

2 | Call Me by My Names

*Naming the Delta through Time and Space**

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I Introduction

Before everything Egyptian knowledge is taxonomic: to know a thing is, first of all, to know its name.

Ragazzoli (2016): 88, my translation

The ancient-to-modern Nile Delta has been consistently conceptualised as a coherent, distinctive region, and toponymy is one of the manifestations of this space-making process. In that regard, available evidence, which ranges from the Old Kingdom to modern times and covers a variety of scripts and languages, testifies to two partly overlapping yet simultaneously distinctive takes on the region. One adopts an insider's fluvial and south–north vantage point; the other, an outsider's maritime and north–south one. The etymology, diachronic endurance and translation of the toponyms (*t3-mḥw* and *Δέλτα*) indicate a tension between the unswerving appeal of the indigenous understanding of the Delta as a place and the long-lasting, far-reaching posterity of the ancient Greek tradition beyond and within Egypt. This chapter analyses available literary and documentary evidence of the name(s) given to what we now commonly call the Nile Delta, from Antiquity to the modern period. By doing so, I propose that we consider these place names as both manifestations and vectors of stories, and reflect on their contribution to our understanding of human pluri-millennial entanglements with this territory. I shall first discuss the two, Egyptian and Greek, names associated with the region, before focusing on the polysignificance of the apex region.

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II Two Gazes, Two Names: The Egyptian and Greek Traditions

Toponymic evidence from Antiquity to the modern period, and from within and outside of Egypt, attests to two different conceptualisations of the Nile Delta: one Egyptian or indigenous, and one Greek or foreign. Drawing from data compiled in the *Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici dell'Egitto greco-romano* and *Trismegistos Geo* (TM Geo) in the spring of 2020,¹ I shall examine what stories these two toponymic traditions hold, and how they are (not) tied to local relations with the land.

TM Geo lists four regional toponyms that designate the Nile Delta as a whole: 1. *p3-t3-mḥty* = *pr-t3-mḥty*, 'The land (of) (the) north' / 'The north land' (10722); 2. *mḥw*, 'Lower Egypt', including its Greek and Latin translations or adaptations of the Egyptian expression 'Lower Egypt' (2712); 3. Kato Chora (4819); 4. Delta (544). A synthetic view of the data is provided in Table 2.1.

In total, the database lists 186 attestations dating from the eighth century BCE to Ortelius' sixteenth-century CE atlas. This corpus obviously has its limits. For instance, while *mḥw* is already attested in Old Kingdom texts,² TM Geo's earliest evidence dates from the eighth century BCE. Furthermore, the Coptic and Arabic forms of the toponym are not accounted for. Yet the data available allows for some general reflection on the ways in which the two toponymic traditions – Egyptian and Greek – coexisted, or not, on the ground and in the ancient literary tradition.

1 'We The North'³: The Egyptian Toponymic Tradition

In the Egyptian language, the Delta was called (*t3*)-*mḥw*, 'Lower Egypt', which is most probably etymologically related to (*t3*)-*mḥty*, 'Northern Land'.⁴ The

¹ While the *Dizionario* is a standard reference for papyrologists working on Greek and Latin documents from Egypt, TM Geo covers a broader chronological and linguistic scope, including documents written in Egyptian. It therefore draws from a larger array of publications and instruments, whose specific references are provided in each toponymic entry. For the sake of space, I will only refer to these publications when they provide complementary information to that compiled in TM Geo.

² See Wb 2 123–124 and 5 224, 10–14; Takács 2008: 476; Wilson 1997: 453.



³ This is a nod to Toronto, the town where I live and work. Here, just like in the Nile Delta, locals pride themselves in their 'northern' identity. This is best expressed by the city's NBA team The Raptors' slogan: 'We the North'.

⁴ *CDD* M, 200 and T, 49; Wb 2 123–124; Wilson 1997: 454. See also Brugsch 1879: 294; Griffith 1909: 425; Meeks 2005: 5 (II 1), 21 (IX 10) and 35 (XV 11); Montet 1957: 5–7; Posener 1965: 70; Razanajao 2016: 38. See also Grandet 1994; Sethe 1907: 10–13.

Table 2.1 *Ancient toponyms used to refer to the Nile Delta according to TM Geo*

TOPONYMS	DOCUMENTARY SOURCES			LITERARY SOURCES		
	English (TM Geo number)	Total attestations/total documents (spring 2020)	Dates	Supports	Total attestations/total works	Dates
<i>P3-t3-mḥty</i> = <i>Pr-t3-mḥty</i>	The Land (of) (the) North / The North Land (10722)	8 = 7 Demotic, 1 abnormal Hieratic	8th to 1st century BCE	Papyrus, Pottery	0	–
<i>Mḥw Mḥy</i> , <i>T3-Mḥy</i> , <i>Mḥ3</i> , <i>‘-mḥty</i> <i>‘-mḥt</i> ₃	Lower Egypt (2712)	91 = 39 Demotic, 29 abnormal Hieratic, 5 Hieratic, 5 Aramaic, 4 Hieroglyphics, 4 Demotic/Hieroglyphic, 4 Demotic/Hieratic, 1 Demotic/Greek/ Hieroglyphic	8th century BCE to 2nd century CE	Papyrus, Pottery, Parchment, Stone	0	–
Κάτω Αἴγυπτος	Kato Chora (4819)	0	–	–	1	1st century CE
<i>Aegyptus Inferior</i>		0	–	–	11	1st to 16th century CE
Κάτω Χώρα		20 = 18 Greek, 2 Demotic/Greek/ Hieroglyphic ^a	3rd century BCE to 7th to 8th century CE	Papyrus, Stone	5	1st to 2nd century CE
<i>Chora Inferior</i>	Delta (544)	2	3rd century CE		1	1st century CE
Δέλτα		8	3rd century BCE to 2nd century CE		27	5th century BCE to 12th century CE
<i>Delta</i>		1	2nd century CE		14	1st century BCE to 13th century CE

^a Both of these are restitutions based on the Egyptian text: see below, n.17.

toponym is attested as early as the Old Kingdom, and found written in a variety of forms through time and scripts. Its etymology is still debated, and the question deserves a complete lexicographical analysis, which goes beyond the scope of this chapter. For now, let's just mention that it might be semantically related to *mḥty*, 'North', and that both words are linked to and also at times written using the papyrus-like hieroglyphs *mḥ.w* (M15  or M16 , which represent, respectively, a clump of papyrus with buds and a clump of papyrus), which are also used to refer to the papyrus marshes of the Delta.⁵

The link between these different words and concepts is deeply experiential and environmentally anchored. Indeed, ancient Egyptians were orienting themselves facing south – that is, facing the direction towards which the Nile's slope was rising, and from which its water originated. Accordingly, the south was conceived as the 'head', the 'summit' and the 'prior', while the North, where the papyrus marshes abounded, was the 'posterior', the 'arrear' and the 'end' of the Nile.⁶ It remains uncertain which of the words inspired the other. The toponym (*t3*)-*mḥw* thus refers to the position of the region within the broader Nilotic basin. As such, it testifies to an indigenous, embodied conception of the local landscape, and by extension an articulation of the cardinal orientation of the world beyond it, from *within* the Nile basin. For, as Georges Posener put it, the Nile was ancient Egyptians' meridian.⁷

The essence and the coherence of the Delta thus resides not only in the fact that it encompasses the lowest, deltaic, and therefore wetter, courses of the river, but also in that it is structurally and environmentally distinct from *t3 šm'w* (Upper Egypt),⁸ the second of the kingdom's 'Two Lands' (*t3wy*).⁹ This meaning endured throughout the history of the Egyptian language, as the Coptic toponym used to designate the Delta (ⲧⲬⲁⲛⲧⲏⲧ/ⲡⲬⲁⲙⲉⲛⲓⲧ¹⁰) shows.

The Egyptian *t3-mḥw* made its way into Greek and Latin. Indeed, literary and papyrological sources attest to the expressions Κάτω Αἴγυπτος and Κάτω Χώρα, which respectively mean 'Low Egypt' and 'Low Country/Land'.

⁵ Faulkner 1999: 114; Sethe 1907: 13–14; Takács 2008: 476–478; Wilson 1997: 454. See also Thot Sign List (TSL_1_3838 and TSL_1_3852), <https://thotsignlist.org>.

⁶ Posener 1965: 70. See also Leclant 1969.

⁷ Posener 1965: 70.

⁸ See notably Gauthier 1929: 56.

⁹ On the manifestations of the dual vision of Egypt in ancient Egyptian toponyms, see Somaglino 2016: 106.

¹⁰ Amélineau 1893: 556. These toponyms are not listed in Timm 1984–1992.

Their Latin equivalents are *Aegyptius Inferior* and *Chora Inferior*. The Greek word κάτω conveys the idea of going ‘down’, ‘downwards’ and ‘below’. In both cases, though, its use indicates that the toponym is meant to describe and locate the region within the Nilotic topography.

Κάτω Αἴγυπτος and *Aegyptius Inferior* are attested twelve times in total in ancient authors, mostly (eleven or c. 92%) in Latin. They are, however, not attested in any known documentary text. In contrast, Κάτω Χώρα and *Chora Inferior* are found twenty-two times in documentary papyri and six times in literary texts, mostly in Greek. The evidence stretches from the third century BCE to the seventh and eighth centuries CE, indicating that it was in use throughout the Hellenistic, Roman and early Arab periods. We shall come back to the implications of the discrepancy between the uses of Κάτω Αἴγυπτος/*Aegyptius Inferior* and of Κάτω Χώρα/*Chora Inferior* below.¹¹ For now, I shall point to Claudius Ptolemy, who, in his *Geography*, specifies that Κάτω Χώρα was the expression commonly used by locals to refer to the Delta.¹² In the conclusion to his description of the hydrography of the Nile Delta, and right before the section where he lists the region’s nomes and metropoleis, he writes, ‘what is round about these rivers is commonly called *Katō Xōra*’.¹³ This equivalence is nuanced in 4.5.55, where he defines the ‘Heptanomoi’ as the seven nomes located south ‘of the Great Delta and *Katō Xōra*’.¹⁴ This passage indicates both a distinction and an overlap between the fluvial distributaries that make up the Great Delta, and the agrarian landscape encompassed and shaped by that Delta (*Katō Xōra*). The first expression pertains to the river system; the second, to the alluvial, arable land.

Κάτω Χώρα and *Chora Inferior* were also used to render an Egyptian expression that referred to Lower Egypt. Indeed, we find Κάτω Χώρα and Ἄνω Χώρα used as translations of the Pharaonic title *Pr-3 n n3 tš.w nt hry jrm n3 tš.w nt hry* (which literally means ‘King of the districts above (*hry*) and the districts below (*hry*)’) in two Ptolemaic decrees written in Demotic, Greek and Hieroglyphic and known, respectively, as the Decree of Raphia and the Decree of Memphis.¹⁵ In this context, the plural use of *tš.w*, ‘nomes’

¹¹ See below, Section 3.

¹² On Ptolemy’s description of Egypt’s three ‘Deltas’, see below, section III.1.

