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## **Archaeological Sites in the Nile Delta Landscape (Egypt). Economy, Law, Protection**

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### **Abstract**

Northern Egypt was always an unusually important area for our study on the history of ancient Egyptian state. The “country of papyrus” called by Egyptians *temehu*, their feeder and granary, a communication centre important for contacts with Levant. Several Egyptian capitals were also located here and during the antic period the region became a centre of culture, sciences and the cradle of Coptic religion. Paradoxically, this curious area was until quite lately very poorly investigated. Even now the problems of modern Egypt related with farming activities, demographic development and industrial spread as well as with the traditional way of thinking are clearly visible in this particular important region.

**Keywords:** *Egypt, Nile Delta, landscape, farming landscape, heritage in landscape*

### **Nile Delta. Economic and cultural factors**

The territory of the Nile Delta is marked by the largest human activity compared to the whole of the Middle East. No patch of land here lies fallow, unused for farming or the constantly developing settlement. The deficit of arable land in Egypt determines its worth. Such a state of affairs, however, poses a serious threat to archaeological sites within the area, with all arable lands in Egypt occupying only 2.6 million ha, of which 70% is located within the Nile Delta and further 20% in the Nile Valley and on revegetated terrains of the

Western Desert. Obviously, the Valley and the Delta owe their fertility to the annual flooding of the Nile, which causes sedimentation of fertile silts and favours the formation of alluvial soils [El-Nahrawy 2011].

Another interesting, yet complex issue, is the transport within the Nile Delta. The network of trunk and local roads highly depends on an older and more economically important irrigation system, which is composed of thousands of canals and drains of different conveyance capacities. The drainage system is divided into several groups, depending on their size and the actual and intended use. The biggest ones, which imitate the natural ancient Nile branches, transport water within the entire Delta territory and provide the inhabitants with potable water. Although drinking water is obtained from a system of mechanical/biological wastewater treatment plants scattered around the region, its quality leaves a lot to be desired. Smaller drains, in turn, are used for irrigating fields and evacuating sewage. They have 'grown' tens and hundreds of thousands of minor drains or canals through which water is transported to individual farmlands. While the main drains are used all year round, the smaller ones are oftentimes active only seasonally, when there is a demand for water to irrigate farm fields (mostly in the summer). The smallest of all are usually opened for several days only, to bring water to the field, and then closed with small dams or barrages. An irrigation system like this is a troublesome issue from the point of view of road construction and definitely does not favour archaeological research, which can only be conducted in the 'dry season', i.e. in spring and in autumn, when the crops do not need additional water supply. All this makes the road system within the Delta difficult to use. The roads are narrow and winding, with certain regions being hardly accessible or reachable only through a roundabout way. The irrigation system makes it virtually impossible to build new local roads, grade-separated junctions or motorways. Although the Nile Delta does have a railway system, built largely as an effect of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century activity of colonial states within the region, it is in an even worse condition than the road network, with basically non-existent infrastructure (railway stations, loading docks etc.).

Today the sector of agriculture in Egypt contributes c.a. 15% of the GDP and employs roughly 30% of the labour force, being the state's biggest private employer. For a country like Egypt, with weakly developed economy and education, this is not without significance, shaping the social attitude towards archaeological sites and other protected areas. Egyptian agriculture relies on small farms: millions of farmers cultivate their lands with the one and only aim of arranging their own maintenance or the maintenance of their usually large families. Farms with small-scale agricultural output operating on the free market have the freedom to choose the crops which they find the most favourable in terms of requirements and projected performance. The model is obviously ineffective and leads to imbalance in agriculture and throughout the economy. Farmers lack efficient organisation, know-how and market-oriented production strategies. Plus, they do not have the necessary education and do not receive instructions on how to treat the relics of the past that their neighbourhood abounds with. The current situation implies a significant

development potential of the Egyptian agriculture, but also the numerous threats that a chaotic, educationally unsupported development brings about; with invaluable traces of the past usually being the very first victims [El-Nahrawy 2011].

The repertoire of agricultural activities within the Nile Delta includes: rice, maize, wheat, sugar cane, leguminous plant, cotton, peanut, citrus (orange, tangerine) and wine growing. Animal breeding is relatively insignificant and virtually limited to horned cattle (cow, African buffalo), sheep, domestic poultry and donkeys, traditionally used as draught animals (to pull carts) or for transport. Yet another source of food are Nile canals which remain abundant in numerous fish species even though their degradation progresses [Kołodziejczyk 2012].

