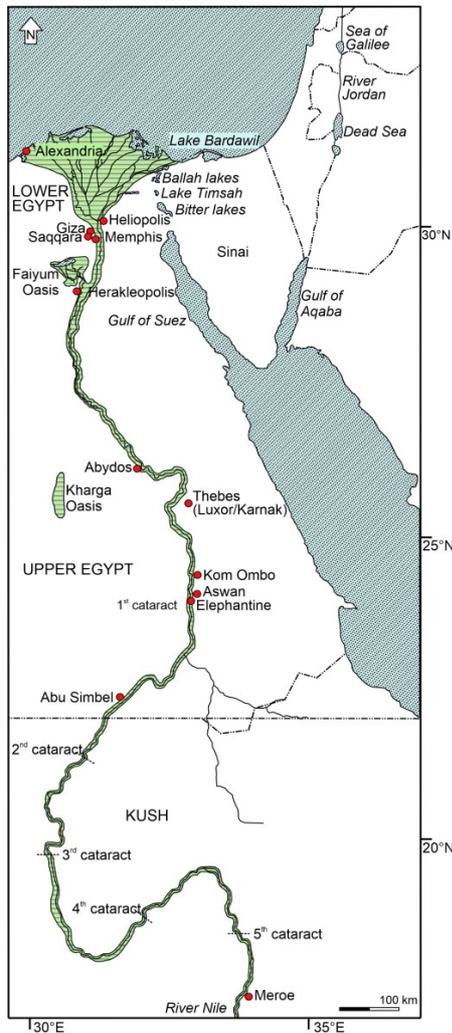


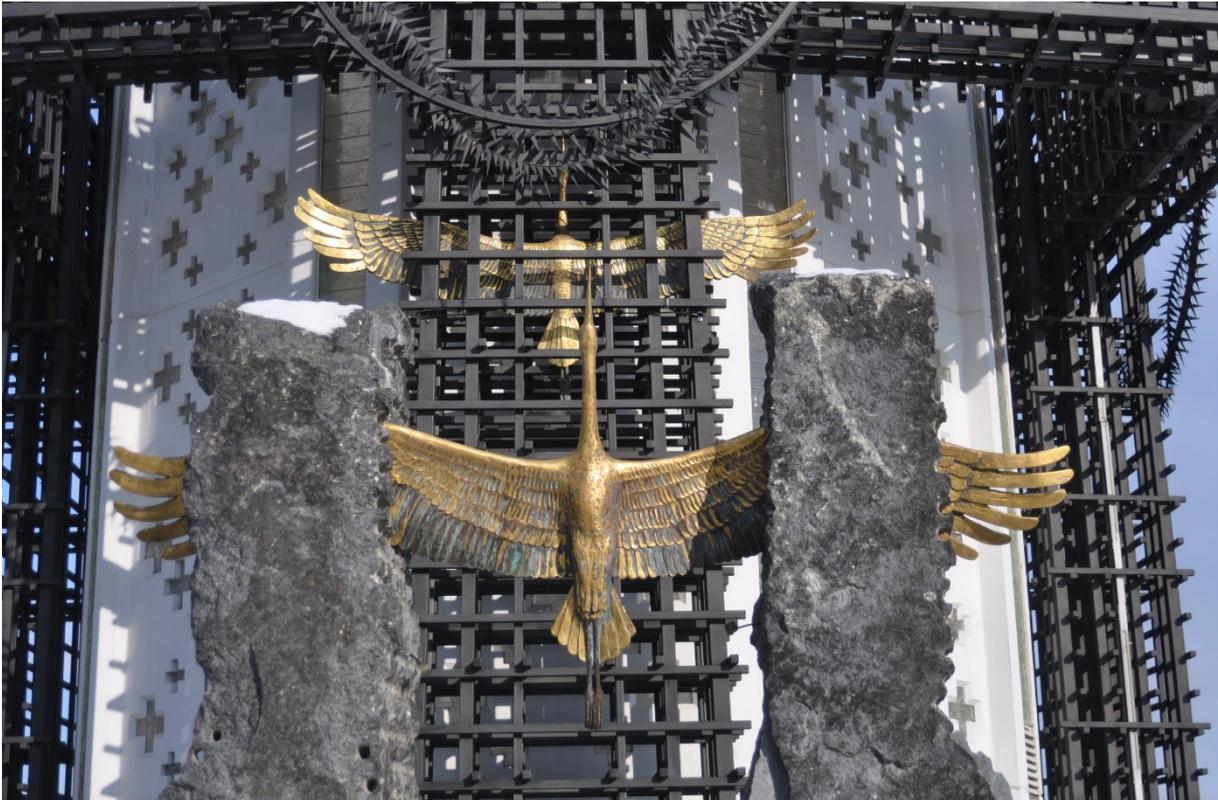
Pim de Klerk

Peatland prose from the past:
Ancient Egyptian camouflaged mires in the works of Diodorus
of Sicily (1st century BCE) and Frontinus (c. 40-103 CE)

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*Aegyptii conflicturi acie in eis
campis, quibus iunctae paludes
erant, alga eas contexerunt
commissoque proelio fugam
simulantes in insidias hostes
evocaverunt, qui rapidius per ignota
invecti loca limo inhaeserunt
circumventique sunt.*



Cranes of the Holodomor monument along the Dnepr in Kiev, Ukraine. Photo: Hans Joosten. Poem: Leo Vroman.