¹³ Καλεῖται δὲ κοινῶς ἡ περὶ τούτους τοὺς ποταμούς Χώρα Κάτω; Ptolemy, *Geogr.* 4.5.45, my translation.

¹⁴ Τὰ δὲ μεσημβρινώτερα τοῦ Μεγάλου Δέλτα καὶ τῆς Κάτω Χώρας καλεῖται Ἐπτὰ Νομοί; *Geogr.* 4.5.25, my translation.

¹⁵ *I.Prose* 12 Gr.4 [b] + Simpson 1996: 242, l.8 = Decree of Raphia, 217 BCE, with the entire Greek formula (τῶν τε ἄνω καὶ τῶν κάτω χωρῶν) being a restitution; *ILouvre* 3 Gr.13 + Simpson 1996: 258, l.7 = Memphis Decree, 196 BCE, with the Demotic formula being a restitution, except for *n3 tš.w nt hry*, and the Greek formula (τῆν τε ἄνω χώραν καὶ τῆν κάτω) being entirely restituted.

or ‘districts’, implies a grouping of all of Lower Egyptian and Upper Egyptian nomes. This expression affirms the official, dual conception of Egypt’s territory, but also showcases the administrative distinctiveness of these two regions. This practice continues in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, as is evidenced by the introduction of the epistrategy, an administrative division that was made up of several nomes, whose chief official was endowed with military and civilian duties in the Ptolemaic period, and of an exclusively civilian nature in Roman times. In several of the Greek papyri listed in TM Geo, Κάτω Χώρα appears as the name of the epistrategy or regional administrative division of Egypt that corresponded to the Nile Delta.¹⁶

The other documentary contexts in which Κάτω Χώρα and *Chora Inferior* are found are also essentially official. These include papyri pertaining to business-related travels,¹⁷ a *conventus* itinerary,¹⁸ an imperial edict of Hadrian¹⁹ and a judicial protocol.²⁰ The expression Κάτω Χώρα also appears in three official documents as a complement of the Diospolitan Nome, to distinguish it from its Upper Egyptian homonym.²¹ Lastly, an early Arab period papyrus mentions the pagarchy of Heliopolis ‘in Lower Egypt’.²² In all cases, therefore, the expression is imbued with a territorial, administrative meaning.

The same translation was involved in the Arabisation of the two regions’ names. Indeed, *el-Sa’id*, which designates Upper Egypt, is tied to the Arabic verb *صعد*, ‘to rise, go up, ascend’. The Arabic equivalent of Lower Egypt is *مصر السفلى* (*Maṣr alsouflah*; literally ‘Lower Egypt’). Like the English ‘Lower Egypt’ and its other equivalent in modern European languages, the expression is now essentially used in academic, mostly Egyptological, geological and geographical scholarship.²³ The word Egyptians use to talk about the

The only similar Greek titlature that is not entirely restituted is that partially preserved in *P.Münch.* 3 45, 8–9 (τῶν τε ἄνω καὶ τῶν κάτω χωρ[ῶν]), which dates from the reign of Ptolemy Philopator (221–205 BCE). This expression, which appears at a later date, is one of several such expressions used throughout Egyptian history to express that the pharaoh ruled over Upper and Lower Egypt.

¹⁶ *P.Oslo* 3 78; *SB* 20 15147. On epistrategies, see notably Husson and Valbelle 1992: 229–230; Thomas 1975; 1982.

¹⁷ *P.Oxy.* 55 3807, 39.

¹⁸ *P.Oxy.* 4 709, 8.

¹⁹ *P.Oslo* 3 78, 19–25.

²⁰ *SB* 20 15147, 6.

²¹ Connor and Coughlan 2018: 1.8; *P.Oxy.* 60 4060, 121; *P.Oxy.* 60 4069, 3.

²² *P.Sijpesteijn* 25, 5.

²³ There exists a third term, *الوجه البحري*, which is used to refer to a larger area corresponding to northern Egypt, including Cairo, the Delta and the entire Mediterranean coast. This is a term used in geography, but is rarely heard in the vernacular, spoken language; I wish to thank Heba Mostafa and Ahmed Abd Alazem for providing me with some of the information featured in this paragraph.

Delta is, literally, ‘Delta’, as in دلتا النيل (‘Nile Delta’) and الدلتا (‘The Delta’). As we shall see below, this is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, as Jean-Charles Ducène notes, as far as the pre-modern period is concerned, ‘Arabs never saw Lower Egypt as a Delta, which is a purely Greek notion.’²⁴ Indeed, medieval texts and maps most commonly designate the region using the expression *Asfal al-arḍ* (‘The Lower Land’), *Asfal al-arḍ Maṣr*, *Maṣr alsouflah* or *Maṣr* alone.²⁵

2 *Three-Cornered Land: The Greek Toponymic Tradition*

According to TM Geo, the word Δέλτα and its Latin form *Delta* are used forty-one times in ancient literary texts. This corpus covers a period ranging from the fourth century BCE to the twelfth century CE. The earliest of these sources is Herodotus’ *Histories*, which was written ca. 440 BCE, and where the word ‘Delta’ appears fourteen times in total.²⁶ Its first occurrence in the *Histories* is in book 2.13. There, Herodotus, who has witnessed the region’s topography first hand, writes about the ‘Egyptians who dwell *lower* (ἐνερθε) than the lake Moeris, and chiefly those who inhabit *what is called the Delta* (τὸ καλεόμενον Δέλτα).’²⁷ A little later, in 2.15, he indicates that this toponym (τὸ Δέλτα) was attributed in his lifetime to the Ionians.²⁸ Overall, Herodotus’ use and commentary on the word Delta indicates that he expected his audience to be familiar with the term. This implies an earlier motivation, whose exact dating cannot be determined, but which must be understood within the context of the relationship between northern Egypt, Ionia and the broader Greek-speaking world.

That a geometric and alphabetical metaphor was behind the motivation of the toponym Δέλτα is made explicit in *Prometheus Bound*, a tragedy attributed to Aeschylus and written around the same time as Herodotus’ *Histories*. There, as Prometheus instructs Io on how to reach the Nile Delta, where she is destined to found a settlement, he says:

It will lead you to the three-cornered (τρίγωνον) land of Nilotis.²⁹

A little more than two centuries later, Polybius, in his discussion of Hannibal’s crossing of the Rhone, describes a district called ‘the Island’ as a delta, whose shape is similar to the Nile’s:

²⁴ Ducène 2004: 251.

²⁵ See below, section II.3.

²⁶ Celoria 1966: 386, who specifies how the term is never used in a technical sense: ‘It is always *the* Delta and not *a* Delta.’

²⁷ On Herodotus referring to the Delta rather than to a delta, see Celoria 1966: 386. See also Diodorus *Hist.* 1.33.

²⁸ τῷ Δέλτα τῷ ὑπὸ Ἰώνων καλεομένῳ; *Hist.* 2.15.

²⁹ τὴν τρίγωνον ἐς χθόνα Νειλώτιν; Aeschylus, *Prom.* 813–814.

Hannibal ... reached a place called the 'Island', a populous district producing abundance of corn and deriving its name from its situation; for the Rhone and Isère running along each side of it meet at its point. It is similar in size and shape to the Egyptian Delta; only in that space the sea forms the base line uniting the two branches of the Nile, while here the baseline is formed by a range of mountains.³⁰

Polybius does not explicitly state that the Rhone and Nile deltas have a triangular shape, but his geometric description corresponds, literally, to the definition of a triangle. This passage also documents another common metaphor used by Greek and Latin authors to refer to Lower Egypt: the insular one. Indeed, because it was viewed as being bordered by three bodies of water, the Delta is at times equated to an island by ancient classical writers. We find this allusion already in Herodotus,³¹ as well as in first-century BCE Diodorus who, in the first book of his *Library of History*, includes the Delta among the islands formed by the river Nile:

Speaking generally, the river forms so many islands that the report of them can scarcely be credited; for, apart from the regions surrounded by water in what is called the Delta, there are more than seven hundred other islands.³²

Strabo, who writes at the turn of the era, offers us the most detailed and explicit commentary on the Greco-Roman, triangular and insular, conceptualisation of the region:

The Nile flows from the Aethiopian boundaries towards the north in a straight line to the district called 'Delta', and then, being 'split at the head', as Plato says, the Nile makes this place as it were the vertex of a triangle, the sides of the triangle being formed by the streams that split in either direction and extend to the sea – the one on the right to the sea at Pelusium and the other on the left to the sea at Canobus and the neighbouring Heracleium, as it is called, – and the base by the coastline between Pelusium and the Heracleium. . . Now these are two mouths of the Nile, of which one is called Pelusiatic and the other Canobic or Heracleioteic; but between these there are five other outlets, those at least that are worth mentioning, and several that are smaller; for, beginning with the first parts of the Delta, many branches of the river have been

³⁰ ἔστι δὲ παραπλησίᾳ τῷ μεγέθει καὶ τῷ σχήματι τῷ κατ' Αἴγυπτον καλουμένῳ Δέλτα, πλὴν ἐκείνου μὲν θάλαττα τὴν μίαν πλευρὰν καὶ τὰς τῶν ποταμῶν ῥύσεις ἐπιζεύγνυσι, ταύτης δ' ὄρη δυσπρόσοδα καὶ δυσέμβολα καὶ σχεδὸν ὡς εἰπεῖν ἀπρόσιτα; Polybius, *Hist.* 3.49.7, Paton (trans.) 1979 (1922).

³¹ Hdt. *Hist.* 2.97.