As already mentioned above, the Egyptian agriculture is based on two categories of properties: small, fragmented farms located in the Nile Delta, which represent the dominant type, and large agricultural enterprises that use more advanced farming methodologies, mostly on reclaimed desert areas. More than 60% of the production potential is thus in the hands of small farmers, whereas the remainder represents farmsteads with areas occupying over 2 ha and large agricultural corporations. The price for 1 ha of arable land in the Nile Delta exceeds by far 200 thousand Egyptian pounds /EGP/ (nearly EUR 10 thousand), which means that the small farmers are millionaires who live on the brink of poverty, due to low return on investment. The paradoxical low profitability of investments in agriculture (despite the perfect soils and favourable climate) is the effect of high cost of land combined with low crop from small acreages and, finally, the limited skills of the farmers. Although the transfer of know-how to farmers lies with the competent departments of the Ministry of Agriculture, their activity is insufficient in the light of the needs identified. The Egyptian agricultural counselling services lack funds, duly trained advisors and tools to carry out their responsibilities. The same or worse still is the situation of services specialising in monument protection, whose activity within rural areas is basically limited to the supervision of works carried out by foreign expeditions and ad-hoc inspections of the condition of archaeological sites. Regrettably, with the high level of corruption and low social awareness, they are unable to enforce adherence to the strict safeguard provisions, inevitably leading to the collapse of their authority and gradual destruction of the region's historical heritage.

The farming methods practised within the Nile Delta are not of an advanced type. The use of major agricultural equipment and machines is fairly low and basically restricted to harvesting. Small-sized farms are predominantly based on manual labour and simple tools. What is especially important in the context of cultural heritage protection is that the land cultivation is fairly shallow, which saved the underground structures from destruction. This would not be possible had it not been for the fertile soils, which do not need any special treatment, and the primitive farming technology. It is important to point out, however, that the region faces another, much serious problem, which highly reduces the possibility to conduct research whilst favouring destruction of the anthropogenic strata preserved underground, i.e. the high levels of groundwaters in all seasons of the year, caused by the millennia-old surface irrigation system used within the area. Even after the

construction of the Aswan High Dam, which significantly reduced the downstream flow of the Nile towards the Mediterranean Sea, the groundwater level remains high. In most of the Nile Delta, the aquifer starts already several dozen centimetres to 1 metre below the surface, with the water being kept at a stable level by its building soil, the structure of which resembles clayey formations, without endangering the safety of crop. While highly beneficial to agriculture, such solutions jeopardise historic monuments and hinder research. Although specialised drainage or safeguarding measures do not guarantee that lower (older) strata will be accessed or have been preserved [El-Nahrawy 2011], without them research is oftentimes impossible.

Another element conditioning the status of protection of archaeological sites and their functioning within the Nile Delta landscape is local traditions and customs, including those imposed by the Muslim religion. It must be noted that although the Sharia law has not been eventually implemented into the new Egyptian constitution, the document does contain a provision reading that Islam is considered to be the religion of the state, with special rights and that the rules of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation. Although generally known for modern and progressive interpretation of Islam, widely promoted by the prestigious Al-Azhar University, Egypt has for ages been perceived as the centre of Islamic social feudalism, next to Saudi Arabia. This must have affected the state's legislation, also in the area of cultural heritage protection, as well as the mentality and customs of the local people, and is particularly visible in funeral traditions and the location and functioning of burial grounds. Muslim cemeteries are usually established in hilly areas, strictly in accordance with Islamic principles, with graves arranged in regular rows (safas) and covered with clay or, more contemporarily, faced with brick. The gravestones do not feature any names, only verses from the Koran. It is up to the family of the deceased to remember the location of the grave and hand the message down from generation to generation. Rare as they are, visits to graves serve as a reminder that everyone must die rather than commemoration of those who passed away, as cult of the dead is strictly forbidden in Islam. According to the Muslim law, it is not allowed to worship anyone other than Allah, as any other cult, even if only hypothetical, is perceived to be a cardinal sin. There are nevertheless exceptions, also in the Nile Delta, such as tombs of Islamic saints, pious and distinguished Muslims, known as qubbas. Qubbas often serve as places of worship, where people lay flowers, sing and recite religious texts. The same approach to burial grounds is true for a number of regions in the Nile Delta. It has been typical to bury the dead in hilly areas located outside villages, but still close enough to coincide with archaeological sites. In a number of places like this (e.g. Tell Samarra in eastern Nile Delta), the existence of burial grounds prevent not only research as such, but also the possibility to protect or fence the area or otherwise counteract devastation.

