

How the Landscape of the Fayum Basin Was Considered a Natural Temple and Brought Corporeality to Myth in the Book of the Fayum.

The Fayum basin's natural landscape is the driving influence behind an adapted mythology that entrenches the gods and their roles within this corporeal geography in a way that is only applicable within the basin itself. Through the analysis of narratives within the illustrated Book of Fayum papyrus B/H/A, in particular the imagery used and its connotations, I aim to demonstrate the uniqueness of the representation of the Fayum as a corporeal embodiment of gods as well as physical environment in which they live and seek refuge, moreover how the landscape of the Fayum itself is shown to be a natural temple.

The landscape of the Fayum

The Fayum basin is a natural depression of 44m below sea level, roughly 100km south of Cairo (Galuzina, 2016). Within it was once a seasonal oasis fed by an offshoot of the Nile during the inundation, however during the Middle Kingdom the river Bahr Yusef was widened to a canal so that the once-seasonal oasis became a year round lake, Lake

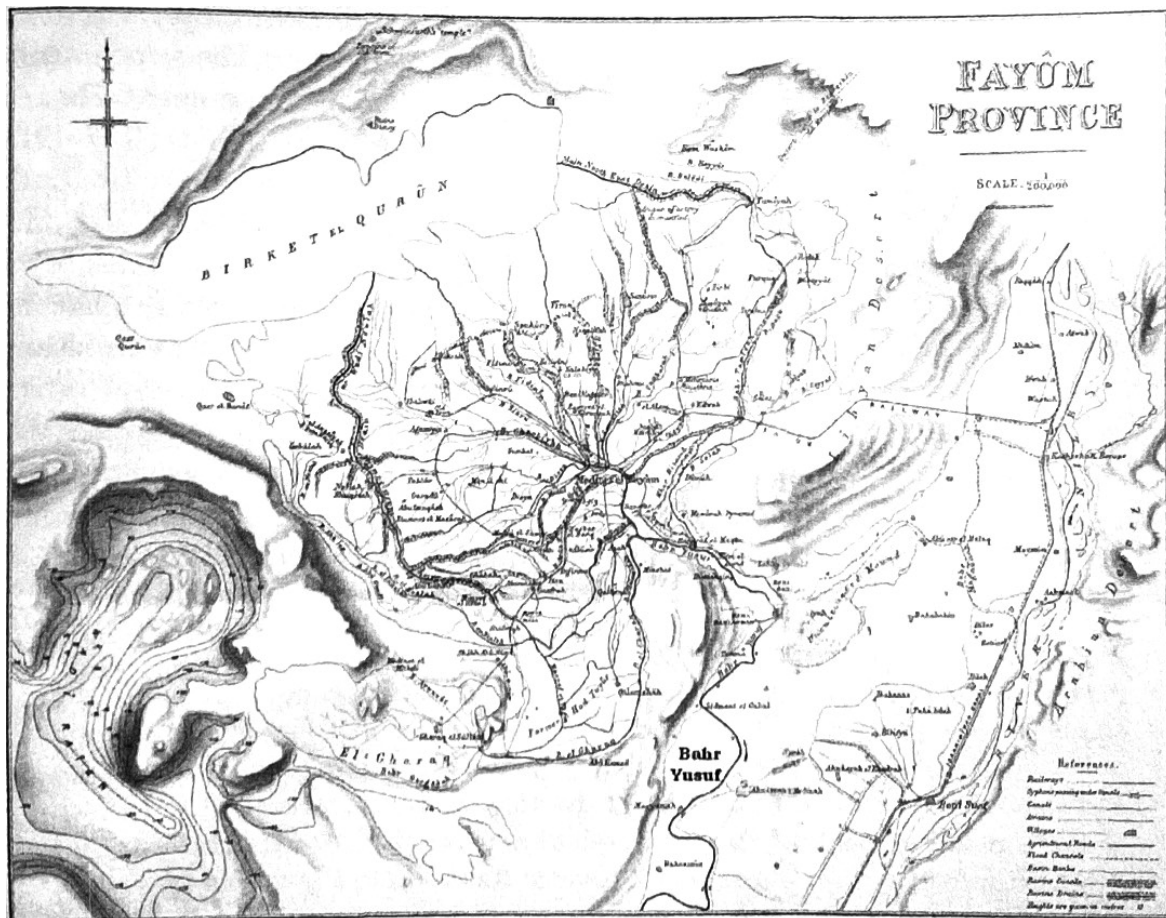


Fig. 1: Map of the Fayum, showing topographical layout (Brown 1892; end of book)