³² καθόλου δὲ τοσαύτας νήσους ποιεῖν τὸν ποταμὸν ὥστε τοὺς ἀκούοντας μὴ βραδίως πιστεῦσαι: χωρὶς γάρ τῶν περικλυζομένων τόπων ἐν τῷ καλουμένῳ Δέλτα τὰς ἄλλας εἶναι νήσους πλείους τῶν ἑπτακοσίων; Diodorus *Hist.* 1.33, Oldfather (trans.) 1933. See Bernard 1970: 34–37.

split off throughout the whole island and have formed many streams and islands, so that the whole Delta has become navigable – canals on canals having been cut, which navigated with such ease that some people even use earthenware ferry-boats. Now the island as a whole is as much as three thousand stadia in perimeter; and they also call it, together with the opposite river-lands of the Delta, Lower Egypt.³³

Strabo's claim that locals call the Delta Lower Egypt is backed up by papyrological evidence. Indeed, while 'Delta' has been absorbed into many languages, it does not seem to have had a substantial impact among ancient native Egyptians and local Greek speakers. Indeed, a search for Egypt's 'Delta' in TM Geo gives only nine attestations found in eight documentary sources. All but one are in Greek, and the documents date from between the third century BCE and the second century CE.³⁴ All of them were produced in contexts pertaining to Greek settlers' (business) travels or to the Hellenistic and Roman provincial administration. The earliest attestations of the toponym Δέλτα in documentary evidence are third-century BCE papyri belonging to the Zenon archive,³⁵ the 'Revenue Laws' of Ptolemy II³⁶ and a wax tablet containing a series of bills.³⁷ In all preserved papyri, Delta is mentioned as the location of payments or purchases (to be) made. The Delta is also named, in tandem with the Thebaid, in the well-known dedication to Aelius Aristides (*I.Portes du Désert 4ter*, 6 = *OGIS 2 709*). The toponyms appear in a formula considered by some to be a literary patchwork that draws from Herodotus.³⁸

The only Latin example of the toponym Delta in a documentary text is in *P.Mich.* 8 467, a second-century CE letter that belongs to the bilingual

³³ Ἀπὸ γὰρ τῶν Αἰθιοπικῶν τερμόνων ρεῖ ἐπ' εὐθείας ὁ Νεῖλος πρὸς ἄρκτους, ἕως τοῦ καλουμένου χωρίου Δέλτα· εἴτ' ἐπὶ κορυφῇ σχιζόμενος ὁ Νεῖλος, ὡς φησὶν ὁ Πλάτων, ὡς ἂν τριγώνου κορυφῇ ἀποτελεῖ τὸν τόπον τοῦτον, πλευρὰς δὲ τοῦ τριγώνου τὰ σχιζόμενα ἐφ' ἑκάτερα ρεῖθρα καθήκοντα μέχρι τῆς θαλάττης, τὸ μὲν ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς κατὰ Πηλούσιον, τὸ δ' ἐν ἀριστερᾷ τῆς κατὰ Κάνωβον καὶ τὸ πλησίον Ἡράκλειον προσαγορευόμενον, βάσιν δὲ τὴν παραλίαν τὴν μετὰ τοῦ Πηλουσίου καὶ τοῦ Ἡρακλείου...δύο μὲν οὖν ταῦτα τοῦ Νείλου στόματα, ὧν τὸ μὲν Πηλουσιακὸν καλεῖται, τὸ δὲ Κανωβικὸν καὶ Ἡρακλειωτικόν, μετὰξὺ δὲ τούτων ἄλλαι πέντε εἰσὶν ἐκβολαὶ αἷ γε ἀξιόλογοι, λεπτότερα δὲ πλείους· ἀπὸ γὰρ τῶν πρώτων μερῶν ἀπορρώγες πολλὰ καθ' ὅλην μεριθεῖσαι τὴν νῆσον πολλὰ καὶ ρεῖθρα καὶ νήσους ἐποίησαν, ὥσθ' ὅλην γενέσθαι πλωτῆν διωρύγων ἐπὶ διώρυγι τμηθειῶν, αἱ κατὰ ῥαστώνην πλέονται τοσαύτην, ὥστε καὶ ὀστράκινια ἐνίοις εἶναι πορθμεία. τὴν μὲν οὖν περίμετρον ὅσον τρισχιλίων σταδίων ἐστὶν ἢ σύμπασα νῆσος· καλοῦσι δ' αὐτὴν καὶ τὴν κάτω χώραν σὺν ταῖς ἀπαντικρῦ ποταμίαις τοῦ Δέλτα; Strab. *Geogr.* 17.1.4. (Jones (trans.) 1932.). See also 17.1.6 (βάσιν τοῦ Δέλτα ἔφαμεν) and Ammianus Marcellinus *Hist.* 22.15.12, as well as Laudenbach 2015: 103.

³⁴ *P.Cair.Zen.* 1 59090, 7; 3 59470, 8; 4 59705, 23; *P.Rev.* p.4–36, col. 31, 6; *SB* 4 7451, 75. A search for 'Delta' coins in *RPC* gave no result.

³⁵ *P.Cair.Zen.* 1 59090, 7; 3 59470, 8; 3 59075, 23.

³⁶ *P.Rev.* col. 31, 6.

³⁷ *SB* 4 7451, 75 and 86.

³⁸ See *SEG* 34 1542.

(Greek and Latin) archive of Claudius Tiberianus, a veteran of the Roman army who had retired in Karanis and had maybe served as a soldier there. In that particular letter, Claudius Terentianus, who might well be his son, contacts him in the context of his enrolment in the Roman navy at Alexandria. Towards the end of the letter, he writes:

I ask and beg you, father, to go to the Delta on a trading boat, so that you may buy and send three breeders.³⁹

Given that Terentianus' mother tongue appears to have been Greek, and that his Latin letters contain a fair amount of influence from Greek,⁴⁰ we can reasonably assume that *ad Delta* referred to the same settlement or district of Δέλτα found in other papyri.⁴¹ More broadly, this letter is also one of many testimonies of the close economic, social, cultural and military ties that existed between the western Nile Delta, including the Alexandrian region (and, in this particular context, the village of Tonis, close to Alexandria, where a part of Tiberianus' family was in all likelihood settled) and the Fayyum.⁴² I shall come back on this particular papyrus below.

That we find no Egyptian translation or transliteration of Δέλτα in any ancient Egyptian scripts, including Coptic, is indicative of two possible scenarios: Either the toponym Delta was never adopted or adapted into the Egyptian language or, if it was, it remained a confidential phenomenon that did not compete with the native toponymic tradition until its much later adoption by Arab speakers.

Indeed, the Arabic use of Delta (الدلتا) to refer to Lower Egypt is a recent phenomenon. To my knowledge, the earliest attestation of the toponym is found in the 1865 translation of an 1841 book *On the History of the Crusades* written by a French man named Maxime de Montrond:⁴³

And thus, it was called *al-delta* because it has three angles like this Δ like the shape of delta which is one of the letters of the Greek alphabet.⁴⁴

Two observations ought to be made: First, the passage above pertains to the ancient Greek toponym Delta. It should therefore not be taken as evidence of modern, local uses. Second, it appears in the translation of a French book.

³⁹ *P.Mich.* 8 467, 30–31: *or[o te] pa[ter u]t eaq̄ ad̄ D[el]ta mer[ca]t[o]r[ia] navi ut em[a]s et mittas tr[e]s toc[adas]*, APIS translation.

⁴⁰ Adams 1977; 1978.

⁴¹ See below, Section 3.

⁴² On the archive of Claudius Tiberianus, see notably Geens 2011 and Strassi 2008.

⁴³ من تاريخ الحروب المقدسة في المشرق المدعوة حرب الصليب, literally *On the History of the Holy Wars in the Orient Called 'The Cross War'*. I owe this information to Anass Dakkach, whom I thank.

⁴⁴ 'نظير صورة الدلتا الذي هو احد حروف الهجاء اليونانية Δ, و إنما دعت الدلتا لانها مثلثة الزوايا هكذا Δ'; de Montrond 1865 (1841); V.2, 308.

Judging from available evidence, the term Delta gradually made its way into Egyptian Arabic as the common word used to designate Lower Egypt starting from that period. This recent phenomenon must therefore be understood within the context of the British occupation of Egypt and, more broadly, of the powerful ties that linked European colonial culture and ‘the Classics’.⁴⁵

3 *Two Names, One Space*

To sum up, the literary and documentary evidence discussed above documents, quantitatively and also qualitatively, the enduring influence of the Egyptian toponymic tradition in the way the Nile Delta was named locally. This trend did not go out of style in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This makes perfect sense, and is in line with what we know more broadly about ancient Egypt’s toponymy.⁴⁶

Most of the evidence in Table 2.1 is in locally produced documentary texts, be they papyri or inscriptions. These amount to 127 or 68% of all attestations compiled in TM Geo. Second, close to half (91/186 or ca. 49%) of all the toponyms listed are written in one of the ancient Egyptian scripts; that is, in decreasing quantitative order, Demotic, (abnormal) Hieratic and Hieroglyphic. If we exclude the literary evidence, all of which is in Greek and Latin, the proportion of Egyptian texts rises to ca. 72% (91/127). Since, as we’ve just seen, pre-eighth-century BCE toponyms and Coptic ones are not accounted for, it is reasonable to expect the proportion of known Egyptian evidence to be substantially higher. Third, while the term Delta proved to have a long-lasting influence on modern (notably European) toponymy, the data compiled in TM Geo shows a different picture. Indeed, 136 or 73% of all toponyms listed stem from the Egyptian tradition. This speaks not only to the strong pull of the Egyptian toponymic practices, but also to the corollary acknowledgement and integration, through transliteration (Aramaic) or translation (Greek and Latin), of local toponymic practices by settler populations and occupying administrations (see Table 2.2).

Of the fifty-nine literary entries, forty-one or 70% correspond to the term Delta in Greek (27) or Latin (14).⁴⁷ The eighteen remaining ones include what appear to be the two versions of the Greek and Latin translations of *mḥw*: Κάτω Αἴγυπτος/*Aegyptus Inferior* (12) and Κάτω Χώρα/*Chora Inferior* (6). While the first expression is listed as a variant

⁴⁵ Blouin (this volume), Chapter 1.

⁴⁶ See for instance Dhennin and Somaglino (eds.) 2016.

⁴⁷ See Bernand 1970: ch.1 for quotes and discussion of the passages pertaining to the Delta provided in the works of Herodotus, Polybius, Diodorus, Strabo, Ptolemy and Hierocles.

Table 2.2 *The Nile Delta in ancient and medieval toponymic evidence*

Egyptian-motivated toponym	Greek-motivated toponym
<i>t3-Mḥw</i> / <i>p3-t3-mḥty</i>	
Κάτω Αἴγυπτος	Δέλτα
<i>Aegyptus Inferior</i>	<i>Delta</i>
Κάτω Χώρα	
<i>Chora Inferior</i>	
ΤΑΔΗΤ/ΠΣΑΜΕΝΖΙΤ	
مصر السفلى	دلّتا النيل, الدلتا

of *mḥw*, ‘Kato Chora’ appears as a separate entry with its own TM Geo number. It is unclear why this decision was made, all the more so that the Greek noun *χώρα* is a more exact translation of the Egyptian noun *t3*, ‘land’, which is found in some variants of the Egyptian toponyms.

Are Κάτω Αἴγυπτος and Κάτω Χώρα two different toponyms referring to two different geographical regions? Are these expressions used in different contexts or at different times? Or are they simply coeval translations of *t3-mḥw* used indiscriminately? A look at what documentary texts say proves illuminating. Indeed, none of the texts listed in TM Geo contains the expression Κάτω Αἴγυπτος/*Aegyptus Inferior*. By contrast, twenty occurrences of Κάτω Χώρα/*Chora Inferior* are found. Given the overall excellent coverage of papyrological and epigraphical texts in Greek and Latin by TM Geo, the complete absence of Κάτω Αἴγυπτος in the local documentation might well be indicative of the fact that this expression was not in use in Egypt, where the more literal Κάτω Χώρα prevailed.

This seems all the more likely since, as noted above, the toponym appears in the Decrees of Raphia and Memphis, which are clearly translations of the Egyptian.⁴⁸ The nature of the literary evidence is also indicative of the external motivation of Κάτω Αἴγυπτος/*Aegyptus Inferior*: the only Greek occurrence is in Strabo (*Hist.* 17.1.35⁴⁹), and apart from one mention in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (5.6.40⁵⁰), all ten remaining mentions of *Aegyptus Inferior* are actually much later in date (fifth to sixteenth centuries CE). By contrast, Κάτω Χώρα, and in three cases *Chora Inferior*, are attested from the third century BCE to the fourth to eighth centuries CE in

⁴⁸ See n.17.