Another important issue connected with the functioning of archaeological sites within the Nile Delta landscape is the storage of waste produced every single day by the millions of inhabitants of the region, which has not as yet been addressed. As the only areas with no crops or settlement, in the hands of

individual owners or inept and corrupted state, archaeological sites increasingly frequently turn into landfills. In addition, the trading in cheap, common plastic goods has intensified in recent years, leading to a complete replacement of traditional and biodegradable products and triggering a gigantic increase in the volume of waste that does not undergo natural decomposition but contaminates free spaces. When combined with low social awareness, illiteracy and lack of the sense of necessity to protect the environment and the surroundings imposed by Islam, all this becomes increasingly onerous, as it not only jeopardises the historical monuments and the landscape but also leads to unfavourable social phenomena in the spheres of public safety, agriculture, economy etc.

### Legal environment in Egypt

Egyptian laws on the protection of historic monuments, including archaeological sites, are relatively simple and restrictive at the same time. Most of the aspects of the subjects discussed are governed by ages-old act on the protection of antiquities, first enacted in 1951 (law no. 215) and amended in 1953 (law no. 529), 1965 (law no. 24) and 1983 (law no. 117), which stands behind the Egyptian system for protecting cultural heritage as we know it today. The most recent of these (law no. 117) is virtually the single and most important legal deed governing the operation of the institution in charge of heritage protection and related matters. Immediate control of the condition of monuments and archaeological sites in Egypt is currently in the hands of the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA), which took over from the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) on the rising tides of changes that followed the revolution of 2011. The Ministry of State for Antiquities is divided into five departments responsible for:

- protection of monuments of Egypt's eras from prehistory until the Greek/Roman period; all archaeological sites of these periods, located in all governorates of Egypt, fall under this department,
- protection of monuments from the Islamic and Coptic periods; all movable monuments and archaeological sites of these periods and cultures, located in all governorates of Egypt, fall under this department,
- museums and galleries in all governorates of Egypt; all museums in Egypt fall under this department,
- technical matters – all issues pertaining to conservation, restoration, architecture, construction and engineering of all monuments and archaeological sites all over Egypt fall under this department,
- financial matters connected with cultural heritage protection.

Thus, the monument protection system in place in Egypt is founded on two major pillars: the act of 1983 [law no. 117 of 1983 as amended by law no. 3 of 2010 Promulgating the Antiquities' Protection Law], the fragments of which are quoted below, and the institution of the Ministry of State for Antiquities. The act governs the questions of ownership of historic sites and venues, stating that *all historic monuments and sites shall be deemed public property of the Egyptian state* (Article

6). Additionally, the act prohibits holding monuments as private property, *except if held in private hands before the act was enacted* (Article 8).

Another important element of the act is an absolute ban on trading in monuments (Article 7), which reflects the old (mainly 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century) tradition of unrestricted antiquarian trade in Egyptian monuments as a result of which significant numbers of the same were lawfully taken out of the country. On the basis of observations of the current situation in Egypt it may seem that this very practice saved many of Egyptian monuments against destruction, yet there is no doubt that it also led to depletion of the state's heritage. As a consequence of this strict approach to trading in monuments, a new provision was introduced, reading that *whoever unlawfully sells or smuggles an antiquity outside the Republic of Egypt shall be punished by hard labour and by a fine of no less than 5,000 and no more than 50,000 of Egyptian Pounds* (Article 41). Similar punishments are imposed for counterfeiting state-owned antiquities or a registered antiquity without a written permit of the Egyptian authorities or for tearing them off their place or transferring them in a manner inconsistent with principles set by the state authorities. Such acts shall be punished by imprisonment for a period no shorter than 2 years and a fine (Article 43).