Moeris¹ (in greek) (Mark, 2017). Nonetheless this landscape is dominated by two forces of the natural world, water and desert, the sheer proximity of the latter, often associated with the domain of Seth (Pinch, 2004), meant that it could be considered that the Fayum was always on the edge between tma'at and chaos. The Ptolemies placed the infrastructure that encouraged a large influx of Egyptians and foreigners, in particular Greek and Macedonian military veterans, who were encouraged to settle in Fayum, leading to copious quantities of Greek and Egyptian texts to come from this area (Jasnow, 2013). This in turn would have lead to an amalgamation of cultural practices and beliefs, if not an osmosis of Hellenised ideas within Egyptian traditions that could have shaped mythology, an influence that I propose may have been countered by the Houses of Life and increased output of textual material pertaining to mythology², such as the wide circulation of the Book of Fayum, as evident from the inscriptions of the text on the walls of the Temple of Kom Ombo (Tait, 2011). Therefore the social environment of the Fayum may have been a catalyst for the communication of theological ideas, if not an affirmation of its identity as an Egyptian-province during the Greco-Roman era through the dissemination of a text that claimed the local lake and river were the residencies of central deities to the Egyptian universe.

It is not just the social environment that influenced local beliefs, the natural landscape itself directs the narratives of central mythologies, as well as the identities of gods themselves. The Fayum was entered through a canal that passed between two great hills between the Nile and the depression (see fig. 1), creating a sense of a removed and protective place. When combined with its position on the West Bank of the Nile, a side often associated with the underworld and dead (Pinch, 2004) and as a place on the edge of the desert, a similar location often designated to the depiction of gods in illustrations, such as in the First Section of the Book of the Fayum (see fig. 2). Furthermore the environment is dominated by swampy land, home to many crocodiles resulting in an overarching cult of Sobek, in the Book of the Fayum, the Hieroglyphic-cryptic annotation in the first section of this text places the Fayum “*in the power of Sobek*” (Beinlich, 2013;41). The significance of crocodiles and their habits may have also influenced beliefs of the sun cult for two reasons: firstly, the Fayum is the only place where, from certain points, the sun can be observed emerging from and returning to the water, thus raising the question of how Re returned to the east for dawn (Beinlich, 2013;31). Secondly, the behaviour of crocodiles, submerging at night and emerging at day break to bask in morning light, may have influenced an association between them and solar movements (Galuzina, 2016). This may have resulted in one of the key phenomena of Fayum religion: the syncretic form of Sobek-Re who travelled through the lake on his journey back to the east at night (Beinlich, 2013). Local animals direct the depiction of other gods as well, identifying Seth as a flamingo headed god and the Celestial Cow as a

¹ rendered from the Egyptian name for the waterway “Mer-Wer” (“Great Canal”) (Beinlich, 2013;41)

² a sentiment touched on by Tait (2011; 201) who believed that the Houses of Life sought to record and maintain Egyptian tradition in the face of Hellenistic influences but does not comment on if this effected the output of text.

white hippopotamus (Bench, 2013), both more pertinent animals to the environment of the Fayum. It is this social and natural landscape that contribute to the popularity of a unique cult local to the Fayum, perpetuated by the Book of the Fayum.

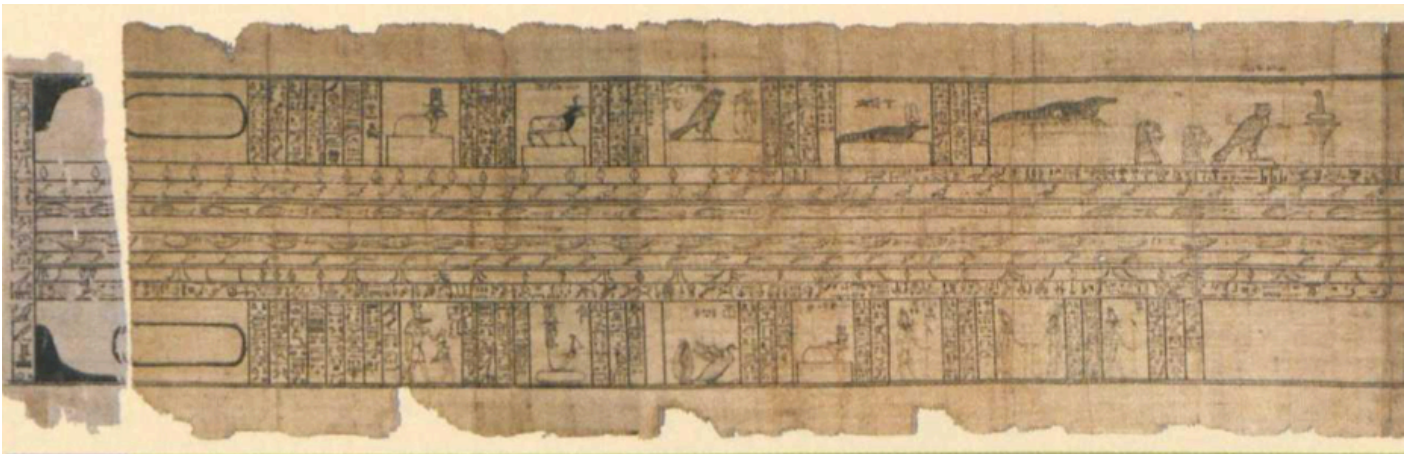


Fig. 2: Section 1 of the B/H/A papyrus, showing the “mer-wer” on the central registers and the gods at the edge, bordering the desert (Beinlich, 2013; 77)