⁴⁹ The expression appears in a passage where Strabo observes that the shores of Lake Moeris in the Fayyum are reminiscent of a seafront, and hypothesises that it must have been the case earlier, at a time when Lower Egypt stood under the sea. The story is reminiscent of *Hdt. Hist.* 2.4.

⁵⁰ The toponym appears in a reference to Agrippa’s measurement of the North African shore, from the Atlantic Sea, and including ‘Lower Egypt’ (*totius Africae a mari Atlantico cum inferiore Aegypto*).

Table 2.3 *Ancient toponyms used to refer to the Nile Delta with updated equivalences*

Toponyms	
Ancient languages	English (TM Geo number)
<i>P3-t3-mḥty</i> = <i>Pr-t3-mḥty Mḥw Mḥy T3-Mḥy</i> <i>Mḥ3</i> ‘-mḥty ‘-mḥt ₃	‘The land (of) (the) north’ / ‘The north land’ (10722)
Κάτω Χώρα <i>Chora Inferior</i>	Kato Chora (4819)
Κάτω Αἴγυπτος <i>Aegyptus Inferior</i>	Lower Egypt (2712)
Δέλτα <i>Delta</i>	Delta (544)

documentary evidence, and in the first to second centuries CE in literary ones. The Latin form is so far only known in Pliny the Elder, whose testimony goes in the same direction as our hypothesis. For he writes that what is known as ‘*Aegyptio Inferior* is called *Chora*’.⁵¹ I would therefore like to suggest that the toponym (*t3-*)*mḥw* was translated in Greek into Κάτω Χώρα, and that this form was commonly used by local Greek speakers. Meanwhile, Greek and Latin writers and later scholars of the medieval and early modern period who wrote, emulated and engaged with them in Latin from *outside* of Egypt, adopted the expression *Aegyptus Inferior*. Despite these differences, both Egyptian and Greek, as well as insiders and outsiders, experienced and maintained the central role played by the apex of the Delta in the construction of the region’s landscape and identity. Based on this hypothesis, the toponymic classification found in *Trismegistos Places* and reproduced above in Table 2.1 needs to be modified (Table 2.3).

III Splitting Head: Polysignificant Delta and Apex as Navel

‘In the Delta of Egypt’, said Critias, ‘where, at its head, the stream of the Nile parts in two’.

Plato, *Timaeus* 21E, Henderson 1929 trans.

As a sign, a toponym (and mostly the name of an inhabited place) is strongly polyvalent, which means, from a semantic point of view, that it has many values, but also, from a discursive point of view, that it is used in diverse ways depending on discourses and genres.

Michelle Lecolle (2015): 2, my trans.

⁵¹ *Aegypti inferiora, quae Chora vocatur*; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 6.39.212.

The apex of the Delta is a crucial place in the articulation of Egypt's environmental, political and cultural coherence as a dual yet united territorial entity. It is, literally, the liminal space between the Nile Valley and the wider, multi-channelled plain of Lower Egypt. It comes as no surprise, then, that the area of the Pharaonic capital of Memphis (located close to Mit Rahina, around twenty kilometres south of Cairo),⁵² was already settled in the Predynastic period, and that the wider site of today's Cairo became very early on the seat of a succession of royal, regional, provincial and national capitals or administrative centres, whose names and precise locations shifted alongside the moving local hydrography, throughout the centuries and millennia.⁵³ Ancient Egyptians named the shifting point between the Nile Valley and the Delta *Kher-Aha*, 'the battlefield', in reference to a battle between the gods Horus and Seth which was thought to have taken place on that spot.⁵⁴ The area, on the east shore of the Nile and just south of Heliopolis, was the site of a necropolis at least from the New Kingdom and until the Late Period.⁵⁵

Invariably, the existence and status of the settlements located in the area of the apex document the entangled layers of societal power that reside in this particular locus. This still holds true today, despite the fundamental changes the Egyptian Nile and its fluvial landscape have encountered over the past two centuries.⁵⁶ The pivotal role of the apex area is expressed through three well-documented cases of toponymic metonymy:⁵⁷ Delta and, closer to us, Kēme and Maṣr.

1 *Deltas with an S: What Literary Sources Say*

Indeed, an examination of the context in which the toponym 'Delta' is used in papyri reveals that it could refer to both a site and an area (that is, to a point and a territory), a fact that is also acknowledged in Greek literary sources. In the passage from his *Geography* quoted above, Strabo writes:

⁵² Including the sites of El Omari, Maadi, Wadi Digla, Zawyet el-Aryan, Abu Ghurab, Abu Roash, Tura and Helwan. See notably Guyot (this volume, Chapter 3) and the University of Vienna's Helwan project page for a summary: https://egyptology.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/i_egyptology/forschung/helwan/ProjHelwanen.pdf.

⁵³ See notably on the matter Bunbury 2019: ch.10 and Sheehan 2010: ch.1.

⁵⁴ The site is indexed in *Trismegistos Places* as Cher-Aha (TM Geo 10730). See notably LÄ I (1975), col. 592 and IV, 26; Vandorpe 1988: 71. See also Agut-Labordère in this volume, Chapter 7 (section II.3). The toponym *mh3.t-t3.wy*, 'the balance of the Two-Lands', to designate Memphis or its region, which appears in Late Period texts; see Zivie-Coche LÄ IV, 26. I thank Claire Somaglino for this information.

⁵⁵ Agut-Labordère, this volume, Chapter 7; Sheehan 2010: Chapter 1.

⁵⁶ On the environmental politics of the modern, perennial Nile, see Derr 2019.

⁵⁷ By 'toponymic metonymy', I mean the use of a toponym that refers to a particular settlement to designate a broader territorial entity, or vice versa. See on the matter Lecolle 2015.

‘The Nile flows from the Aethiopian boundaries towards the north in a straight line to the district called “Delta”, and then, being “split at the head”, as Plato says, splits into two branches.’⁵⁸ The district (χωρίον) in question is mentioned once more a little later in the same paragraph. There, Strabo discusses the polysignificance of the toponym ‘Delta’:

An island, therefore, has been formed by the sea and the two streams of the river; and it is called Delta on account of the similarity of its shape and the district at the vertex has been given the same name because it is the beginning of the above-mentioned figure; and the village there is also called Delta.⁵⁹

In other words, according to Strabo, in his lifetime, Δέλτα was the Greek name of a village (κώμη), a district (χωρίον) and the whole of Lower Egypt.⁶⁰ Strabo’s testimony implies that the district and village got their name in reference to their position at the *beginning* (ἀρχή) of the Delta. All three Deltas thus refer and are named in explicit reference to the apex, of which they represent concentric, territorial manifestations (Figure 2.1).

Trismegistos Geo does not include an entry on the district Delta, but it does account for the village (TM Geo 4006), which it identifies with the modern island of El Warraq. El Warraq is located in the governorate of Giza, between the mainland districts of Imbaba and Shubra. The biggest island in the Nile, it stands at the point at which the Nile divides itself into two branches (Maps 2.1 and 2.2).⁶¹ However, this identification does not fit with what we know of the location of the head of the Nile at the turn of the era. Indeed, recent work has shown that from ca. 3500 BP, the apex of the Delta has been moving northward at a gradual yet steady rate.⁶² This means that it was located more to the south in the lifetime of Strabo, perhaps a little bit to the north of Babylon.

Another, partly overlapping but also sensibly different, trio of deltas is described by second-century CE Alexandrian geographer Claudius

⁵⁸ Strab. *Geogr.* 17.1.4 (Jones (trans.) 1932); see above, p.75-6 and n.33.

⁵⁹ γέγονε δὴ νῆσος ἐκ τε τῆς θαλάττης καὶ τῶν ρευμάτων ἀμφοῖν τοῦ ποταμοῦ, καὶ καλεῖται Δέλτα διὰ τὴν ὁμοίότητα τοῦ σχήματος. τὸ δ’ ἐπὶ τῇ κορυφῇ χωρίον ὁμωνύμως κέκληται διὰ τὸ ἀρχὴν εἶναι τοῦ λεχθέντος σχήματος, καὶ ἡ κώμη δὲ ἢ ἐπ’ αὐτῷ καλεῖται Δέλτα; Strabo *Geogr.* 17.1.4 (Jones (trans.) 1932).

⁶⁰ This passage is echoed in Eusthatus’ twelfth century CE commentary on Dionysius Periegetes, where three deltas are identified: Egypt as a whole, the Nile Delta and a village located at the apex. See on the matter Litinas 2015: 44-45.

⁶¹ TM Geo doesn’t specify why the island is equated with the ancient village of Delta. Pleiades opts for a more cautious approach, and states that the settlement is ‘unlocated’. See Bernand et al. 2012.

⁶² Bunbury 2019: ch.6; Bunbury and Rowe 2021; Bunbury et al. 2017; Bunbury and Lutley 2008; Gonçalves 2019; Pryer 2012. See more generally Ball 1942: 63, 152 and 171; Sheehan 2010: ch.1; Yoyotte and Charvet 1997: 70 (n. 35).

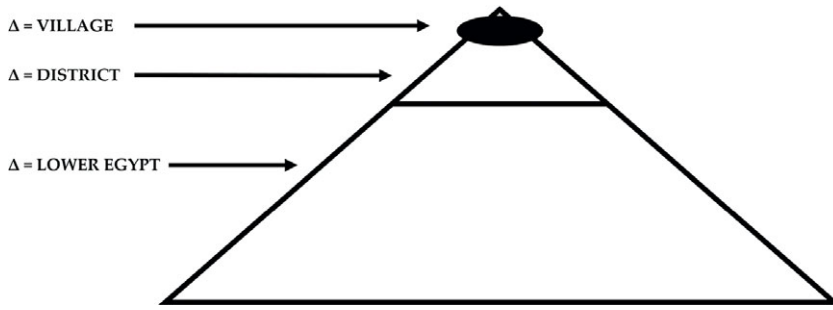


Figure 2.1 Schematic rendering of Strabo's three Deltas

Ptolemy. The description is part of the fourth book of his *Geography* (4.5). I provide here a more literal translation in order to highlight the particular meaning of some of the terms used by Ptolemy:

Is called Great Delta [the area] down which the Great River, called Agathos Daimōn and flowing through the Herakleotic mouth, turns course into the one called Bubastic, which flows through the Pelusiac mouth; the location of the branching of the Delta is 62° 30'.

Is called Small Delta [the area] down which the Bubastic river splits up into the Busiric river, which flows through the Pathmētīc mouth; its location is 62° 40' 30" 20'.

A third Delta could also be spoken about, [located] in a way between the ones that have been told about, down where the Bubastic [river] splits up into the one flowing through the city of Athribis and the Pineptimi mouth; and its (the third Delta) location is 62° 15' 30" 05'.⁶³

How much of Ptolemy's embodied experience of the Egyptian landscape made it into this description? And can his insider's perspective partly explain the distance felt between his description of the Nile Delta and the more authoritative versions provided by Herodotus, Strabo and Diodorus?