The most relevant for this study are however the provisions pertaining to the treatment of archaeological sites and discoveries made within agricultural and building lands. In accordance with the Egyptian law, all archaeological finds, pieces of art and other artefacts found on the Egyptian lands shall be deemed to be cultural property and shall be governed exclusively by regulations produced by state authorities. In light of the above-mentioned act *an antiquity means each and every movable or immovable object, i.e. a creation of art, sciences, literature or religion, which is the product of different civilisations and can be rooted in successive historic ages since the prehistoric ages until 100 years before the enactment of the law. To satisfy the requirements of the definition, the object must be of archaeological or historical value and must be considered symbolic for one of the civilisations that took place on Egyptian lands. The above also applies to human remains* (Article 1). Finally, the Egyptian authorities have an absolute power over the registers and lists of monuments produced in Egypt; and any real-estate or chattel of a historical, scientific, religious, artistic or literal value may be considered an antiquity by a decree from the Prime Minister upon recommendation of the competent Minister in cultural affairs (Article 2).

Whoever finds within the territory of Egypt an archaeological object belonging to private persons shall notify the authorities of such object and the object shall be entered into the relevant register or shall be considered unlawfully held (Article 8). The same applies to immovable antiquities, such as archaeological sites or architectural relics, which are registered due to a ministerial resolution from a competent minister in cultural affairs upon recommendations of other authorities. The decree is announced to the owners of the antiquity and is published in the Egyptian Official Gazette (Article 12).

Pursuant to Egyptian law, illegal export of antiquities outside the boundaries of the state is strictly prohibited, with employees of airports, border checkpoints etc. being statutorily obligated to ensure adherence to the rule. Even if lawful, the mere possession of an antiquity does not authorise the holder to take it out of Egypt (Article 9). It is permitted, however, that antiquities can be exhibited abroad for a specified time. The above does not apply to particularly valuable antiquities or antiquities vulnerable to damage (Article 10). Provisions of Article 9 also bind owners of collections or antiquities as they are not permitted to dispose of, allow deterioration of or export antiquities without a written permit. Moreover, Egyptian authorities can seek compensation for causing damage to antiquities (even the ones not owned by the state), e.g. fragment of an edifice or an artefact (Article 9).

Equally rigorous are provisions governing the code of conduct for unintentional and unplanned finding of antiquities, for instance, during agricultural works. Whoever accidentally finds a movable antiquity shall give notice of such to the local authorities within 48 hours as of the time of finding the same and shall take good care of such antiquity till handing it over to the competent authority otherwise he shall be considered possessor of the antiquity without licence (Article 24). In addition, the law specifies principles regarding the operation of foreign research teams in Egypt, hundreds of which work here every year. All antiquities found by a foreign scientific excavation mission are obviously the property of the state, with the mission being only allowed to influence decisions about the place of their depositing or exhibiting (Article 35). Similarly, no exploitation/use of an antiquity or site by individuals or foreign teams shall result in the handover of ownership of the same by prescription (Article 15). Situations like this are frequent in Egypt, as it is perfectly normal for research teams to keep working within a specific site for several dozen years, to do which they need to build the necessary infrastructure and facilities.

Control of the state of Egyptian cultural heritage, including archaeological sites, is currently in the hands of the Ministry of Antiquities, a body with a long and intricate history. Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there were virtually no regulations concerning monument protection or trading in antiquities in Egypt. Thousands of artefacts, from jewellery and figurines to sarcophaguses or whole fragments of buildings, were torn out of their original contexts and sent abroad as elements of museum or private collections created or developed at the time worldwide. The demand for Egyptian (or, in broader terms, orient) antiquities, observed since the Renaissance, boomed in the Western culture after Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798-1801) and the subsequent publication of the multi-volume work entitled *Description de l'Egypte*, an important proto-scientific legacy of the voyage which aroused global interest in Egypt and its mysteries.

The first efforts aimed at bringing antiquities under the control of Egyptian authorities were made by king Mohamed, who issued a decree on 15 August 1835, prohibiting the export and trade of all Egyptian antiquities. The decree also indicated a building in the centre in the then Cairo, to house the artefacts found in different parts of Egypt. Sadly, these antiquities were usually given by Egypt's rulers to

European dignitaries as gifts, as a result of which by the mid-nineteenth century the collection of artefacts had diminished so significantly that they were moved to a small hall in the citadel. In 1855, what remained of the archaeological collection and was presented by Abbas Pasha to Austrian Archbishop Maximilian.