The Book of Fayum: Summary and Sacred Geography

The cults within the Fayum basin celebrated many syncretic forms of Sobek (Galuzina, 2016), centrally that of Sobek-Re which is epitomised in the religious text known as the Book of the Fayum which centres on the key themes, the cycle of the sun-god and the inundation of the Nile as well as the Fayum as a place of divine refuge (Beinlich, 2013). The composition date of this text is uncertain, however thanks to the afore mentioned textual abundance from Fayum as well as the Houses of Life, institutions that preserved Ancient Egyptian traditions, rich material evidence comes mostly from the Greco-Roman era (c. 332BCE to 400AD) (Jasnow, 2013). The linguistic development in Ancient Egypt meant that hieroglyphs were largely reserved for religious texts and formal inscriptions in temples and tombs, a restriction that was eventually extended to its cursive form, hieratic, (“Sacred Script”) (Jasnow, 2013). An even more cursive script, demotic, which had previously been used almost entirely for practical documents was “enthusiastically” taken up by priestly scribes in the Greco-Roman era (Jasnow, 2013;80). Therefore not only are there multiple copies of the text of the Book of the Fayum in these different scripts, but on the illustrated Hieroglyphic B/H/A, there are annotations in hieratic and the numbering in demotic (Beinlich, 2013), showing a simultaneous use of this language and a lack of discrimination for religious texts that seems to have been common practice in Greco-Roman times, giving insight into the era in which it was written (Jasnow, 2013). It is this illustrated version (B/H/A)³ that will be mostly discussed, as it is through the selection of iconography that most of the nuances of the Book of the Fayum are expressed, despite the text that accompanies the images being so that they can be read and understood

³ for the in depth study of this papyrus, see Beinlich, 2013

without the supplementation of the illustrations (Tait, 2011), I propose the full effectiveness of this religious expression comes from its imagery. Furthermore it is this illustrated version that best demonstrates the cardinal determinism, with the top of the document being North, the bottom South, the left is East and the right West, (O'Connor, 2012) that substantiates the implication of the Book of the Fayum as a form of Map, a relative phenomenon in Ancient Egyptian culture alone (O'Connor, 2012;76/7).

The text itself takes the reader through the Fayum basin, beginning with the entrance to the basin through the Bahr Yusef and wetlands, from the Nile Valley (Beinlich, 2013). It is this section that establishes one of the key themes of the Fayum as a place of refuge for the gods, namely Osiris, as demonstrated by the use of the pair of black hill signs used to depict the entrance (see fig.2). Combined with the description of the southern sands as the place where enemies of the sun god rose up against him (placing this event at Heracleopolis) (Beinlich, 2013;37), the other two fundamental beliefs in the Book of the Fayum are introduced. The sun god takes refuge in the Wetlands which the text also establishes as the embodiment of his mother, the Celestial Cow, this motif of refuge is cemented with the combination with the Northern sands that form a protection, in particular from Seth (Beinlich, 2013;39). The second section introduces the narrative of the inundation as brought by Osiris being redirected into the Fayum to the wetlands, in the illustrated version they are presented here as the goddess Mehet-Weret, facing south (towards the source of the inundation) with her arms in the *Ka* position (see fig.5), supposedly representative of the Northern and Southern channels of Lake Moeris (Beinlich, 2013;43). The middle of this section is dedicated to the retelling of the local version of the book of the Celestial cow, here establishing that Re rested his body in the "Great Green" of the lake, the "*place of concealment of the Ogdoad*" where the Celestial Cow protects and revives Ra (Beinlich, 2013;45). The final part of this section is devoted to a depiction of the lake and Ra's emergence from it as part of the Sun's rebirth in the early morning which will be explored later (fig. 4).

The third section is a continuation of this depiction of the lake as a whole (Tait, 2011), where the conflicting directions of the inundation and the movement of the sun are captured (Beinlich, 2013). It also shows cult places around the Fayum, above and below, along with registers of their associated deities, who are depicted within the lake along with two form of the celestial cow⁴. In particular, three significant sacred locations are shown: Shedet, the house of Ra-Sehet and the Acacia house of Neith which is ascribed to be on a great mound (Tait 2011;195).