⁶³ καθ' ὃ σχίζεται ὁ Βουβαστικός ποταμός εἰς τὸν Βουσιριτικὸν ποταμὸν;

Μέγα Δέλτα καλεῖται, καθ' ὃ ἐκτρέπεται ὁ Μέγας ποταμός, καλούμενος Ἀγαθοδαίμων καὶ ῥέων διὰ τοῦ Ἡρακλεωτικῆς στόματος, εἰς τὸν χαλούμενον Βουβαστικὸν, ὃς ἐκρεῖ διὰ τοῦ Πηλουσιακοῦ στόματος· θέσις δὲ ἐστὶ τῆς ἐκτροπῆς τοῦ Δέλτα ξβ' λ'

Μικρὸν δὲ καλεῖται Δέλτα, καθ' ὃ σχίζεται ὁ Βουβαστικός ποταμός εἰς τὸν Βουσιρικὸν ποταμὸν, ὃς ἐκρεῖ διὰ τοῦ Παθμητικῆς στόματος· ἔχει δὲ καὶ τὸ μικρὸν Δέλτα θέσιν ξβ' γο" λ' γ"

Λέγοιτο δ' ἂν καὶ τρίτον Δέλτα μεταξύ πῶς τῶν εἰρημένων, καθ' ὃ σχίζεται. ὁ Βουβαστικός εἰς τὸν δι' Ἀθρίβεως πόλεως καὶ τοῦ Πινέπτιμι στόματος ῥέοντα· οὗ καὶ αὐτοῦ (τοῦ τρίτου Δέλτα) θέσις ξβ' δ" λ' ιβ";

Ptolemy *Geogr.* 4.5.16, my translation. English words between [] have been added for more clarity.



Map 2.1 The apex of the Nile Delta, with the island of Warraq

Source: Google Earth



Map 2.2 Slanted view of the apex of the Nile Delta, with the island of Warraq at the forefront
Source: Google Earth

These three writers did all visit Egypt, and their testimonies are certainly extremely valuable. But they were, literally, outsiders, so their gazes remained fundamentally Helleno- and Romanocentric, self-referential and therefore more panoramic than locally grounded. Ptolemy's case is different. He was a local, and Egypt is where he wrote his *Geography*. In order for us to properly assess the full historical value of Ptolemy's testimony, we therefore ought to acknowledge his Egyptianness. By this I don't mean that he was a native Egyptian (he seemingly was not), but that he was born and did *live* in Egypt most if not all of his life.

We know very little about Ptolemy's life, but what we know matters: A Roman citizen, probably of Greek ancestry, he was born and lived in Egypt, including in Alexandria, where he worked from at least ca. 146 until his death ca. 170 CE.⁶⁴ While scholars generally point out the inevitable inaccuracies of the factual content of the *Geography*, I argue that its Egyptian section does deserve more credit. The discrepancies between Ptolemy's and earlier descriptions of the region might have to do not only with the time span – and thus environmental shifts – that separate him from his predecessors, but also with Ptolemy's own biography, including his personal, physical and socio-culturally anchored understanding of the local landscape, a crucial factor which remains unexplored by modern scholarship.

Indeed, Ptolemy's Nilotic portion of the *Geography* does offer an insider's paradigm. First, we have seen how the Greek, geometric approach to the region illustrated by the toponym Delta also manifests itself in literary descriptions of the region's hydrography. Ptolemy's account stands out. Not only does he document how the Nile branches had shifted between Strabo's and his lifetime, but he also layers his work with information that is rooted in local approaches and uses of the Nile, thereby allowing us to refine and nuance earlier outsiders' testimonies. Thus, he is the first ancient Greek author to systematically distinguish between the Nile branches (which he calls 'rivers' following the Egyptian use) and their 'mouths' (also following the Egyptian use), whose names are for the most part unaccounted for elsewhere in literary sources (Map 2.3). He is also the only ancient author to specifically mention the existence of transverse canals that allowed boats to sail throughout the Delta in an east–west direction, avoiding the lengthier trip to and from the apex (which is still necessary today).⁶⁵ 'Great River' (ὁ Μέγας ποταμός), the hydronym which he uses to name the Nile, is the literal translation of the Egyptian hydronym *p3 itrw*,⁶⁶ while the 'Taly' branch is

⁶⁴ Toomer and Jones 2016.

⁶⁵ Blouin 2014: 29–35; Redon 2018.

⁶⁶ Ghiringhelli 2017: 27–28.

attested in a third-century CE documentary papyrus.⁶⁷ Moreover, the hydronyms ‘Agathos Daimôn’ and ‘Termouthiac’, which refer to the two branches flowing towards or near Alexandria in the western Delta, can be directly linked to local (and imperially sanctioned) religious practices that are attested at the time in the Alexandrian area.⁶⁸

The Egyptian section of Book 4 progresses outward in and from north to south. Alexandria, where Ptolemy lived, appears very early on in Book 4, as one of the settlements on the seacoast of Mareota (4.5.1). The entry reads ‘Alexandria, metropolis of all Egypt’.⁶⁹ The provincial capital does appear to be the starting point of Book 4. As Ptolemy narrows down on the Nile after having surveyed the province’s maritime and desert edges (including oases), he proceeds with locating the deltas’ branches, then their nomes and metropoleis, before moving southwards to the Heptanomia and Thebaid areas. Ptolemy’s list of Lower Egypt’s nomes and metropoleis (4.5.46–54) therefore follows a north-west (Alexandrian area) to south-east (Babylon and the Wadi Tumilat) fashion.⁷⁰ The north-to-south organisation speaks to his Alexandrian vantage point. It also evokes the journey most travellers entering Egypt from Alexandria and wishing to reach Upper Egypt and the harbours on the Red Sea had to embark on. As for the west-to-east arrangement of this portion of Book 4, it is similar to what is attested in Egyptian geographical list texts from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman period.⁷¹ This should not be seen as a coincidence, but as yet another testimony of Ptolemy’s knowledge of and engagement with Egyptian modes of space making.⁷²

Taking these considerations into account, let’s come back to Ptolemy’s description of the three deltas and reflect on what it tells us about the role of the apex within his construction and experience of Lower Egypt. Ptolemy’s description of Lower Egypt’s three deltas is embedded in a larger section on the Delta, which is, too, divided into three sections: the first one (4.5.39) focuses on the Great Delta, which corresponds to Lower Egypt and is bounded by the Agathos Daimon branch to the west and the Bubastic one to the east. The second one (4.5.40) deals with the branches that flow from the Bubastic (easternmost) branch and bound the Small Delta to the west and the Third Delta to the east. The third and last section (4.5.41)

⁶⁷ P.Oxy. 12 1427, 4.

⁶⁸ Blouin 2009 and 2016. We should mull over the possibility that his understanding of the deltaic hydrography, and the Greek hydronyms he uses, testify to a porousness of local Greek toponymic practices that was in many ways out of reach – and beyond the point – for foreign writers like Herodotus and Strabo.

⁶⁹ Αἰγύπτου πάσης μητρόπολις Ἀλεξάνδρεια; *Geogr.* 4.5.9.

⁷⁰ Likewise, his list of the Nile mouths runs from west to east (*Geogr.* 4.5.10).

⁷¹ Ghiringhelli 2017; 2021.

⁷² See Cooley 1854; Postl 1970: 334–343.

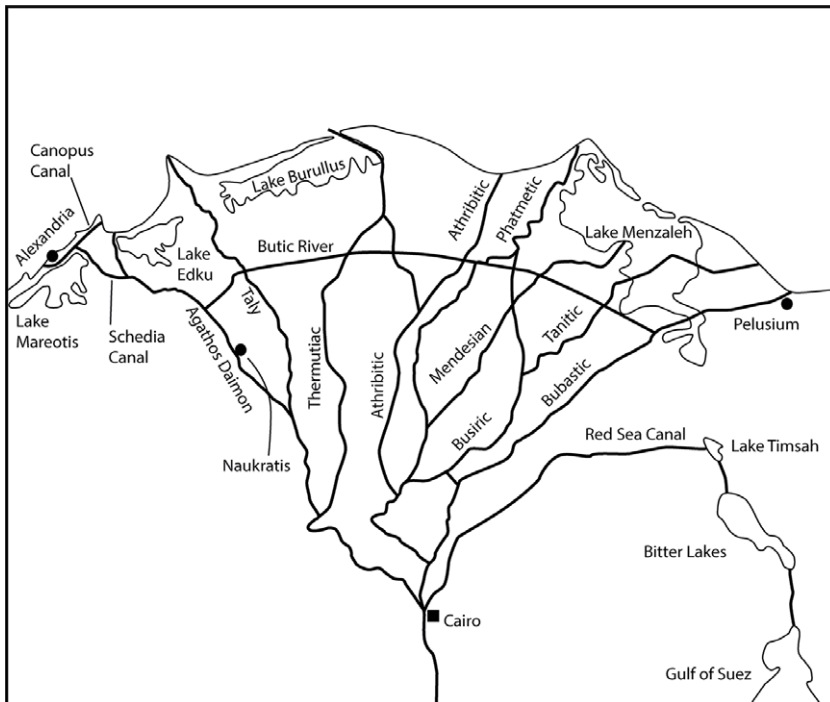
deals with the two branches (Thermouthiac and Taly) that split from the Agathos Daimon branch and flow through the Great Delta. The latter are located in the western half of Lower Egypt (Map 2.4).

The three deltas do not seem to have been of the same status. Indeed, Ptolemy distinguishes between the Great and Small Deltas on the one hand, and the Third Delta on the other. This distinction is expressed through the verbal forms used. Indeed, while the Great and Small Deltas are said to ‘be called’ (καλεῖται) that way, the use of the optative formula λέγοιτο δ’ ἄν in the sentence pertaining to the third delta gives the impression that the existence of the third delta was perhaps not as commonly invoked or known. The verbs used by Ptolemy also pose the question: Who calls these deltas by these names? Does Ptolemy have in mind other scholars, the Greek-speaking population of the province at large, or both? It is impossible to tell for sure, but given he wrote these lines in Egypt, it seems quite safe to assume that these toponyms were in use locally during his lifetime.

Ptolemy provides coordinate points (θέσις) for each of the three deltas. Regarding the Great Delta, its location corresponds to ‘the branching of the Delta’ (τῆς ἐκτροπῆς τοῦ Δέλτα⁷³) – that is, the point where the Great River, whose western stream is called Agathos Daimon, turns into the Bubastiac river. In other words, this is the apex. As for the location of the Small and Third Deltas, one can only deduce that they correspond to the two points where the Bubastic river splits up (σχιζέται) into two distributaries. If Ptolemy’s locations of the three deltas correspond to bifurcation points, does it mean the term only meant a place (apex) and not a space? The syntax of this passage, and more particularly the use of the adverbial compound καθ’ ὃ, which can literally be translated as ‘down which’ or ‘down where’, indicates that the term could mean more than one thing. The three deltas are thus made both by their respective apex, and by the water and land *down*, that is downstream, from the apex point.

