Review


This work is a major contribution to our knowledge not only of the maritime dimensions of the Nile River, but also of the geography of medieval Egypt in general. The book is clearly a product of arduous research conducted over many years and Cooper manages to cover a wide array of disparate subjects in interdisciplinary fashion while retaining a tightly focused topical approach that is easy to follow. The text reads well and the work as whole brings together so many sources and so much information that it is indispensable for anyone studying the material life of Egypt in any pre-modern interval.

Following the story of Egypt’s dense network of waterways, the book is divided into three broad topics: geography, navigation, and navigational infrastructure (including ports). There is, however, a great deal of cross-fertilization between these three themes, something Cooper manages to accomplish skillfully. The section on geography examines the Nile Delta in antiquity, exploring the works of classical geographers (Herodotus, Pliny, Ptolemy, and others). Note-worthy here is the way in which Cooper provides an insightful discussion of the long-term changes in environment and geography via a discussion of changes and transformations in the composition of the Nile’s multiple river branches in antiquity. A table provides a very useful and well-organized comparative display of the geography of these Nile branches—and how their approaches differed according to time period and each author’s perspective—which is a valuable reference source for anyone doing work in the field of Egypt’s geography. Cooper introduces the question of how and when these multiple branches disappeared over time, leaving only two in their place: the Rosetta and Damietta branches. His book continues to follow this subject through the subsequent parts of this work.

When we come to the second two parts of Cooper’s section on Egypt’s geography, what we find is an extremely useful treasure trove of information about the locations, trajectories, and evolution of the Nile Delta’s irrigation (and transportation) canal network in the Islamic period and into the early nineteenth century. Via maps and satellite images, Cooper brings the spatial orientation of these canals into sharp relief and the work here should serve as essential background work for studying Egypt’s irrigation system. Indeed, Cooper’s work here stands alone as an masterful update (and insightful critique) of Omar Toussoun’s geography, most of which has gone without comment or criticism in the hundred years since Toussoun produced a series of studies that have, since the 1920s, been the basis for our understanding of Egypt’s geographical past. Whether Cooper addresses the long and complex history of the Nile’s Canopic branch—which (for the most part) became the Alexandria canal—in the western Delta or the lesser know waterways of the eastern Delta, the major canals are traced out in words and images that should now be the basis for any further explorations of Egypt’s hydrographical geography. This first section, by itself, stands out as a major achievement and advancement of our knowledge of how geological forces structures canal and riverine evolution over the long term.

Given this reviewer’s background as a historian of Egypt’s irrigation system in the Mamluk period, a couple of specifics and items of the nitty-gritty should be noted here. Cooper’s mapping of the canal system via some specific examples like his use of the Corona satellite images is noteworthy as is his critical exploration of hitherto highly obscure feature of Egypt’s waterways, like the Hafir canal in the north-west Delta province of al-Bubayra. His analysis of satellite maps is brilliant and original in its scheme, and he cleverly shows how one can trace out the trajectories of past canal systems and the intersection of Delta canals with the Nile branches using the vestiges of these old canals that are traced in the surface features of the Delta’s terrain. Connections with obscure tracks such as the Ibyar (Batanuniyya) canal’s intersection with the Rosetta branch at Farastaq are highly informative, finely detailed, and a valuable source for advanced research into irrigation and riverine geography in any period of the Delta’s past.

This reviewer is less familiar with the nuances of the maritime and port-focused second and third parts of the work, but it seems clear that this material is even fresher and more original than the first section’s foundation in geography. Through travel itineraries, narratives of maritime expeditions, and the mapping of port geography, Cooper’s work should be recognized here as the singular foundation for any research (or teaching curricula) in this area. What should not be neglected is the very rich and informative appendices that follow at the end. What is particularly noteworthy here is the detailed maps that provide a century-by-century history of geographical change in both the river branches and canal systems of the Nile Delta.

There are really no caveats to offer in a review of a work of such high quality. The only minor note that might be made here is that in such a vast and comprehensive treatment of so many subject areas, some aspects of the Nile’s flood hydrology might seem somewhat abbreviated for anyone staring at the beautiful photographs of the Cairo (Rawda) Nilometer on the outside jacket of the book. One could only wish that Cooper had more space to bring his knowledge of the Nile to bear into the realm of the long history of the Nile’s flooding; no doubt given more space, he could have provided expert reference material here as well.

In conclusion, Cooper’s work is an outstanding example of
skilled research and of exhaustive labor over many years. It is one of the finest explorations of Egypt’s geography and environment in print, and it is also a much-needed reference that updates and expands upon Toussoun’s work from a century ago. This work will clearly remain the foundation for future research into these topics as the new template for explorations of Egypt’s geography.

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