Her concluding chapter uses the uprising of the Boukoloi/Nikochites as a case study on the effects of cascading, multi-determined disruptions.
to that relationship seen in the crisis of the third century. But the very fact that the uprising and its effects were short lived, despite happening at the confluence of social, economic, and environmental calamity, demonstrates that resilience.

Blouin also addresses the important question of the “otherness” of the Deltaic evidence within Egypt and the wider Empire—that is, the question of Egyptian Sonderstellung which has long dogged studies relying on papyrological evidence. Her conclusions find that the Deltaic evidence accords with strategies and practices found not only in other parts of Egypt, but in parts of the wider Empire, such as North Africa.

In addition to her larger arguments, Blouin does the field a service by organizing and clearly describing the CAT, and by explicitly defining the many technical terms—categories of land tenure, taxes, crops, land categorization, etc.—that can make agro-fiscal papyrus documents inaccessible to those outside a very narrow field of study. These chapters (chiefly 4 and 5, but also parts of Chapter 2) might have made their contents even more accessible had they been included as appendices with an explicit organizational scheme and layout. Presented as they are, they can interrupt the narrative flow of the argumentative chapters.

Blouin also sees a “market oriented approach” and something comparable to “the modern concept of sustainable development” in fiscal measures meant to adapt to the hazards and exigencies of particular environments (p. 169). But it is unclear why measures such as reducing taxation on artificially irrigated land or tax exemptions for valorization of marginal land indicate production geared toward a marketable surplus rather than personal, local consumption. By couching what are ultimately local agricultural efforts in terms of market orientation and sustainable development, Blouin perhaps overemphasizes the effects of top-down management like targeted tax relief. Even if it was sometimes the case that land use did cater to the type of taxes levied on it—pressures to produce wheat to meet the demands of taxes and consumption outside of Egypt certainly affected crop selection—the direction of causality could also run the other way, with land use instead dictating which types of taxes were levied on which land.

These are more quibbles than objections, however, and Blouin makes difficult evidence from an understudied region accessible to a much wider audience, and places it into a coherent, persuasive historical context. The book will be valuable to any historian or papyrologist interested in the agricultural, social, economic, and environmental history of Roman Egypt.

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