Section 4 is a description of the temple at Shedet and a catalogue of the many forms of Sobek of all the nomes of Egypt along with the number of 'offerings' that each receives in the Fayum (Tait, 2011). Here we see the Fayum's unifying character (as mentioned in Beinlich, 2013;41) as well as the protective connotations of Fayum. I propose that through this representation of all the gods residing in the Fayum, it is a place

⁴ due to the cardinal determinism used in the papyrus, this section in particular is highly map-like, with the cultic sites and their deities representative of actual places (O'Connor, 2012;73)

both central to the Egyptian world and also disjointed enough to be considered a refuge of the divine, this disjointed position external to the Nile Valley could be considered an 'otherworld' in which the gods live (Assman & Frankfurter, 2007). It further stands to reason that these offerings to the gods would have been overseen by the temple at Shedet, aligning it with this central position within the universe.

The Fifth Section pertains to the House of Life of Ra-Sehet, which in the illustrated version is accompanied by a diagram of the House of Life, a rare piece of information in Ancient Egypt where the inner structure of the Houses of Life was considered an "extraordinary secret" (Beinlich, 2013; 67). What is significant was that this institution was named in the Book of the Fayum as the second most significant place after Shedet and asserts its place as an institute of learning tied to kingship (Beinlich, 2013;66/7). It records the "*the uttering of the first kings*" (Beinlich, 2013;67) and receives the four vulture goddesses that come to the House of Life to spread their wings over the king in protection, thus reaffirming Fayum, in particular its Temples, place as the centre of the world (Beinlich, 2013; 68).

Section Six discusses the Acacia House of Neith, establishing it next to Shedet and the eastern part of the wetlands (Beinlich, 2013;70), although distance is not specified. It is in this section that the place is suggested to have been an island or mound periodically surrounded by water. It is identified as a "Temple of the Acacia, likewise of Neith" (Beinlich, 2013; 70) where a ritual was performed on "Judgement Day" in which the king or his priestly representative would receive the bow and arrows of the goddess Neith, who had protected Horus with them (Beinlich, 2013; 70).

The Fayum as presented through this text forms a natural temple, a message that is strongly communicated through Section Seven which describes the foundation of the Lake at Fayum (Beinlich 2013;72). Here the space is measured out by the Ogdoad, with one pair at each corner, they then dig the foundation trench that ends up so deep that it reaches the primeval ocean that rises up and fills it. This is similar to the depositions of the foundations of temples and likened to the belief behind the sacred lakes at temples, that represented the primeval ocean. It also explains the name of Shedet, that was "the (one) excavated by both hands" (Beinlich, 2013;72). The Book of the Fayum concludes with the eighth section which is an illustrative conclusion reaffirming the lake as the "Temple of Sobek Shedet", in which "*the name of the sun god, Ra, of Osiris, of Horus and of Pharaoh, it is the Lake.*", thus alluding to the very nature of the lake as home of the true, secret, names of the gods (Beinlich, 2013; 74).

What is interesting is that a description of the location of all these significant cultic places and events is given within relation to the Fayum in a way that ties the mythology and religion to a very corporeal, immediate geography.

The Gods as in the Landscape:

Despite the main witnesses of this text coming from Greco-Roman times (Jasnow, 2013), the key themes of the Book of the Fayum are very representative of core, ancient, Egyptian mythologies such as the passage of the Sun at night and the inundation of the Nile that were then adapted to local geography (Beinlich, 2013).

For example the inundation is explained with the coming of Osiris, other mythologies of this phenomena have been attributed to the tears of Isis or the return of Re's daughter from the desert (Pinch, 2004). However in the Book of the Fayum it is explained by the coming of Osiris, who personifies the fertility-bringing floodwater and by whose entrance into the Fayum, defeats the infertile desert, the personified by Seth (Beinlich, 2013). Therefore Osiris' passage into the Fayum, bringing the inundation, is communicated by the image of the inevitably defeated, flamingo-headed Seth by Osiris' son Horus (fig. 3). However the coming of Osiris is explained by the "House of the Flame", supposedly located on the southern hill at the entrance to the Fayum basin from the Nile Valley, where the 'Entourage of Osiris' would show him the way the lake through the lighting of the torches (Beinlich, 2013; 42). Beinlich argues that this was done through the cooperation with the northern hill, known as the "Place of Watching, or Observing" (Beinlich, 2013;41), from which the inundation could be spotted and the "House of the Flame" alerted (Beinlich (2013;42). Unfortunately in the B/H/A papyrus, the flames in the depiction of the "House of the Flame" are absent, with just the allotted space for the artist to draw them left blank, however from other papyrus it is known they would have been drawn in red that would have filled half the field (Beinlich, 2013;42). Thus through this section we can see how mythology was shaped to the landscape and how landmarks were incorporated so as to be driving forces within the central mythology of Egyptian religion.

