

The Urban Landscape of Bakchias

A Town of the Fayyūm from
the Ptolemaic-Roman Period
to Late Antiquity

Paola Buzi and Enrico Giorgi



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Cover image: General view of Bakchias from the west

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Preface

P. Buzi, E. Giorgi

This book aims to summarise the results of field research – as well as historical, historico-religious and papyrological studies – conducted on the archaeological site of Bakchias, located in the north-eastern part of the Fayyūm region. It represents a revised and re-arranged version of the book edited by the same Authors in 2014.

The pages that follow do not aim to be a detailed excavation report, given that many publications have already focused on the more technical aspects of the results of fieldwork carried out since 1993. Instead, they attempt to provide an overview of the rise and fall of the *kome* of Bakchias that will be both clear and as exhaustive as possible. There is now no doubt that this settlement was a thriving centre from at least the 26th Dynasty up until the ninth or tenth centuries CE, though with differing levels of economic prosperity and urban development.

On this occasion, we will give equal weight not only to the archaeological and topographical aspects but to the historical and religious aspects as well, whilst never forgetting the relationship between the urban settlement and other villages of the Arsinoite *nomos*, which is famously a peculiar exception in Egyptian geography.

The excavation licence for the archaeological site of Bakchias is currently held by a joint mission involving the University of Bologna (the DiSci, or Department of History and Cultures, previously known as the Department of Archaeology) and Rome's Sapienza University (the Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art History, and Performing Arts, headed by the authors of this book).

We should, however, mention that the field research done from 1993 to 2004 was conducted by the University of Bologna directed by Sergio Pernigotti, in partnership with the University of Salento, represented by Mario Capasso and Paola Davoli. From 2005 on, Sapienza University has worked alongside the University of Bologna, whilst later and for a limited period of time, the mission was also able to draw on the contribution of the Medea Norsa papyrological centre run by Silvia

Strassi, who was based at the University of Trieste at the time.

We would like to begin this book by expressing our gratitude to many people and institutions, starting with the original director of this mission, Sergio Pernigotti. We would also like to mention that the research project underway in Bakchias would never have taken hold, and this book would never have been possible, without the kind cooperation of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt or without the financial support provided by the Republic of Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the University of Bologna and, more recently, Sapienza University's Grandi Scavi fund (2015). Our most heartfelt thanks also go to the directors of the Italian Cultural Institute in Cairo who have come and gone over the years, to the Italian Archaeological Centre in Cairo, originally directed by Maria Casini, followed by Rosanna Pirelli and finally Giuseppina Capriotti Vittozzi.

Amongst our many colleagues and friends, we would particularly like to thank Mohamed Ismail Khaled (from the SCA), Ettore Janulardo (from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Giuseppe Sassatelli, Elisabetta Govi and Gabriele Bitelli (from the University of Bologna), Teodoro Valente, Beatrice Alfonsetti and Alessandro Saggiaro (from Sapienza University, Rome).

Many colleagues over the years have made their contribution to the research project and we would like to thank them all. We limit ourselves to remembering our main collaborators in last years such as Ilaria Rossetti, Valentina Gasperini, Julian Bogdani and Alessandro Campedelli.

Last but not least, our sincerest gratitude goes to local colleagues, the people of Gorein and, above all, our dearest and most irreplaceable *rais*, Mohseen.

The archaeological and topographical research conducted on the site of Bakchias is ongoing and new results could inevitably force us to rethink what has been stated here in the future. However, those who work in the field know that this is a risk we inevitably run.

Introduction

Bakchias and its geographical context

P. Buzi, E. Giorgi

The Kōm Umm el-Athl archaeological area, which includes the remains of the Ptolemaic-Roman village of Bakchias, is located in the north-eastern part of the Fayyūm¹ (in the *markaz* of Tamiyya), approximately halfway between Kōm Awšīm and Darb Gerza, which correspond to the ancient towns of Karanis and Philadelphia respectively.²

The distance between Kōm Awšīm and Kōm Umm el-Athl is just short of 12 kms, more or less the same distance that we find in an interesting record: a papyrus letter (*P.Michigan* VIII 496) where an inhabitant of Karanis invites a resident of Bakchias to visit, specifying that the trip should take no more than two hours, clearly riding on a donkey or sailing along the canal.³

The road that still connects these sites runs along the Abdallah Wahbi canal, whose name already appears in a 1:25,000 Egyptian map of 1945. This waterway starts just after al-Lāhūn, where it detaches from a branch of the Bahr Youssef, a tributary of the Nile that supplies water to the entire region, and finally flows into Birket Qarūn, the large lake on the northern border of the Fayyūm. It is one of the main canals that mark the edge of the Fayyūm depression and therefore of cultivated land, even if vegetation is rapidly spreading and constantly claims land that was once desert.⁴

Despite the efforts made by the Egyptian authorities to protect the site of Bakchias so far, the gradual expansion of farmland is a problem that threatens the preservation of its archaeological remains. The increase in rising damp is proving extremely damaging for the preservation of clay mud-brick buildings, i.e. the majority of the ruins of the ancient village.⁵

On arrival at the modern-day village of Gorein, there is a small bridge that crosses the canal and connects the dirt road that starts in Kōm Awšīm to the northern part of the modern village and, subsequently, the archaeological area.⁶

Thus the ancient town of Bakchias was located on the edge of the region, on the verge of the plateau that marks the end of the depression. Since Sir Flinders Petrie and the English papyrologists Bernard P. Grenfell, David G. Hogarth and Arthur S. Hunt explored Kōm Umm el-Athl, our understanding of the urban settlement of Bakchias has made giant leaps forward, thanks to the systematic fieldwork conducted by Italian archaeologists and Egyptologists. Nevertheless, in recent years we have concentrated on studying and considering the information we have gleaned, due to the lack of funding and the difficulty of conducting research in the field given the extreme political instability that is now affecting Egypt. This is also being done through cooperation with other missions operating in the region.

