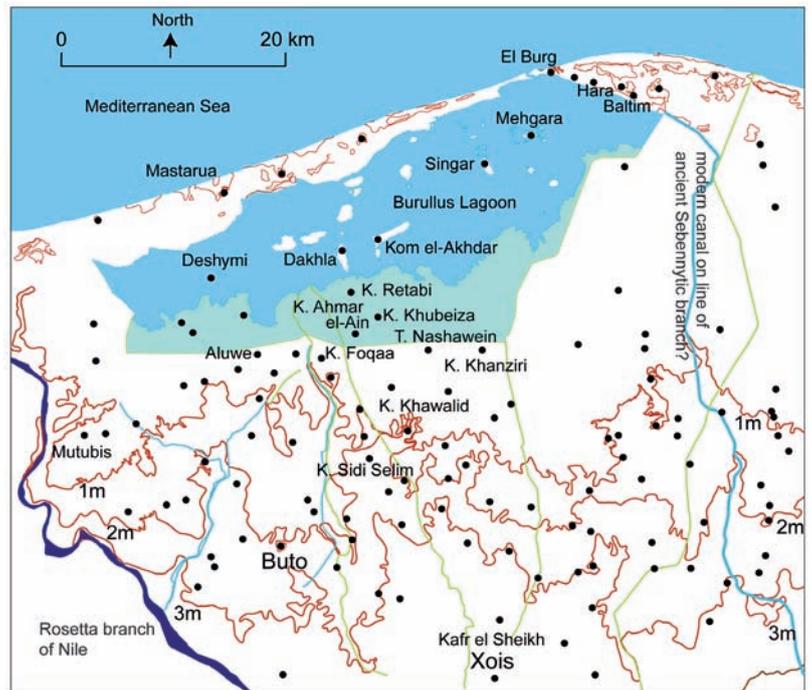


# The ancient landscape around Lake Burullus

The northernmost areas of Egypt are remote, swampy and watery. **Penny Wilson**, who has been investigating around Lake Burullus for the EES Delta Survey, describes this little-known environment and the ancient sites that once flourished there.

Travelling northwards in the Nile Delta, you have the sensation that the edge of the world is approaching and you will soon fall off it. The flat agricultural expanses of the floodplain give way to endless modern fish farms cut through swampy margins, and then to the reedbeds and shore of Lake Burullus. Using the prevailing northern winds, boats sailing across the lagoon can tack through the reed beds along hidden channels and around flat islands, towards the sand bars and dunes of the northernmost fringe of Egypt. Beyond are the clear blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. To the east of Lake Burullus the mighty Sebennyitic branch of the Nile once flowed, now canalised and tamed by a series of drains, and along the southern edge of Burullus a series of distributaries and waterways once debouched into the lagoon, creating channelways through the swamps and reed beds.

Modern irrigation has brought the area under intensive farming, but in pharaonic times it was most likely only occasionally visited by fishermen, bird catchers and reed collectors. As the Delta slowly moved northward, due to the yearly deposition of silt, more land became available for exploitation. From the Roman Period onwards there was an enormous effort to make the most of these northernmost areas, which, in turn, created an agricultural land boom from the first to the tenth centuries AD. Towns and villages sprang up, inhabited by people eager to take advantage of the new land and encouraged by an empire hungry for grain. The populations in the area declined, however, due to war, famine and plague, and the Arab invasion after AD



Map of Burullus and the surrounding areas, showing ancient sites (after the EES Delta Survey), the lagoon and sea areas (in blue) and modern fish-farms/ancient marshes (green). Contour lines are in metres above sea level

641. With reduced populations, the large towns and cities could no longer maintain the drains and dykes to the standards needed to survive in this hostile area. The *tells* that once supported these thriving communities do exist, however, and number amongst Egypt's unsung and undiscovered treasures. North of the ancient centre of Buto, there are more than 100 sites, many of them dating to the Roman Period. Survey work by the Egypt Exploration Society aims to establish the nature of the settlements in this extraordinary landscape.



