Texts in Context: A Methodological Case Study in the Topography of Talei
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In the context of my work for the Oxford Roman Economy Project I have been looking at various demographic studies, especially regarding population sizes and settlement patterns. The integration of textual and archaeological data has produced some interesting results from areas of the Roman Empire that have been sufficiently excavated and/or surveyed. The works of Little, Rowland, Hitchner, Small, and Moreland1 have been seminal in highlighting the need for an interdisciplinary approach in the study of the past, where archaeology and documentary history can provide contextual and structural support for each other. In the case of Egypt, where more and more towns and settlements are being systematically surveyed, the same methods are starting to be applied, even if often in a virtual sense (such as Krüger, Mueller).2 Contrary to most other areas in the Empire, where scant textual evidence is used to complement the much more abundant archaeological finds, in many Egyptian sites the balance between archaeological and documentary evidence is presently in favor of the latter. This peculiarity is very advantageous in the sense that it provides a narrative that can potentially be generalised to aid the understanding of sites that have yielded no documentary evidence. In this methodological study I focus on the Fayum town of Talei and its environs in the first century AD and I examine ways that the papyrological data, mainly sales contracts, can be combined with the results of the archaeological survey. The aim is to locate spatially, actually or virtually, patterns of landownership inferred from the papyri, and explore ways of modelling the results.

Talei, identified with the modern site of Kom Talit, is situated in the south-west Fayum, in the meris of Polemon. The papyrological documentation regarding Talei and its people ranges from Ptolemaic times (when it is usually referred to as Talithis) to the 8th century, with the concentration of references occurring in the first-third centuries AD.3 It seems that no papyri were found at the site itself, but references to it occur in texts from other areas of the Fayum, including some from the Oxyrhynchite nome.4 The papyrological evidence sheds considerable light on the town and its people. Information regarding agriculture has also come to light, such as the practice of double cropping and the principles used for crop rotation.5 We also hear of various officials that held their posts at Talei, and of the activities of the local γραφείον, as well as of individuals practising a wide array of professions. The general impression is of a multi-faceted community with a vibrant economy.

Archaeological survey in Talei has uncovered the main site of the town. The site confirms the presence of several aspects of the town that we know about from the papyri, as for example the intricate

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3 Clarysse and Vandorpe (1998–2002); see the article in the Fayum Project for a graph of the chronological distribution of papyrus texts.
5 Nestola 1970, 175.
irrigation system which is achieved through a series of canals that span part of the city and its environs. The survey also has revealed the interesting fact that the built-up area is arranged in a grid of streets, which run perpendicularly to each other and create fairly regularly sized blocks. The N-S direction of the grid follows the pattern of the irrigation canals. These are visible in the plan drawn by Kirby and Rathbone.\(^6\)

Papyri from the first three centuries AD, on which this study focuses, shed light on matters concerning landownership and ownership of real estate in the form of sale, mortgage, cession, and lease documents, as well as, indirectly, in the form of tax receipts, contracts regarding transportation services, and petitions. The aim is to match the information contained in the documents with the archaeological finds, in order to obtain a fuller picture of this particular town and its inhabitants. Since the archaeological evidence has no claim to completeness, and the documentary evidence consists only of a few chance finds, the main objective is to come up with a methodological outline, which can be applied more widely in areas such as Philadelphia, where a grid has also been uncovered.

What is especially pertinent to this study is the geophysical information found in the papyri. The survey finds are used as a basis into which the information derived from the papyri can be fitted. The papyri provide information regarding the nature of the property in question, very occasionally its size or value, but often regarding its location: it is mainly the sale documents that need to identify the exact boundaries

\(^6\) Kirby and Rathbone 1996. The map is reproduced here with the kind permission of the Egypt Exploration Society.
of the agricultural land, site, or house and yard, that are being sold. There are therefore several documents that not only contain a description of the land in question, but also name its surrounding neighbors. The assumption is that houses and their courtyards will most probably be located somewhere on the grid, whereas agricultural land will not. Indeed what is in general common practice is here a necessity because of the nature of the terrain. Vacant lots could be in either place, but their position can often be identified through their neighbors. Furthermore, it is possible to identify or at least suggest possible examples of the location of certain houses within the grid through references to landmarks such as the main street of the town. The same can be done with the land to the south-east of the grid, based on references to canals, as well as if it is the type of land which tends to occur in clusters (e.g. kleroi).

The obvious constraint in dealing with land ownership is that of time span; clearly the documents used as evidence should not have a span of more than a few decades, and even that may be too much depending on how fast land tended to change hands. So, while all relevant documents from the first three centuries have been considered, the main focus is on those from the first half of the first century.