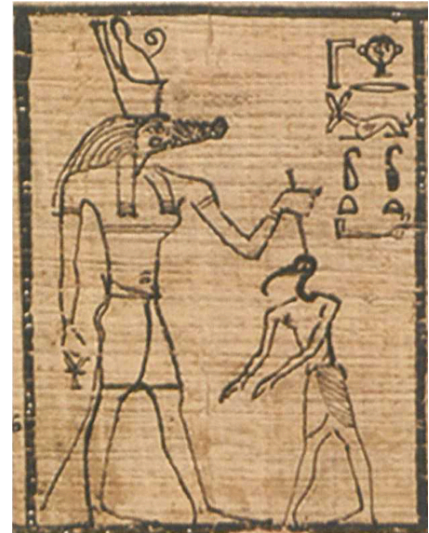


Fig. 3 : Horus defeating Seth (in Beinlich, 2013; 38)

The main subject of the book is the lake and wetlands, similarly to the main focus of Egyptian religion is the sun, therefore their amalgamation within the Fayum leads so some of the most significant religious motifs from Ancient Egypt (Galuzina, 2016). The repetition of the Fayum as a place that is "*in the power of Sobek*" (Beinlich, 2013;41) therefore incorporates the crocodile god into the narrative of the sun god, thus the cult of Sobek-Re as the primary deity of the Fayum (Galuzina, 2016). In Section Two is a representation of the lake on which two divine barks are facing left (East), towards where the sun god would emerge from the water in the early morning (see fig. 4). The lower bark is that of Sobek, who "*travels the northern lake*" whilst wearing the double crown of Egypt, what is more his bark has falcon heads crowned with sun disks at the prow and stern, supposedly either Re or Horus (Beinlich, 2013; 45). Inversely in the upper bark is a