This was the spirit that inspired the international roundtable organised by the University of Bologna on 25th May 2012,⁷ followed by a second, more extensive day of study organised in Rome on 20th April 2018,⁸ occasions that proved extremely useful for sharing various methodological aspects, as well as the results of research.

It is worth stressing that the focus on a far-reaching, systematic review of the site was an informed choice

¹ For publications about the Fayyūm region, see Morini 2004; Morini 2006; Morini 2009.

² Those who reach the Fayyūm from Cairo get to the site by leaving the main road at the first junction just after the Museum of Karanis and taking the first road on the left, approximately 100 m further on.

³ Pernigotti 2000, 61-62, with bibliography. The distance between the two sites cannot have changed much over time for historical and geographic reasons. Given that the old canal was generally similar to the modern version (even when it departs from the original route, it nevertheless stays close and parallel to it), the terrain has not changed to an extent that could alter its path to any significant degree (Morini 2006a; Mandanici 2007).

⁴ This waterway gives rise to many other secondary canals that are fed by hydraulic machines or by the natural slope of the terrain, creating the backbone of this region's irrigation system, which has now been supplemented with other reclamation work.

⁵ Mandanici 2011; Mandanici 2012; Buzi *et al.* 2011.

⁶ This bridge is undoubtedly the reconstruction of an older bridge called Kubri Umm el-Athl (the bridge of Umm el-Athl). In the abovementioned old Egyptian map, the northern corner stated the altitude '14.17 m a.s.l.' but recent restoration work has removed this label.

⁷ As well as the members of the ongoing mission in Bakchias, those who attended the roundtable held on 25th May 2012 included, among others, Willeke Wendrick, the then-director of UCLA's mission in Karanis, and Emanuele Papi, the director of the University of Siena's mission in Dionysias. Moreover, participants included Antonio Curci, the co-director of the Aswan-Kom Ombo joint mission of the University of Bologna and Yale University; Gianluca Miniaci, a member of the University of Pisa's mission in Luxor; and Giuseppe Lepore, previously a member of the joint mission of the Universities of Bologna and Lecce in Soknopaiou Nesos.

⁸ Apart from the members of the mission, those who attended the conference of 20th April 2018 included Dominic Rathbone, Cornelia Römer, Sergio Pernigotti, the original director of the mission in Bakchias, Antonio Giammarusti, Włodzimierz Godlewski, Gertrud van Loon, Dobrochna Zielińska, and Gabriella Carpentiero.

that was undoubtedly fostered (or influenced) by the abovementioned circumstances. Nevertheless it was long overdue. We believe we can now say that, following the season of ‘grand projects’, which particularly focused on acquiring new data and the accurate preliminary presentation of ongoing research, it is now necessary to invest our best resources in presenting our results to the scientific community, without concealing the problems faced and the goals that have yet to be achieved. We feel this choice is essential if we wish to plan and organise future project-based phases.

Years of research, like those conducted in Bakchias, involve changes not only to the circumstances in which one works, but also to the people that make up the team. Although we accept the responsibility of summarising the results of the research carried out up to now in Bakchias, we cannot forget the essential contribution made by all those who preceded us or who worked with us along the way, to whom we owe a profound debt of gratitude.⁹

This book particularly focuses on the most recent discoveries, without however neglecting to mention

what has been written in the past, which is now reinterpreted and reviewed in the light of new knowledge.

The presentation of the various areas is usually and consciously rather succinct. Previous preliminary reports and some more detailed publications have allowed us to be brief, referring the reader to existing publications for a more in-depth analysis.¹⁰ In addition, the book *Bakchias: Dall’Archeologia alla Storia*, edited by the authors of this book, remains essential reading, as it was the first systematic attempt to summarise what we know so far.¹¹ We refer the reader to that book for everything that concerns the cataloguing of the buildings of Bakchias¹² and the ceramics¹³ and stone artefacts¹⁴ unearthed since 2005.

For the same reasons, this book does not mention some classes of materials due to the many monographs – such as those discussing glass and timber, sculptures of all kinds and amulets¹⁵ – and extensive articles – such as those discussing coinage¹⁶ – which have allowed us to avoid repeating ourselves, ensuring that this book remains both exhaustive and as clear as possible.

⁹ Given the impossibility of mentioning all the Egyptian colleagues and friends who have worked in Bakchias, we will have to limit ourselves to mentioning the inspectors of the Fayyūm inspectorate who cooperated and collaborated in field research: inspectors Maghed Abd el-Hameed Abd el-Aal, Nahla Mohamed Ahmed Hassan, Mohamed Hamed Mohamed Ahmed and Mohamed Hamed Gabr Salama Nureddin.

¹⁰ For the preliminary reports, see Tassinari 2006a; Buzi and Tassinari 2007; Giorgi 2007; Giorgi 2009; Giorgi 2011c; Giorgi 2011a; as well as the various articles published in the RISE series (*Ricerche Italiane e Scavi in Egitto*), originally edited by Maria Casini and subsequently by Rosanna Pirelli and Giuseppina Capriotti Vittozzi. For definitive reports, see Rossetti 2008; Tassinari 2009; Giorgi 2012; Giorgi and Buzi 2014.

¹¹ Giorgi and Buzi 2014.

¹² Rossetti 2014b, 369-406.

¹³ Gasperini 2014, 243-368.

¹⁴ Tocci 2014, 213-242.

¹⁵ Pernigotti 2008; Gasperini, Paolucci and Tocci 2008; Nifosì 2009.

¹⁶ Parente 2004; Parente 2008.