The most interesting cases occur in sales documents, where considerable detail is disclosed about the property itself and its whereabouts. The houses are described as old or new, we are told whether they have two or three stories, whether they have a cellar and yard. The land is further designated as cataecic or cleruchic; according to its function it is described as grain land or vineyard. An unspecified parcel of land can be either arable, vacant, or designated for building. The position of the property is defined usually by specifying its neighbors to the south, north, west, and east. In documents where the exact location does not have to be specified, such as in *P.Mich. II* 121, which is an alimentary contract, the general location is given in relation to a landmark, such as an aforementioned property, or a temple. Unfortunately the only temple we ever hear about in Talei, that of Thoeris, is only mentioned once in passing, and the archaeological survey has not recovered any certain traces of it. The same applies to other public buildings that we know from the papyri, such as the public record office, and the granary.7

Of the landmarks that occur often in specifying the position of a property, the most prominent one is the royal street (ῥύμη βασιλικῆ). Neither Nestola nor Rathbone identify the exact position of it.8 However a few conclusions, potentially helpful to this end, can be drawn from the papyri: first of all, the royal street must be inside the village (as opposed to leading to the village, or adjacent to it), since the properties that name it as adjacent to them are mostly residential. What is more, one might assume that this street would have been quite central in the village, since two out of three houses that are on it and we have some description of are three-story constructions (the third is unspecified).9 The direction of the street, should we assume that that was all in a straight line, could theoretically be determined by the side of the property in question which it occupies. Unfortunately the papyri offer the rather confusing situation where two properties name it as bordering with them on the south side,10 one on the north,11 and two on the east!12 A

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7 Kirby and Rathbone 1996, 30.
8 Nestola 1970; Kirby and Rathbone 1996.
11 *P.Mich.* V 328.
schematic representation, quite simplistic, of the information contained in the papyri that mention dwell- ing places might look as follows:

![Diagram of schematic representation of dwelling places]

The arrangement of these clusters in relation to each other is arbitrary, as the only indication of se- quence we have is the royal street, and that of course only controls two of the four variables. Since all the streets in the village run at roughly right angles, this might mean that the royal street formed a corner at some point. Another possibility however might be that the notion of north and south is not completely clear-cut in a grid that runs at approximately 40 degrees off the due north-south direction.

Outside the residential area of the settlement, the arable land of the village, as determined by its geo- physical layout, would have been to the southeast of the main village site. The dichotomy that the land- scape so clearly shows up as a necessity is indeed confirmed by the documents: the plots of arable land (mostly kleroi) whose surroundings are stated in the documents are invariably surrounded by other such plots. Besides, the position of such land, when it is noted in the papyri, is invariably "around Talei" (περι) rather than "in Talei" (ἐν) which is the case of the residential plots. The only landmarks that are preserved are to do with irrigation, notably a "royal canal" is mentioned, but its whereabouts cannot be de- termined. The same principle as before can be applied to the rural areas.

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It is interesting to observe that in the "urban" plots the reference to only one neighbor per side shows a more constant spatial layout, whereas the sometimes confusing reference to two neighbors on one side of some agricultural plots may be an illustration of the fluidity of land-ownership, where fragmentation and consolidation of plots confounds the effort to keep accurate records of land-ownership. In the case of *P.Mich. V 252* for example half of a *kleros* is being ceded by two brothers to a man called Zenon. When the neighbors of the now two plots of land are determined, both give each other as neighbors to the east and west respectively, but also name the same two neighbors to the north, which is, in fact, impossible. The two neighbors to the north must have bordered on the initial whole plot, and then been wrongly named as still neighbors of each.

One of the main exports of Talei seems to have been wine, and in the papyri most stages of the wine production are attested, which leads to the assumption that a lot of the arable land must have been used for viticulture. Indeed several vineyards are mentioned. The location of a couple of the vineyards is specified in relation to other plots of land, and it is interesting to observe that these were not necessary clustered together, i.e. they tended to border plots used for grain and other crops. In those cases the decisive factor in the grouping together of land put to different uses seems to be its status as cleruchic land, rather than anything to do with the type of crop growing in it. The rest of the land was used to cultivate wheat, barley, beans, lentils, lotus, bitter vetch, etc. Only one fragmentary and unclear reference to sacred land in Talei remains.
Further topographical information that we find in the papyri is the fact that Talei is mentioned among towns that have a harbor. In none of the preserved papyri is there any specific information on the harbor of Talei, and there is also a noteworthy absence of any sort of reference to shipping. In fact, judging from the available documentation, it would seem that transportation was carried out exclusively by land, and mostly by donkeys (though a few references to camels can also be found), even between Talei and nearby towns that were connected to it through a network of canals. This confirms the premise that the Fayum’s distance from the Nile made transport by land much more common than in other nomes which had ready access to the river.

Talei is of course not the only sufficiently surveyed site in Egypt, and hopefully there will be many more in the future. For this short paper I chose to focus on Talei because it provides a concise example of how one can use papyrology and archaeology together to obtain the most complete picture possible of an ancient site based on concrete evidence. The results for Talei are of course imperfect, but even so they are satisfyingly tangible: the schematic representations attempted above, while simplistic and incapable of conveying a realistic sense of scale, do give a general idea of patterns in land distribution, as well as a sense of the relation of buildings to vacant land and public thoroughfares. This might prove quite promising in the case of other, better-attested sites. The obvious one, as mentioned before, is Philadelphia, a more daunting, but also potentially even more rewarding task.

Works Cited

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22 *P.Bad*. II 29; *P.Fay*. I 23.
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