A house, boats and trees in Lake Burullus



*A sycamore tree sculpted by the wind at Tell Hara, near Baltim*

Once drained, there would have been rich agricultural lands for grain, vegetable and fruit production. The surpluses were collected at strategic points, perhaps monitored by guard posts along the waterways, and sent as tax to Rome and Constantinople during the Roman and Byzantine Empires. The agricultural towns in the area saw the change from pagan religious beliefs to Christianity and then to Islam in just four hundred years and the settlement mounds should reflect the political, economic and religious changes. The area around Lake Burullus provided rich resources and the very isolation of the area may have attracted monastic communities, amongst others, from the Late Antique Period onwards. There are diverse types of site in this area, therefore, and they are a product of the landscape in which they were built.

Along the northernmost fringe of Burullus, for example, there is a series of sand dunes, up to 10m high, which have good views north to the sea and south to the lagoon. Pottery on these sand dunes dates to the Medieval Period, but it is possible that the dunes may have moved and covered earlier watchposts, since fragments of Roman amphorae can be noted at places such as Mastarua. The modern seaside resort of Baltim has covered any ancient remains, but the sand dunes here have abundant medieval Islamic pottery, again attesting to activity in this area, which was the location of the port of Paralos, at the mouth of the Sebennytic branch, until the tenth century.



*House plans visible on the surface of Tell Nashawein*

Large settlements south of Burullus may have been at the edge of the agricultural lands and adjacent to waterways in order to administer and manage the areas around them. Kom Khanziri (Pachnamounis) and Kom Khawalid (Phragonis) were important bishoprics and both sites survive as *tells* of up to 15m high, covering an area of 25 and 65 hectares respectively. Tell Nashawein is a site which comprises two mounds, most likely originally on either side of a waterway, and Tell Foqaa, to the west, may also have had a twin town, now no longer extant, in order to supervise goods being transported northwards. Both sites are covered in fired brick, red-slip ware pottery, glass and metalwork, suggesting that they were equally affluent. In the area now used for fish farming, ancient mounds stand proud of the tanks excavated for young fish. Kom Khubeiza (13 hectares) and Kom el-Ahmar el-Ain (9 hectares) may be remnants of larger sites and they must always have been constantly wind-blown, fly-ridden and difficult to access if their modern condition is any indication.

More isolated than even these settlements are those inside Lake Burullus itself. Accessible now only by boat, the remaining ancient sites at the islands of Dakhlah, Kom el-Akhdar, Mehgara and Singar are surprisingly different in their appearance. Dakhla is a flat area of mud, almost at water level, with some traces of red brick walls, pottery and glass dating to the Late Antique Period (fourth-seventh centuries), whereas Kom el-Akhdar has a small



*Sandhill and grass-covered dunes at Mastarua*



*Recording fired brick on the surface at Kom Retabi*

mound not more than 2m high, which is now covered in green shrubs and yellow flowers in the spring. There is abundant pottery, glass and metal, also of the Late Antique Period, covering the site. Singar, which in local legend is said to have had its own king, has been inhabited in more recent times by fishermen whose small huts were cut down into the island and through archaeological strata, which would suggest that the island was at least partly inhabited during the Late Antique Period. The primary use of these islands today is for pasturing cattle, because the natural isolation and difficulty of reaching them means that potential thieves would have to be very determined and well prepared to be able to rustle the animals from these places.

By comparison, at the south-west corner of the lagoon is the site of Tell el-Ahmar or Tell Mutubis, which was investigated in spring 2012 as an EES Amelia Edwards Project, directly funded by EES members. Mutubis seems once to have been close to an inlet of the lagoon and with the Rosetta branch of the Nile not far to the west, the site must have commanded an important strategic position, monitoring traffic on the Rosetta branch, as well as having direct access to the lagoon and the northern seaboard. The site of Mutubis now consists of a 12m high mound, partly cut away, but which may have once covered an area of around 35 hectares. Its most thriving era also seems to have been in the Late Antique Period, as attested by the many red-slip ware sherds and abundant amphora fragments on the surface of the mound.

The pattern of settlement and development of this isolated and hostile environment during a little understood period from an archaeological point of view



*Cows grazing on Kom el-Akhdar*



*Fish farms surrounding Kom Khubeiza*



*Surveying at Tell Mutubis*

is only now becoming apparent as further survey work is carried out. Like work in the eastern lagoon system of Manzala at Tell Tinnis (see p.30), the EES survey is part of a detailed landscape investigation of the Delta, which aims to reconstruct the ancient environment in which so many people once successfully lived and worked.

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*The mound of Tell Mutubis. The preserved mound rises behind the low-lying area which has been cut away to the level of the modern fields*