In 1858, Said Pasha (the governor and later vice-king of Egypt), approved the establishment of an antiquities authority (officially and traditionally known as *Service des Antiquités*) to stop illegal trade in the Egyptian artefacts, and appointed a French scientist, August Mariette, as the first director of the newly-founded institution. The new institution was responsible for setting up own excavations and for approving and supervising foreign archaeological missions. Mariette's services for Egypt also included the establishment of the first National Museum in the Middle East, inaugurated in 1863 in an old Cairo City Council building in Bulaq district [Bierbrier 2012].

For the nearly 100 years that followed, the *Service des Antiquités* was almost exclusively managed by French scholars. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (i.e. at the beginning of 1950), when British colonial forces eventually left Egypt, did the authority turn into a purely Egyptian institution. For years the protection of antiquities lied with the Ministry of Education, to be transferred to the newly established Ministry of Culture only in 1960. The name of the antiquities authority was changed twice; first into the Egyptian Antiquities Authority (EAO, 1971) and then into the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA, 1994). After the 2011 revolution, the SCA grew in importance and was transformed into an independent Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA).

Today, in the times of post-revolutionary chaos, the protection of Egypt's archaeological heritage, including archaeological sites, presents a serious problem and is a highly challenging task. Next to the abovementioned division of competences, the Ministry of State for Antiquities was divided territorially and departments in charge of supervision of individual regions of the state were established. The Nile Delta Department (additionally divided into the West and East Delta sub-departments) exercises control over thousands of sites located in the part of the country which is the most difficult to manage. It is here that the majority of Egyptian citizens live, and the demographic development, combined with intense farming and urbanisation, seriously threatens the otherwise heavily damaged archaeological sites. The Ministry of State for Antiquities exercises supervision over the region through local branches with jurisdiction coinciding with the administrative division of the country, encompassing 10 governorates: Alexandria, Beheira, Kafr el Sheikh, Gharbiya, Minufiya, Qalyubiya, Dakahlia, Damietta, Sharqiyah and Port Said. The area covers c.a. 22,000 km<sup>2</sup> and hides countless traces of the past [Kołodziejczyk 2012].

As institutions with potentially the best knowledge of the subordinated area and possibility to respond to hazards, the local branches of the Ministry and their activity perform an invaluable function in the protection and management of cultural heritage. Unfortunately, their work usually boils down to rigorous supervision of foreign research expeditions which are treated as a potential problem, although the



real danger lurks elsewhere, most often generated by the local people seeking a way to use lands covered by conservation protection for farming or for erection of residential buildings or council flats. The low level of education and knowledge (including the law) causes that the protective activities are way too often ineffective and incomprehensible to indigenous inhabitants, while the omnipresent corruption favours breaking the rules and tempts the officials to turn a blind eye to the destruction of archaeological sites.

The Egyptian legislation governing the conduct of archaeological investigations imposes certain restrictions on the foreign teams who explore the Nile Delta, related to the protection of the site exploited. For instance, they are not allowed to use heavy equipment, such as bulldozers or excavators, and have to secure the site after completion of works and obey the highly rigorous rules of keeping research documents. Most of these laws are nonetheless nothing more than dead letters, as the teams tend to work according to their own patterns and traditions, not necessarily consistent with Egyptian standards. Sites that are left unsecured after the end of the season or the final completion of works are a common view.

In recent years, international institutions, including UNESCO, have been trying to establish contact with the Egyptian authorities to win influence over the legal status of antiquities protection in the state (and in other countries within the region), yet their possibilities are limited. In addition, the political situation does not favour negotiations, educational programmes, awareness-raising programmes or conservation activities either.

### **Accessibility and protection of archaeological sites within the Nile Delta**

Archaeological sites within the Nile Delta can be divided into several groups that differ in size, thickness of cultural layers and the present condition.

Division according to size is presented below:

- Sepulchral and occupation sites (tells), urban or metropolitan, stretching over an area of dozen or so to hundreds of hectares; vast spaces with relics of edifices, fortifications, temples scattered here and there, and numerous artefacts on the surface (including ceramics), e.g. Buto-Tell el-Fara'in, Mendes or Bubastis.
- Sepulchral and occupation/sepulchral sites (tells), stretching over an area of several to dozen or so hectares, hiding small relics and artefacts (ceramics), e.g. Tell el-Farkha, Merimde Beni Salame, Tell el-Murra etc.
- Occupation sites and graveyards of limited size (semi-tells or underground sites), up to several hectares in size, often multi-layered and poorly visible on the surface, e.g. Kôm el-Chilgan, Tell el-Dab'a Dakhliya etc.
- Remains of small settlements and graveyards wholly extending beneath the ground, invisible on the surface and usually discovered by accident or during explorations with the use of geophysical methods, e.g. Minshat Ezzat, Tell el-Dab'a etc.