Ptolemy’s mapping of Lower Egypt’s three deltas’ bifurcation points and his polysignificant use of the term Delta are reminiscent of Strabo’s emphatic testimony on the main apex of the Delta (Map 2.3). Yet he also complicates this general description by attesting to two other ‘deltas’, a ‘small’ one and a ‘third’ one, both of which are encompassed within the Great Delta. Overall, Ptolemy’s three deltas document a local understanding of the deltaic hydrography that is the product of his multifaceted cultural and environmental sensibility: While his use of the toponym

⁷³ The noun ἐκτροπῆς echoes the verb ἐκτρέπεται used to designate what is called the Great Delta at the start of the sentence.



Map 2.3 The hydrography of the Nile Delta according to Ptolemy

Delta builds on the Greek tradition, he also acknowledges local toponymy by specifying that ‘what is round about these rivers [the branches of the Nile] is commonly called *Katō Xōra*’.⁷⁴ His focus on the course of the river, the north-to-south and west-to-east organisation of the Nile Delta section and his emphasis on the splitting points of the river’s channels all make sense *on the ground* – that is, from the perspective of someone who lives in Alexandria and has travelled through Lower Egypt. We might therefore wonder whether, when he writes that the Great and then Small Delta ‘is called’ (καλείται) this way, and that there is a ‘third Delta’ (τρίτον Δέλτα) ‘as we call it’ (πῶς τῶν εἰρημένων), he is referring to particular territories and their names as they were known locally.

The Small and Third Deltas are both located in the eastern half of the region.⁷⁵ Why is that so? We know that the subsidence rate of the north-eastern Delta was faster than that of the north-western and north-central Delta

⁷⁴ *Geogr.* 4.5.45; see above, n.16.

⁷⁵ See Litinas 2015, who identifies the Small and Third Deltas as being respectively located between the Pelusiatic and the Busiric branches, and between the Pelusiatic and Athribic branches. This hypothesis agrees well with the structure of Ptolemy’s text.

during the mid- to upper Holocene.⁷⁶ Was the western half conceptualised in Ptolemy's day as a greater extension of the Alexandrian region? If so, could this partly explain the names of the Agathos Daimon and Thermouthiac branches? Was the eastern part of the Delta seen as a somewhat distinctive region by locals, that is beyond Ptolemy's scholarly network?

A similar bipartite conceptualisation of Lower Egypt appears in Book 4 of Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*. There, the Alexandria-born novelist, who was a contemporary of Ptolemy, provides the following description of the region's fluvial landscape:

The Nile flows down from the Egyptian Thebes high up and is a single stream thus far, flowing until Memphis; and a little below there is a *keras* ('winding' or 'outcrop'). *Syrōn* is the name of the village at the end of the main stream. From that point it is broken off by the land, and out of one river three rivers are formed: while two (rivers) splitting off, one from each side, on the other hand, the river, being a single stream and forming the land in the shapes of the Delta, flows as it did before breaking up. However, each of these rivers does not keep flowing until it reaches the sea, but splits up, one in one place, one elsewhere, at the cities, and the channels cut in the land are larger than those of the rivers in Greece.⁷⁷

Nikos Litinas compellingly reconstructed and analysed the Greek text of this passage, thereby proposing the revised translation above. According to his analysis, while Tatius' novel draws from older descriptions of the Nile (notably Herodotus), 'when he came to the description of the divisions within the Delta, he updated and modified some specific details using current information and experience'.⁷⁸

Like Ptolemy's, Achilles Tatius' description of the Delta's hydrography agrees with Egyptian evidence. Indeed, as François Ghiringhelli's work shows, among the several waterways known to have made up the region under the Ramessides, one can distinguish three main branches. The deltaic hydronyms attested in Egyptian texts could also have been used at times to designate the three main branches' watershed basins. These

⁷⁶ Stanley 1990.

⁷⁷ ὁ Νεῖλος ρεῖ μὲν ἄνωθεν ἐκ Θηβῶν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων εἰς ὧν ἄχρι Μήμεως καὶ ἔστι μικρὸν κάτω κώμη (Κερκάσωρος ὄνομα τῆ κώμῃ) πρὸς τῷ τέλει τοῦ μεγάλου ρεύματος. ἐντεῦθεν δὲ περιρρήγνυται τῆ γῆ καὶ ἐξ ἑνὸς ποταμοῦ γίνονται τρεῖς, δύο μὲν ἑκατέρωθεν λευμένοι, ὁ δὲ εἰς ὡσπερ ἦν ῥέων πρὶν λυθῆναι, καὶ τὴν γῆν εἰς τὰ σχίσματα Δέλτα ποιῶν. ἀλλ' οὐδὲ τούτων ἕκαστος τῶν ποταμῶν ἀνέχεται μέχρι θαλάσσης ῥέων, ἀλλὰ περισχίζεται ἄλλος ἄλλη κατὰ πόλεις, καὶ εἰσιν αἱ σχίσεις μείζονες τῶν παρ' Ἑλλήσι ποταμῶν; Achilles Tatius *Leuc. and Clit.* 4.11.3–5 (Litinas (trans.) 2015: 48).

⁷⁸ Litinas 2015: 148.

consisted respectively of the western Delta, the eastern Delta and the central Delta. This tripartite description of the region's hydrographic profile correlates with the geographical organisation of the nomes in Egyptian geographical lists into three main sequences (a western, a central and an eastern one).⁷⁹

Greek texts concur with Egyptian sources on another crucial point: The anchoring, structuring role of the apex area.⁸⁰ Indeed, similarly to Herodotus and Strabo before him, Achilles Tatius mentions the existence of a settlement at the apex of Lower Egypt. Litinas' restored text replaces the otherwise unattested 'Kerkasore' (Κερκάσωρος) found in other editions with the more locally anchored Σύρων, a village located in the Heliopolitan nome that is attested in a first-century CE papyrus.⁸¹ The village of *Syrōn* would therefore have been located downstream from Memphis, slightly below a 'winding' or 'horn' of the Nile,⁸² a topographical feature that is reminiscent of the area of the island of Warraq, discussed above. It is then to say that *Syrōn* would have been located close to the 'Delta' village mentioned by Strabo (see Plate 1). Could these have been two designations for the same settlement? It's impossible to tell. If they were not, then they were located close to each other, and within a ca.10–12 km radius of Babylon and Heliopolis.

Achilles Tatius' description of the Nile Delta's hydrography also agrees with Ptolemy in that it too conveys the idea that Lower Egypt encompasses more than one delta (Map 2.4; Figure 2.2).

In this particular passage, the toponym Delta is not a synonym of Lower Egypt (though Achilles Tatius uses it with that meaning earlier on; see 3.24). Rather, it is employed in a metaphorical way, to describe how the middle branch of the Nile, by flowing all the way through the sea (καὶ τὴν γῆν εἰς τὰ σχίσματα Δέλτα ποιῶν), acts as a bisector that shapes Lower Egypt into two triangles. This branch is described as the main branch of the river. In other words, it is the Nile itself, and not one of its distributaries, that shapes the land into two triangles. The apex's role is thus, by the same token, doubled.

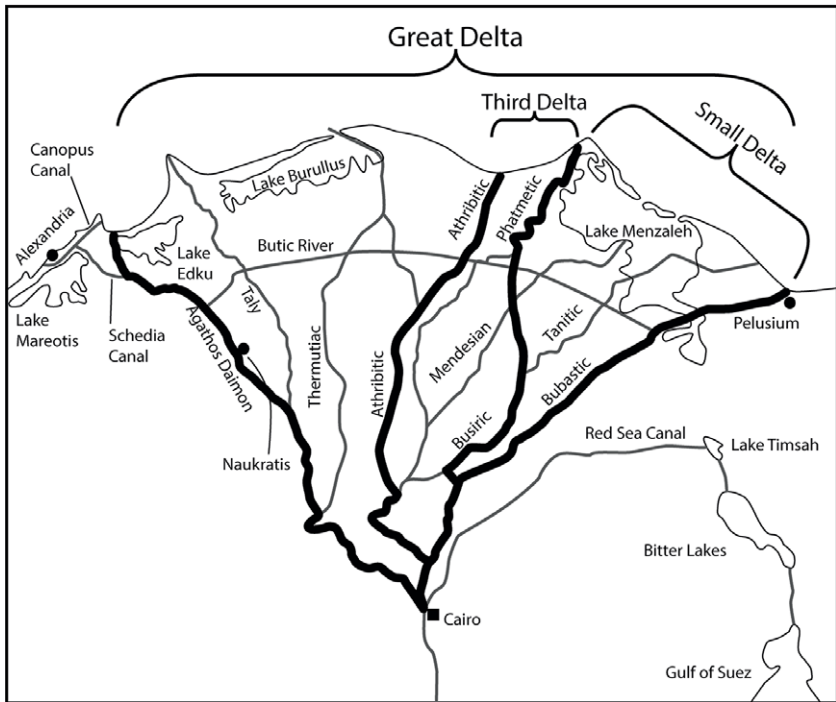
The analysis provided in this section shows how ancient Greek and Roman literary renditions of Lower Egypt into more than one (type of) delta drew more than has traditionally been assumed from Egyptian traditions and perspectives. This is especially true of Egypt-based writers like Ptolemy and Achilles Tatius. Documentary evidence illuminates such local influences in different, at times mundane, yet powerful ways.

⁷⁹ Ghiringhelli 2017.

⁸⁰ Ghiringhelli 2017; 2021.

⁸¹ Litinas 2015: 47–54; *P.Hamb.* 1 2.

⁸² A village of that name is attested in the Heliopolites nome in *P. Hamb.* 1 2, 6–7 (TM Geo 7310).



Map 2.4 Egypt's three 'deltas' according to Ptolemy⁸³

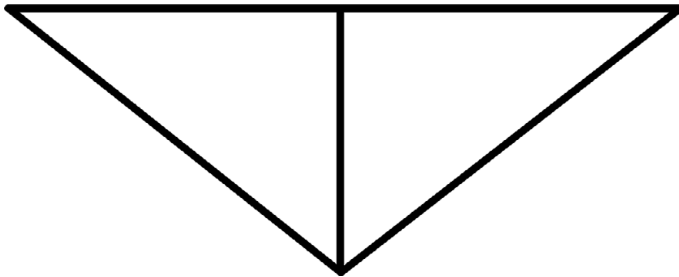


Figure 2.2 Schematic rendering of Egypt's 'shapes of deltas' according to Achilles Tatius

2 Deltas with an S: What Documentary Evidence Says

Literary testimonies on the polysignificance of the toponym Delta both illuminate and find some confirmation in papyri. That a district or settlement called Delta existed at the apex before the Roman period is

⁸³ Maps 2.3 and 2.4 were drawn by Dimitri Nakassis, whom I thank. They are based on the map found in Stanley, Warne and Schnepf 2004, which is a modified version of the one provided in Toussoun 1926.

documented in *P.Rev.* (259–258 BCE), a papyrus containing revenue laws under the reign of Ptolemy II. The toponym is listed in the thirty-first paragraph, which is dedicated to the fines that cultivators who did not pay the tax on wine and orchards faced. It appears in the middle of a series of nomes located respectively in the western and eastern parts of the Delta:

The cultivators [(shall transport)] the due amount of wine —. (31) [(If any of them fail to do so)] he shall pay to the tax-farmer the value of the tax which he owes them: in Libya, the Saite, . . . polite, Prosopite, Athribite, Menelaite Nomes and the Delta, . . . drachmas for each metretes of eight choes; in the Sebynnite, Busirite, [Mendesian], Leontopolite, Sethroite, Pharbaithite Nomes, Arabia, the Bubastite Nome and Bubastos, the Tanite, the Memphite Nome, and Memphis, the Letopolite, Hermopolite, Oxyrhynchite and Kynopolite Nomes, the Lake District, the Herakleopolite and Aphroditopolite Nomes, six drachmas (for each metretes); and the Thebaid, five drachmas.⁸⁴

The paragraph indicates that there were three different fines, each applicable in one of four geographical zones: Libya and the western Delta (4–6); the central and eastern Delta (7–10); Middle Egypt and the Fayyum (10–13); and Upper Egypt (14). The order of the nomes, the parting of Lower Egypt into two different fine zones and the combination of Middle Egypt (that is, Heptanomia) with the western half of the Delta are all in line with the way in which the region is traditionally organised in Egyptian lists of nomes. It is also, as we've discussed above, in agreement with Ptolemy's list, which dates from almost half a millennium later.