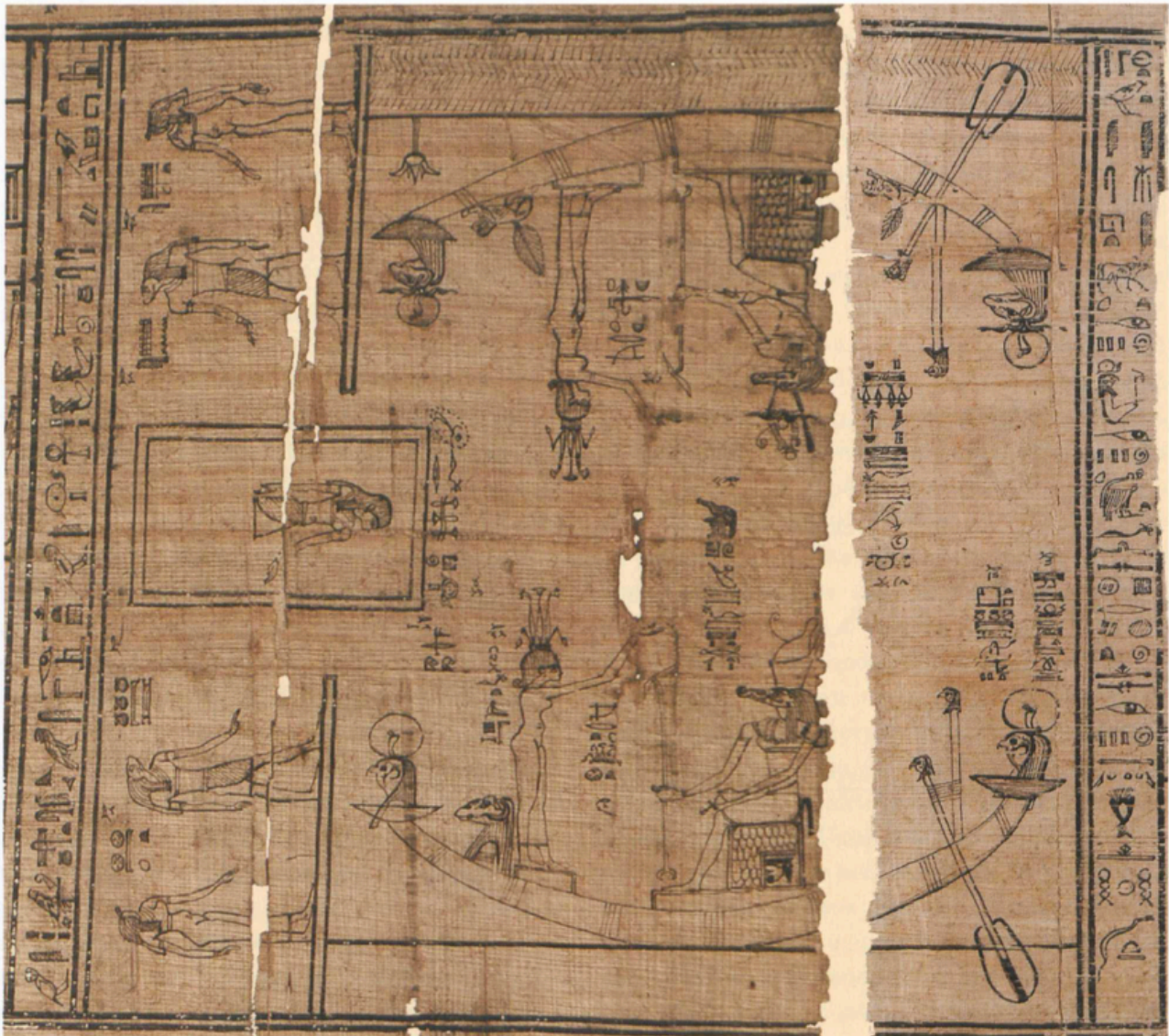


Fig. 4: Re and Sobek in the east of the lake (in Beinlich, 2013; 46)

crocodile-headed Re who “travels the southern lake,” whose bark has rams heads with sun disks at the prow and stern; these barks are proposed to show the transfer from the night to the day in the early morning (Beinlich, 2013; 45/6). Arguably one of the most unique parts of this depiction is Re as emerging from the lake, where only the top half of his body is drawn and is bordered by a box, on the left side of the lake and therefore to the east (Beinlich, 2013). This is unusual for two reasons, first that he is depicted twice within the same scene but also because of only half of his representation does not denote swimming, despite the accompanying text “*It is Ra, who goes off to swim*”, (Beinlich, 2013;46) because in the visual traditions of ancient Egypt, even things under the water are shown (Tait, 2011) and therefore the omission of half of Re’s body cannot be attributed to his submergence. I therefore propose, that if this is

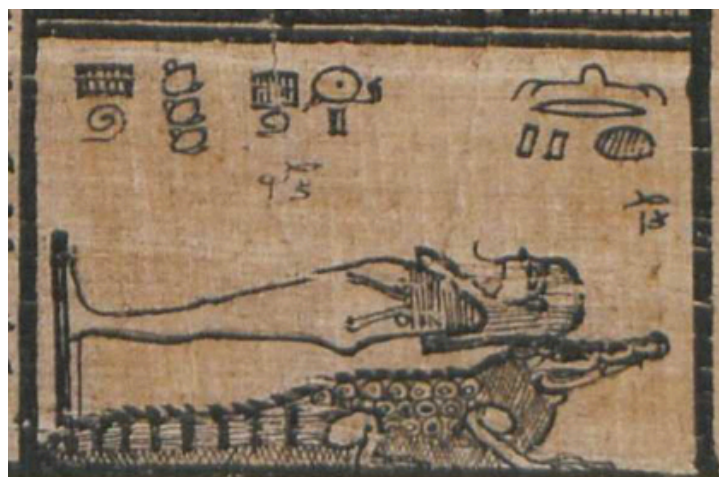


Fig. 5 : Sobek-Ra & Osiris (in Beinlich, 2013; 49)

indeed a representation of early morning (as Beinlich 2013;46 suggests), it is therefore a depiction of the emergence of Re from the hidden mysteries that is the depths of the lake and therefore cannot be shown to the human eye (in alignment with the nature of such mysteries, O’Conner & Quirke, 2011). It is through these hidden depths that Re swims through in the syncretic, or manifested, form of Sobek (Beinlich, 2013). However it is epitomised through the figure of Sobek-Re and Osiris in Section Three (fig. 5), shown as Re in crocodile form (arguably his underworld manifestation as Sobek, Beinlich, 2013; 49) with a mummy (or coffin lid) on his back, representing the syncretism with Osiris (Beinlich, 2013). Such an amalgamation of the gods allows Re to travel through the mysterious depths of the Fayum, in which is the otherworld, for this he needs to adopt the form of Sobek as the lake is “in the power of Sobek” (Beinlich, 2013;41). Moreover because this process requires the passage through the otherworld he must also take on his Osiride form, which is also necessary for him to be revived, a motif that is also in the Books of the Underworld, shown through Osiris’ mummy-form on the back of Sobek-Re (Beinlich, 2013; 50). Although this representation may be seen as a necessary part of the sun’s journey to the east, it has a dual function of explaining *how* the sun god travelled through the Fayum at night, communicating a narrative that has to be adapted to the water-dominated landscape of the Fayum.