- Isolated settlements, burial places or loose discoveries, not linked to other types of sites, traces of roads and routes, poorly visible and usually discovered accidentally - Mashala etc.

The most important position in the Nile Delta landscape is obviously occupied by sites falling under the first two categories, i.e. distinct points, rising above the flat landscape and easily visible from a distance; dominant features of the landscape which at the same time require the biggest protective and research efforts. Sites representing the next three groups are far less (if at all) prominent in the landscape, which makes their identification way more difficult. It must be said that, limited in size as they are, and frequently located beneath the surface, within areas actively used for farming, they are most vulnerable to destruction, unless urgent measures are taken. To aggravate the situation, private ownership of lands which hide archaeological sites favours all kinds of conflicts and problems related to protection or exploration. Tells, which are the most easily visible and covered by the best protection, tend to occupy vast areas, usually in the vicinity of contemporary cities or towns, within attractive and desirable terrains eagerly allotted for new construction or agricultural investments. In consequence, protected areas tend to be gradually 'filched', whether against the law or by way of exerting pressure on the local authorities and the Ministry of State for Antiquities, and used for still new activities. Not a single archaeological site within the Nile Delta is safe. Even though of global importance, all relics of the past – the entire cultural heritage that has been left in Egypt – are continually subjected to human pressure, deteriorating year after year.

The accessibility and degree of protection of archaeological sites within the Delta highly depends on their status, meaning qualification into one of the groups above. Those falling under group 1 or 2 tend to be the easiest to access and most carefully protected, which is due to several factors. Firstly, they are oftentimes located in the vicinity, or even within the confines, of towns or cities (e.g. Bubastis or Tanis) and therefore can be freely reached by trunk roads. Plus, they are well marked and fitted with parking facilities for tourists. Such sites are also relatively well protected by guards, fencing, barriers or information signboards. Sadly enough, all this is insufficient to save them from destruction, especially at the outskirts, where illegal dumping sites spring up like mushrooms or the land is gradually grabbed by farmers or new residents. Archaeological sites from the remaining groups are far less prominent in the Delta landscape and, consequently, much more difficult to find and reach without expert knowledge of their location or the help of a local tour. There is no use searching for good roads here, as these remote places only meet the eyes of those who forced their way through narrow dirt tracts. They are not fenced, marked with information boards, or guarded. Although, theoretically, guards should be present at all archaeological sites, they hardly ever watch over the small ones. Additionally, archaeological sites located within farmlands, fields or pastures are exposed to destructive processes typical of such terrains. Ploughing, irrigation, water activity and plants cause degradation of artefacts and features located beneath the surface, all the more that the vast majority of the edifices

(whether residential buildings, economic facilities or tombs) erected here in ancient times were made of mudbrick, which was sun dried far more often than burnt. Mudbricks were used even in the construction of royal palaces (e.g. from the Second Intermediate Period). Destruction of mudbrick structures progresses quickly since – soft and similar to the substrate soil as they are – the objects (made of Nile silt) do not stand in the way of soil cultivation or building activity.

### **Hazards and perspectives**

The agricultural landscape of the Nile Delta abounds in contradictions and inconsistencies. On the one hand, it is continually changing due to the still growing anthropo-pressure exerted by demographic development of the Egyptian society, large-scale use of chemicals in agriculture, the ever-growing environmental pollution and the melting of agricultural acreage due to the development of civil engineering. On the other hand, the region unchangeably remains Egypt's breadwinner, as fertile soil bravely endures the reckless doings of man. Unfortunately, the situation of another major element of the Delta's heritage and landscape, i.e. archaeological sites and monuments, does not look even half as rosy, as their condition deteriorates notably year by year and the outlook is not good. The current political and economic situation in Egypt has a destructive influence on the activity of monument and landscape protection authorities which, unable to implement a structured protection policy, tailored to the needs of the people, focus on ad-hoc, oftentimes completely ineffectual actions. Additionally, there are certain traditions and cultural elements that strongly resonate in the mentality of Egyptians, making the protection of archaeological sites and other features in the country's landscape even more difficult, if not impossible. What I mean here is the approach to the space, land, land ownership and traces of the pre-Islamic past. The activity of Egyptians is concentrated, in the first place, around the immediate neighbourhood, without implying questions about landscape as the whole or provoking ordered protective undertakings. Yet another urgent problem is that Egyptians very often do not identify themselves with monuments from ancient times. This is all due to the multiple relocations of the population, but also according to the approach founded on Islam, which rejects 'pre-Islamic' traces and objects. Also as a result of political changes which took place in last 7 years inhabitants of the Nile Delta are facing a lot of problems related with looting and criminal activities, focused on theft of valuable items and monuments. This problem described as *heritage in times of conflict* were underlined and discussed by many authors in last few years [see eg. Tresilian 2014; Tassie, De Trafford and van Wetering 2015].