Most of the toponyms listed are nomes. We also find Libya, and the Lake District, which corresponds to the Fayyum – that is, the future Arsinoite Nome. The two settlements listed in the passage above – Bubastos and Memphis – are named in tandem with the nome for which they are the metropolis. This is not the case of the Delta, so we should securely expect that it designates a region or a nome. A comparison with the other, similarly structured, but slightly different, list of nomes contained in *P.Rev.* (par. 60–72) also goes in that direction. While the list quoted above is largely enumerative, the second one consists in a nome-by-nome detailing of the laws on the farming of taxes on sesame and ricin. The

⁸⁴ ἐμ μέν τῆι Λιβύτῃ καὶ τῶι Σαίτῃ καὶ . . .] πολίτῃ καὶ Προσωπίτῃ καὶ Ἀθριβίτῃ καὶ Μενελαίτῃ καὶ Δέλτῃ τοῦ με(τρητοῦ) τοῦ (ὀκτά)χ(ου) [(δραχμάς)]· ἐν δὲ τῶι Σεβεννύτῃ καὶ Βουσιρίτῃ [καὶ Μενδη]σίω καὶ Λεοντοπολίτῃ καὶ Σεθρωίτῃ καὶ Φαρβαίτῃ καὶ τῆι Ἀραβίῃ καὶ Βουβαστῃ καὶ Βουβ[άστ]ω καὶ Τανίτῃ καὶ Μεμφίτῃ καὶ Μέμφει καὶ Λητοπολίτῃ καὶ Ἑρμοπολίτῃ καὶ Ὀξυρυχίτῃ καὶ Κυνοπολίτῃ καὶ τῆι Λίμνῃ καὶ Ἡρακλεοπολίτῃ καὶ Ἀφροδιτοπολίτῃ (δραχμάς) εἰ ἐν δὲ τῆι Θηβαίῃ (δραχμάς) εἰ; *P.Rev.Laws.* 31ctr 1–14; Bagnall and Derow (trans.) 2003: 114.

Delta is absent; we do, however, find the Heliopolite nome (par. 64). In his introduction to the first edition of the papyrus, John P. Mahaffy, citing Strabo, suggests that Delta was another term used to designate the Heliopolitan nome. Strabo does indeed list a series of nomes, but not the Heliopolitan one, and we have seen above how he mentions the existence of a Delta district located at the apex. Mahaffy's hypothesis has gathered a considerable amount of support.⁸⁵ A double designation – in this case a topographical metonymy (Delta) and a sacred toponym (Heliopolis) – is certainly possible.

The Delta Nome is the last one listed in the section that is otherwise dedicated to nomes located on the western part of Lower Egypt. Now the Heliopolitan nome is traditionally described by scholars as being located on the eastern shore of the Nile. Why then include it in this section and not in the following one? Did the Heliopolitan nome of the time encompass territory situated on both sides of the Nile? Could it thus be listed in this way because the apex was directly linked to Alexandria via the Canopic branch, and at the crossroads between the western Delta, the Nile Valley and the roads leading to the eastern desert?

Papyri also confirm the historicity of a settlement called Delta located in the apex area. A reference to the settlement of Delta is found in a second-century CE hymn to Isis (*P.Oxy.* 11 1380).⁸⁶ There, amidst a long enumeration of deltaic settlements with their respective epithet to the goddess, we read: 'at Delta, Giver of delights'.⁸⁷

In their note on this particular line, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt argue that 'Delta' refers probably to 'a town rather than a district' and corresponds to Strabo's 'κώμη rather than the χωρίον or was further north, as suggested by Hogarth⁸⁸ . . . , or meant the Heliopolite nome'. Given that none of the Egyptian toponyms associated with an Isiac epithet in *P.Oxy.* 11 1380 corresponds to a nome, it seems most likely indeed that Delta was the same 'village' mentioned by Strabo. In another study, I suggest that this particular hymn to Isis is the third of three successive versions (an Egyptian, a Graeco-Macedonian and a Roman), the second and third ones consisting of geographical updates and the expansion of a pre-Hellenistic Egyptian original. Should that be the case, the section in which Delta is found would originate from before the Roman period. This is in line with

⁸⁵ Mahaffy in Grenfell (ed.) 1896: xlvi. See also Gauthier 1935: ch.2, esp.44–45; Thomas 1967.

⁸⁶ On this hymn, see Blouin 2022.

⁸⁷ [ἐ]πὶ τοῦ Δέλτα χαρτοδώτειραν; *P.Oxy.* 11 1380, 10. The epithet is a compound made of χαρτός, 'causing delight', 'welcome' and δώτειρα, 'giver'.

⁸⁸ Hogarth 1904: 2

Strabo's testimony, which dates from the early days of the Roman occupation of Egypt, and thus implies the prior existence of the district and settlement named Delta by Greek speakers. The inclusion of Delta into the list also indicates that the settlement of Delta was not a small village, but a settlement of considerable enough size.

We've seen how TM Geo putatively locates Delta on the island of El Warraq. Could it have been the site of a commercial harbour? This seems most probable considering the strategic and practical importance of locating a settlement at the apex. Given the polysignificance of the toponym, the time is ripe to reconsider the meaning of Delta in documentary papyri.

Four of the papyri that belong to the third-century BCE archive of Zenon contain the toponym Delta. Two of those are very similar accounts of expenses incurred during what seems, according to references to a captain, to be a voyage along the Nile. Line 23 of *P.Cair.Zen.* 4 59705 reads 'upon the Delta' (ἐπὶ τοῦ Δέλτα) and is followed by a list of expenses (mostly food, wood and bath fees). Delta appears twice in *SB* 4 7451, a longer expense list written on wax tablets. It is first associated with debts (only wine is preserved) made in 'the Delta' (τοῦ Δέλτα).⁸⁹ The second (tablet 70b) is written in a different hand. It consists of a heading followed by expenses similar to those found in *P.Cair.Zen.* 4 59705. Just before the heading, we find a two-line entry related to a meal eaten in Memphis. This might indicate that the boat sailed to Memphis, then downstream towards Delta.⁹⁰ A similar heading is found in *P.Cair.Zen.* 1 59090, an account of money received by Zenodoros, Zenon's treasurer, through a man called Peisicles.⁹¹ The fourth document is *P.Cair.Zen.* 2 59470, a business letter from a travelling merchant named Molossos to Zenon that was written between 256 and 246 BCE. Towards the end of the letter, Molossos informs Zenon that he sent him a letter 'regarding the papyrus rolls' through a man named Kriton, whom he had met 'upon the Delta' (ἐπὶ τοῦ Δέλτα). I've discussed this document elsewhere, and hypothesised that the order of papyrus rolls was most probably made in the eastern Delta.⁹² Here, too, Delta might very well refer to the settlement of that name located at, or else the wider area of, the apex.

⁸⁹ Tablet 69b. The editor restitutes [ἐκ] before τοῦ Δέλτα but both *P.Cair.Zen.* 4 59705 and the second mention of the toponym found in this document are written with the preposition ἐπὶ, so I would be tempted to reconstitute the latter instead.

⁹⁰ The fact that the first mention of Delta appears earlier, in tablet 69b, is not necessarily in contradiction with this hypothesis, since it was written by a separate hand. The same goes for the other mention of Memphis in l.100 (Tablet 71A), which pertains to a sum received from a man named Stratōn.

⁹¹ *P.Cair.Zen.* 1 59090, 7: ἐπὶ τοῦ Δέλτα.

⁹² See Blouin 2014: 84–85.

Let's finally look back at *P.Mich.* 8 467, the second-century CE letter that belonged to the bilingual (Greek and Latin) archive of Claudius Tiberianus, which we discussed earlier. While the reference to 'Delta' found in this papyrus has so far been understood as referring to Lower Egypt at large, the present study refines our understanding of *which* delta Terentianus had in mind. Indeed, one might think that by asking Tiberianus to go 'to(wards)/ next to Delta' (*ad Delta*) to buy him three breeders, he might not have meant the Delta as a whole, but more specifically the settlement or area of Delta, wherefrom fluvial traffic towards Alexandria, along the Canopic branch of the Nile, would have been easy.

All five documents discussed in this section mention Delta as the site of some business transactions. In all cases, these take place in the context of connectivity networks between the Fayyum oasis and Lower Egypt. I therefore suggest that in the Hellenistic and Roman period, the settlement of Delta was the site of a commercial harbour whose attractiveness resided in its location at the crossroads between the Fayyum, the western Delta, the eastern Delta and the desert and the Nile Valley. Its situation and role would have been comparable to that of Bulaq, another settlement located close to the apex. Bulaq developed in the thirteenth century CE following a westward shift of the Nile in the area.⁹³ Starting from the fifteenth and until the early twentieth century CE, it was Cairo's main fluvial harbour. Seen in this light, the transactions and request for purchases set in Delta found in several papyri could be located in a specific place, rather than in a vague space. Given the particular contexts of these documents, this would make more sense.

Lastly, papyri also document how the divide of Lower Egypt into two halves located on each side of a distributary of the Nile found its way into administrative geography. Indeed, between 314/315 and 322 CE, Lower Egypt was split into two provinces (and dioceses): Aegyptus Jovia (Western Delta) and Aegyptus Herculia (Eastern Delta and Heptanomia). There, the Phathmetic branch probably acted as the border between the two provinces. The same branch was used again from 381 CE on as the border between the provinces and dioceses of Aegyptus (Western Delta) and Augustamnica (Eastern Delta and, until 535, Heptanomia).⁹⁴ We find the same logic in maps based on the tenth-century scholar Ibn Ḥawqal's work, *The Face of the Earth*.⁹⁵ Ibn Ḥawqal travelled to Egypt in 955 CE. In his

⁹³ Selim 2017: ch.2. See Bunbury 2019: 135 and Cooper 2014: 189, fig. 12.2.

⁹⁴ Benaissa 2013; Lallemand 1964.

