CHAPTER 7

Nekloni (al-Naqlūn) and the Coptic Account Book British Library Or. 13885

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The (unpublished) eleventh-century Coptic account book British Library Or. 13885 has mainly been valued for its lexicographical interest. It shows a high percentage of rare Coptic words, many of them borrowed from Arabic, and clearly originates from a monastery in the Fayyum province. An archaeological find made by the al-Naqlūn mission of the Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology in 2004 conclusively links the book to the so-called Dayr al-Naqlūn, which a thousand years ago was a rich and prosperous monastic center. The newly established provenance of the account book not only restores the British Library manuscript to its proper context, but also allows its integration into a greater volume of documentary material, in Coptic and Arabic, that illustrates the social and economic life in this monastery in particular, and the southeastern part of the Fayyum Oasis in general, in the Fatimid period.

Introduction

A well-known description of the Fayyum, written around the year 1245 by a Muslim author who is usually cited as ʿUthmān al-Nābulusī, lists no less than thirteen monasteries for this province.1 Nowadays very few of these still exist, and hardly any of them can be identified with complete certainty in the present-day landscape of the Fayyum. The major exception is the so-called Dayr al-Naqlūn, situated—according to the medieval author—“in the mountain, near Qambashā and to its east.” Currently this monastery, locally known as Dayr al-Malak, “the Monastery of the Angel” (scilicet Gabriel, its patron saint), houses a thriving community of monks and lay brothers, and is still to be found

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1 Moritz 1899: 22; Moritz’s edition and several useful studies of the text and its author have been reprinted in Sezgin 1992.
at the very spot where it was located by our thirteenth-century author: on a low mountain ridge to the east of Qambashā, modern Qalamshāh.

**al-Naqlūn and the Polish Excavations**

The monastic site of al-Naqlūn (called Nekloni or Neklone in Coptic sources) is far older than the thirteenth century, and dates back to Late Antiquity. In addition to a rich—though largely legendary—literary tradition, its antiquity is also apparent in the many archaeological remains that are still visible on the spot. Exploring this rich past, excavation and conservation works have been ongoing at al-Naqlūn since 1986, undertaken by a Polish archaeological mission under the direction of Professor Włodzimierz Godlewski (Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw).

As can be easily observed even by the non-archaeologist, al-Naqlūn is a composite site. Before 1986, its core consisted of a medieval church and a cluster of immediately adjacent buildings. Surrounding these, the ruins of a far larger monastic complex were visible. In addition, two zones of hermitages (monastic dwellings cut into the soft rock) could be identified: one on the plateau that slopes from the church toward the west; another in the low mountains to the east of it. In each of these zones, not to mention the various cemetery sites scattered over the place, research has been going on since 1986. This has shown that monastic habitation on the site may date back to the fifth or sixth century. The site flourished in particular in Late Antiquity and in the tenth–twelfth centuries, to be abandoned as a monastery in the fifteenth century, perhaps as a consequence of the Great Plague. The church, which became the core of a monastery again in the late twentieth century, has always remained in use. Inside this church, the Polish mission uncovered a beautiful ensemble of wall-paintings that adds significantly to the repertoire of medieval Coptic monumental art.

The still ongoing work on the site also brought to light large quantities of texts, in all conceivable genres, not all of which have been published. These

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3 For part of this tradition and its modern offshoots, see van der Vliet 2009.
4 The progress of the excavations can best be followed from the annual reports in *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, from vol. 2 (1991) onward; see also the general introductions quoted above.