It is also worth to mention that in the Muslim world, tradition and identity are usually deprived of local elements, with their only and most important element being religious principles. Based on my own observations as a person working on excavations in Egypt for the last 20 years, I can assume that more often than not, the local people are afraid to show interest in antiquities and their condition or involve

in protective activity in fear of being accused of 'idolatry' or 'unhealthy' behaviours in opposition to Islam.

In the Middle East (including the north of Egypt), the issue of mental qualities and approach to the past is particularly visible in monuments and works of art of the colonial era (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century). The colonial hegemony of European states within the region only lasted 50-60 years (exclusive of the three past centuries of the European exploitation of the African coasts). The continent was conquered after 1880, when Africa was divided into colonies occupied by individual European states during the Berlin Conference. Not only did colonialism leave a still indelible trace in this corner of the world, but also shaped the region into what we see today, imposed the European culture and administration and favoured the development of infrastructure, education, health protection etc. Its heritage is highly complex and difficult to assess, as it has both positive and negative aspects. For years, authorities of countries of the North Africa and the Middle East have been striving to recover the thousands of monuments of ancient art taken out of the region from colonial times onward, with their efforts showing, i.a. in their attempt to have the bust of Nefertiti returned by Germany. Few people know, however, that traces of colonialists' presence within the area are simultaneously being erased. Such practices are perfectly visible in Egypt (north of Egypt; Nile Delta), where whole parts of big cities, including Cairo, Alexandria or Port Said, were significantly expanded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to a plan. To this day, the cities abound in quarters with villas, palaces and public utility buildings from those times. Finally, although weaker and weaker, traces of infrastructure or industrial or public buildings, such as railway stations etc. are also visible in Egypt. Many of them are true gems of architecture and engineering, but even as such, they are being abandoned, destroyed and devastated, demolished and replaced with concrete blocks of flats or, finally, converted, not necessarily as desirable in the context of contemporary conservation principles. Such practice is particularly visible in Cairo, a city with nearly 20 million inhabitants, or Amman, a home to 5 million people, which represent an architectural hotchpotch, with 19<sup>th</sup> century tenements bordering on antiques from the times of Ramesses II or the Roman emperors. The whole new city of Cairo, a present-day financial and cultural centre of the Arabic world, was basically built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the rule of British and French colonists. It is no mystery that 19<sup>th</sup> century objects, with unregulated ownership, are a problem to the authorities and inhabitants of Egypt, who are reluctant to speak about the times of the state's dependence, but is this a sufficient reason to destroy and forget them as works of art or the manifestation of architects' craftsmanship? How can they be protected without violation of the Egyptians' right to shape their historical policy and weed out traces of history which is so painful? What roles should be assumed by international organisations or research and conservation circles in these transformations?



Fig. 1 Agricultural works on the fields in the Nile Delta - wheat and barley harvest. Photo by R. Słaboński



Fig. 2 Agricultural works in the Nile Delta - preparation for rice cultivation. Photo by R. Słaboński



Fig. 3 Archaeological site Tell el-Farcha on the edge of the village of Ghazala. The development of the modern village is increasingly threatening the ancient settlement. Photo by R. Słaboński



Fig. 4 Archaeological site Tell el-Farcha on the edge of the village of Ghazala. The development of the modern village is increasingly threatening the ancient settlement. Photo by R. Słaboński



Fig. 5 A contemporary Arab cemetery located in the archaeological site of Tell Samarra. Photo by P. Kołodziejczyk



Fig. 6 Architectural details lying around the buildings of the Service of Antiquities at the Tell-el-Ruba (Mendes) site. Photo by P. Kołodziejczyk

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