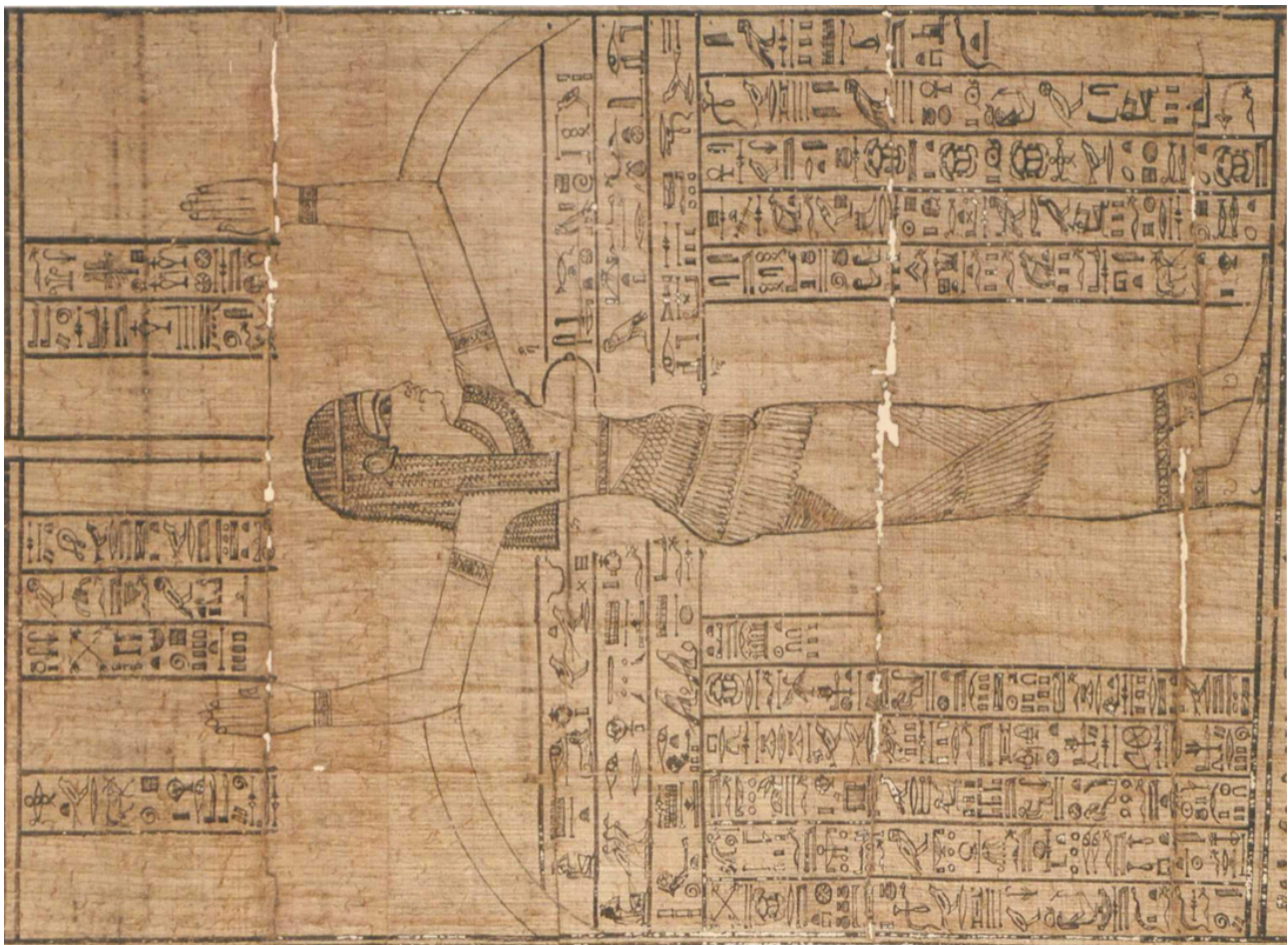


Fig. 6: Mehet-Weret as the Lake (Beinlich, 2013; 43)

The final point of interest in how the gods are incorporated into the landscape of the Fayum is the lake itself which has many forms. Firstly, in the formation of the Fayum (as explained in Section 7), it is filled with the primordial waters, and therefore claimed by Nun, much like how gods take possessions of their temples (Beinlich, 2013; 72). The lake itself is asserted to be the Great Goddess, Mehet-Weret, the Celestial Cow, who when within the lake also takes the form of the “white hippopotamus” when she is not raising Re into the sky as a cow (Section 3 as in Heinlich, 2013;55). However the dominating representation of the lake is through the its personification as Mehet-Weret (fig. 6) who is shown standing, although this is rotated so she is horizontal and therefore may be reclining (Beinlich, 2013;43) alluding to her role in the rejuvenation of Re. More importantly, the depiction of Mehet-Weret is reminiscent of traditional representations of Nut, I thus propose it can be construed that the Fayum was being represented as an entire universe within itself. This would reflect the Egyptian belief that the cosmos was always close and could be condensed so as to manifest in homes, temples and, in the case of the Lake at Fayum, landscapes (O’Connor, 2012).