⁹⁵ It is the case in ms Topkapı Sarayı inv. 3346 (1086 CE) and ms Aya Sofia 2934 (1200 CE); see Ducène 2004.

maps, Lower Egypt (which he calls *Maṣr (el-souflah)* elsewhere) is split into two longitudinal zones: *الريف (al-rif)*, 'the countryside' to the west, and *الجوف (al-gouf)*, 'the hollow', in the east.⁹⁶ The name of the western half of Lower Egypt might be a translation of the Greek *chōra*, which was used to refer to the wider agricultural region around Alexandria, and also at times to Egypt as a whole.⁹⁷ As for the name of the eastern half of Lower Egypt, it might be yet another expression of the toponymic manifestations of the lower elevation of this region.

In addition to being the (literal and conceptual) root of a variety of deltas, the apex area has been from very early on and consistently through history the host of a concatenation of settlements, all of which ebbed and flowed with the apex point itself. These developments, whose archaeological remains can be traced back to the Predynastic period, are a testimony to the navel-like status of this juncture point between not only the Nile Valley and Delta, but also more far-reaching roads and routes that linked the Mediterranean, the Fayyum, the eastern desert, the Red Sea and the Nilotic hydrography.

Sources from Late Antiquity and the Arab period indicate that the polysemy associated with the Greek toponym Delta finds Egyptian and Arabic parallels. Other metonymic associations between settlements located close to the Delta's apex and a larger territory are known in later periods. These involve two other toponyms: *Kēme* and *Maṣr*.

3 *The Apex as Synecdoche: Kēme and Maṣr*

The selection of a site located close to the military settlement of Babylon⁹⁸ by the Arabs for their first Egyptian foundation represents a powerful expression of not only the strategic location of the apex of the Delta, but

⁹⁶ These territorial entities are also mentioned by the tenth-century Palestinian writer Al-Maqdisi; Miquel 1972: 112–114. *al-rif* appears in Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī's (ca. 780–850 CE) *Kitāb Sūrat al-Arḍ* ('*Book of the Aspect of the Earth*'), the author of the earliest known Islamic map of the Nile.

⁹⁷ Miquel 1972: n.30 notes that the term *al-rif* comes with a connotation of wealth.

⁹⁸ Current archaeological evidence suggests that the settlement of Babylon (today's Old Cairo) was founded ca. 700–650 BCE – that is, during the Third Intermediate Period. While Old Cairo is now located inland, the original site of Babylon was at that time located next to the Nile, on a limestone terrace located at the southern limits of Heliopolis. Ceramics – including a large number of imports from Syria-Palestine and the Greek islands – document the continuous occupation and commercial vocation of the site from the Late to the Roman Period. Archaeological material and the general sequence of early occupation have led Peter Sheehan to suggest that the toponym Babylon might point to a Persian colony, and thus to a toponym of Persian – and not Egyptian – origin; Sheehan 2010: ch.1, *contra* Lambert 1994: 55. This

also the recognition, by the new rulers of Egypt, of the legitimacy of an urban tradition that goes back thousands of years.⁹⁹ This is visible, as for earlier periods, in toponymic practices. Indeed, κΗΜΕ (Sahidic) or ΧΗΜΙ (Bohairic), the Coptic toponym used to refer to the Delta, also designated a series of settlements which had been at some point capitals of Lower Egypt (Memphis, Babylon, Fustāt), as well as Egypt as a whole.¹⁰⁰ The toponym is the later form of the ancient Egyptian *km.t*, literally ‘Black Land’,¹⁰¹ which referred to the alluvial soil of the Nile Valley and Delta, in contrast with *dšrt*, the red land of the desert.

Similarly, the Arabic toponym مصر (*Maṣr*) which is now Egypt’s Arabic name started as a metonymic toponym that pertained to a military settlement located in the area of Babylon-Fustāt.¹⁰² This association is not attested in Arabic papyri. The toponym does not appear in Arabic papyri, but we find it with seemingly two meanings in the seventh-century *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu. First, he locates the journey of Arab troops during the invasion of Egypt along ‘the great river of Egypt’.¹⁰³ According to Amélineau, the term مَسْرَة (Māsərə), which is a transliteration of the Arabic *Maṣr*, actually refers to the Delta.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Maqrizi, al Idrisi, Ibn Ḥawqal and maps based on some of these scholars’ works routinely differentiate between (*asafil arḍ*) *Maṣr* or *Maṣr (elsouflah)*, literally ‘Lower Egypt’, and (الاعلى / صعيد, *alSa’id (al-a’la)*), ‘The High Sa’id’, that is the Nile Valley. The latter expression, which is also at times associated with *Maṣr*, is a tautology, for *alSa’id* means ‘that which goes up’, and *al-a’la* ‘high’.¹⁰⁵ Second, John of Nikiu also mentions ‘The gates of *Maṣr*’ (25), no doubt

phenomenon makes, of course, perfect sense given the situation of Babylon at the apex of the Delta.

⁹⁹ On the ports of Babylon, Fustāt and Cairo, see Cooper 2014: ch.12 and Sheehan 2010: ch.1.

¹⁰⁰ Amélineau 1893: 540; Casanova 1901, including several compounds; Maspero and Wiet 1919: 144. See also Quatremère 1811: 49 and Maspero and Wiet 1919: 140, regarding the Coptic toponym ΜΙΣΤΡΑΜ, most probably a translation of *Miṣr* or Fustāt. Bishopric lists also used ΦΟΥΣΤΑΩΝ or ΦΥΣΤΑΤΩΝ, as well as the Arabic transcription of Babylon, indicating that the toponyms were sometimes used indiscriminately to refer to what would today be the area of Old Cairo.

¹⁰¹ Wb 5, 4–17.

¹⁰² Wensinck et al. 2020 (2012). See also Miquel 1972, who translates *Miṣr* as ‘métropole (capitale de province)’ and also notes (n.31) that it is used to designate the Fatimid province as a whole.

¹⁰³ John of Nikiu 111.13 in Zotenberg 1883: 199. I thank Eyob Derillo for helping me with this text.

¹⁰⁴ Amélineau 1893: 4. See also Charles (ed.) 2007 (1917): 179.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Ḥawqal: الصعيد الاعلى / وواحي مصر / صعيد مصر الاعلى; Ibn Battuta: الصعيد/مصر الاعلى; al-Idrisi: مصر/اعالي; أسافل ارض مصر/الصعيد/أسفل أرض مصر; Ibn alWardi: مص / صعيد; alMakrizi: أهل الصعيد/أهل أسفل الأرض and الصعيد/أسفل أرض مصر. I thank Anass Dakkach, who researched and compiled this data. See also Wensinck et al. 2000 (2012).

referring to the gates of Babylon or Fustāṭ.¹⁰⁶ The same use of *Maṣr* to refer to the Cairo area is found in Ibn Battuta,¹⁰⁷ and it endures today.

IV Conclusion

A toponym is a story. It is a story of the relations between human beings and the land that holds, nourishes and sustains them. A toponym bears within itself the gaze and vulnerability of the beholder. Toponyms can be expressions of love and respect, propitiatory offerings and markers of routes. By naming, one acknowledges the *being* of a place, and their intimate, embodied and experiential relations with it.

What stories do the toponyms used to designate the ancient-to-modern Nile Delta tell? There are two stories. The first one is indigenous. It goes back to the Pharaonic period and endures today. *T3-mḥw* and its Greek, Latin and Arabic equivalent bring us into an immersive experience amidst the Nilotic landscape. Flowing water and moving silt flow down. They shape and reshape the land. The river is an agent. Flowing down, it reaches the apex. As it branches out, it slows down its pace, meanders more and eventually reaches, and morphs into, marshes and lakes, wherefrom it *ends* into the sea. In this place, the *northern land* is *low*. The second story comes from the sea. It is younger and, although favoured by foreigners, and absorbed into spoken Egyptian Arabic during the nineteenth century, it never took deep roots on locals' tongues. This story tells of how Ionian Greeks' encompassing gaze traced and sailed the *contours* of the region. They, like so many Greek and Latin settlers, rulers, travellers and speakers after them, approached the land from the Mediterranean Sea. They knew and used the harbours located at the eastern and western edges of the region. From there they sailed upstream along westernmost and easternmost branches of the Nile. To them, this space looks like a triangle. Its base is the sea, and its two sides are irregular fluvial channels that meet up south. It is, literally, a giant, aquaeous *Delta*.

Taken together, the sources discussed in this paper show how the Nile Delta was considered as a coherent, yet divisible unit. From the sequences of Egyptian lists of nomes to Ptolemy to medieval Arabic maps, available evidence testifies to a subdivision of the territory into smaller deltas. Together, these sources tell another, related story. That story is set on the

¹⁰⁶ Wensinck et al. 2020 (2012).

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Battuta vol. 1, 26 and maybe 37–38.

place where the Nile river splits into more than one distributary. It is between Upper and Lower Egypt. It is the apex. Human beings, locals or settlers, saw and related to that place. The apex moved over the millennia, and human communities did so with her. They still do. Human communities understood how powerful that place was. There, the river multiplies. There, the farmable land widens spectacularly west and east. From there, one can move in all directions, by land or river: to the Mediterranean and Red seas, upstream to the river's sources, to the Fayyum oasis, to Libya, to Syria and Arabia. From there, peoples, goods and ideas converged and diverged. They still do. It is the beginning and the end. The beginning of a propitious, multifaceted, living end. Just like the distributaries of the Nile, the names of this place multiplied. Delta, Kēme, Maṣr: All three toponyms designated a settlement located at the apex, as well as two other, wider territories attached to it (the Heliopolitan nome and Lower Egypt in the case of Delta; Lower Egypt and Egypt as a whole in the case of Kēme and Maṣr). Like a Russian doll, these polysignificant toponyms contained, and sustained, each other.

Let me end this chapter by tying the stories above to the story of Québec, the name of my hometown and homeland. The toponym Québec (Kephek in Abenakis) can be linked to the Algonquian expression *kebec*, which means 'there where (*ek*) it is blocked/closed/obstructed (*kebh*)' in several Algonquian languages. It has also been linked to modern Mi'kmaq imperative *gepeg* and Innu *kepek*, both of which mean 'land/disembark'. Québec thus refers to the local fluvial hydrography, and more specifically to the sharp narrowing of the river one encounters on the eastern tip of the Île d'Orléans when one approaches the area from the east – that is, against the current. The toponym Québec was adopted by French settlers. Samuel de Champlain used it to name his 1608 foundation, close to the Iroquoian settlement of Stadaconé. The British maintained it after their conquest of Nouvelle-France in 1759.¹⁰⁸ Like the ancient Greek Delta, Québec stems from a downstream-up perspective and focuses on a point at which the river morphs: into a delta in the first case, into an estuary in the second. Lastly, just like the Hellenistic and Roman Delta, Québec now designates a settlement (*ville de Québec*), an area surrounding that settlement (*région de Québec*) and a large territorial unit (*province de Québec*). Two places, two spaces, two languages, yet two converging sets of indigenous and settler stories.

¹⁰⁸ Commission de toponymie Québec (2020 (2012)); Delâge 2007.

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