A Wider Egyptian Tradition or Hellenistic Influence?

The nature of the Book of the Fayum seems deeply rooted in Egyptian mythology, following central themes and motifs as expressed in earlier texts (Beinlich, 2013), conversely subtle influence from the increasing hellenistic population of the Fayum may also be evident in this text. Firstly the settlement of soldiers in from the Roman Empire in the Fayum would have influenced culture and exposed Egyptians to such maps as may have played a decisive role in the incorporation of the actual geography into local mythology (Beinlich, 2013; 34). This same landscape was becoming increasingly complex with cultivation and foreign settlement in the area, however to the Egyptian eye would still have seen the links to the landscape they knew in the Book of the Fayum (Tait, 2011;195), therefore it could be considered that this book was a retaliation to hellenistic influence by reaffirming its ties to strong, Egyptian traditional motifs. After all, the ideas communicated in this text would already have been known to priests (Tait, 2011) and perhaps the only innovation within it is cementing these mythological events within the immediate landscape. Alternatively this may have been an emerging Egyptian practice at the time, for example in the Papyrus of Jumilhac from the 4th century BCE there is evidence of localised retellings centralised around national mythic themes, such as the conflict between Horus and Seth (Pinch, 2004;63/4) . The colour of the red mountain in the Jackal nome is explained with the tale of Anubis’ slaughter of the Followers of Seth whose blood stained the mountain where they gathered, thus showing how national myths and themes are incorporated into localised environments (Pinch, 2004;64). Furthermore the significance of the Fayum in this phenomena must have been prevalent at the time as excerpts of the text of the Book of the Fayum are inscribed in the temple at Kom-Ombo, another temple complex dedicated to Sobek-Re that is far south of Fayum (Tait, 2011). This may be because their similar environments that are swampy and dominated by

crocodiles would drive beliefs centred around Sobek, therefore the text of the Book of the Fayum may have been an attractive mythology and adopted in external but recognisable landscape.

Unfortunately certain limitations face further investigation into the use of the Book of the Fayum, in particular the illustrated version that measures about 10m long and is so large that it cannot be read in the typical method in Ancient Egypt of partially unrolling it across a lap (Beinlich, 2013). Combined with the relative redundancy of such extensive copying of a text that was probably restricted to temple and priestly, or priestly affiliated, readers who would already have esoteric knowledge of such matters (Beinlich, 2013), the purpose of such a text is uncertain. Although it has been proposed that this papyrus was intended for display, perhaps at temple entrances, certain matters of the text such as the House of Life ar Ra-Sehet make the display of the entire text implausible (Tait, 2011;201). Nonetheless the find context of most texts are within the vicinities of temples (Beinlich, 2013), reinforcing its religious nature as well as its probable sites of composition and consumption, however Beinlich (2013; 35) also proposes their popularity and acquisition for prestige objects, regardless of whether the owner was literate in the script. What is known is that it was an established text that was well known and distributed, including to other Houses of Life, who may have aspired to collect literature from other nomes as a way of maintaining Egyptian identity and traditions in Greco-Roman times (Tait, 2011;201).

Conclusion

One of the most striking aspects of the Book of the Fayum is how it forthrightly entrenches gods and landscape, unlike the papyrus of Jumilhac which alludes to certain mythological events happening in local geography, perhaps to explain local landmarks (eg. Red mountain, Pinch), the Book of the Fayum establishes that not only do the gods reside in this lake but that the lake itself is a form of the mother goddess as well as the primordial waters. Further analysis of this book would be beneficial to the much under explored study of sacred Egyptian landscapes, that is only in its initial stages (O'Connor & Quirke, 2011; 68) as well as the extent to which Egyptian and Hellenistic traditions interacted (Jasnow, 2013; 86). Nonetheless the Book of the Fayum exemplifies a close relationship between religion and landscape, whether it is demonstrated through the representation of the gods' image which were adapted to animals that could be more immediately situated within the recognisable landscape, or formalises geographic ties between mythological events and landmarks such as the northern & southern hills or the lake. Perhaps the most impactful part of the Fayum is it's implication that the forbidden knowledge of the "mysteries" of the gods is in such an immediate, tangible and (if one were determined) accessible location as the depths of Lake in the Fayum basin. Through the representations of Mehet-Weret, Fayum as a natural temple and its contents of the "mysteries", the landscape of Fayum is not just presented as a temple of Sobek, but a condensed, corporeal cosmos within itself.

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