Kom vanavond met verhalen
hoe de oorlog is verdwenen
en herhaal ze honderd malen
alle malen zal ik wenen

Come tonight with stories
how the war has disappeared
and repeat them a hundred times
all the times I will weep

Приходьте з історіями сьогодні ввечері
як зникла війна
і повторить їх сто разів
Я буду плакати кожен раз

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Papers

Peatland prose from the past: Ancient Egyptian camouflaged mires in the works of Diodorus of Sicily (1st century BCE) and Frontinus (c. 40-103 CE)

Pim de Klerk (Greifswald Mire Centre/State Museum of Natural History Karlsruhe; pimdeklerk@email.de, www.pimdeklerk-palynology.eu)

War is one of the most common topics in the works of ancient historians, and there are numerous texts that describe various campaigns and battles in Antiquity. As almost all landscape types, mires and wetlands also played a role in warfare. Mires were particularly used for hiding, for natural defences, or to trap the enemies (De Klerk & Joosten 2019).

The function as trap is mentioned in a particular quote from the ‘Stratagems’ by Sextus Iulius Frontinus (c.40-103 CE). After a successful career in the military, he was praetor, three times consul, governor of Britain, augur, and inspector of waterworks (Campbell & Purcell 1996). This latter function resulted in his work ‘De aquae ductu’ on the water infrastructure of the City of Rome. As military man he wrote a major work on warfare named ‘de re militari’, of which only the ‘stratagems’-section has been preserved. This text was intended as a teaching in tactics for military officers. Frontinus wrote:

“When Egyptians go into battle in a plain with marshes, they cover these with seaweed. In battle they fake flight to lure the enemies into this trap, who - because of their unfamiliarity with the area – rapidly get stuck in the mud and are surrounded.” (“Aegyptii conflicturi acie in eis campis, quibus iunctae paludes erant, alga eas contexerunt commissoque proelio fugam simulantes in insidias hostes evocaverunt, qui rapidius per ignota invecti loca limo inhaeserunt circumventique sunt.”) (‘Stratagems’ II:5,6).

It is a strange quote, and it seems justified to doubt its accuracy.

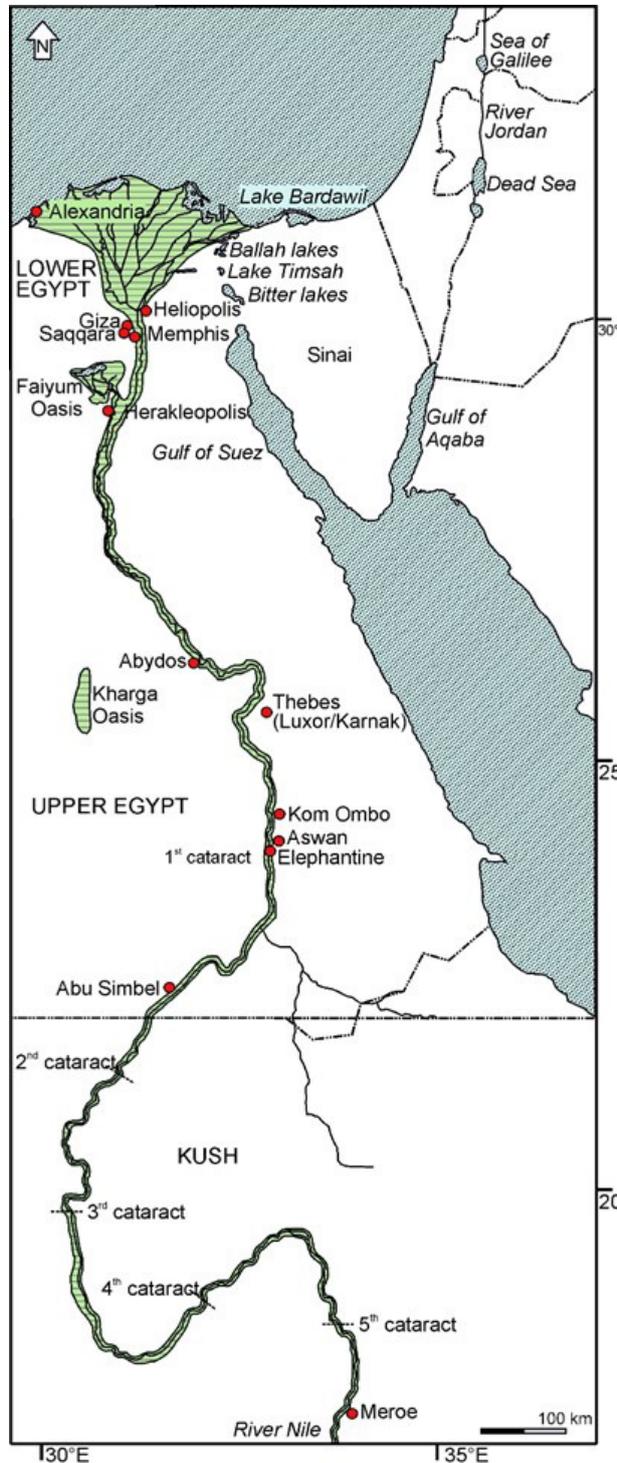
The first questions that arise are where and when this had happened. Ancient Egypt was surrounded by dry desert bordering the fertile Nile River valley: there were no marshes apart from the luxurious papyrus reeds in the Nile Valley and Delta. Furthermore, the low-lying Suez rift between the Gulf of Suez and the eastern Mediterranean contained a series of shallow lakes and wetlands that also will have contained prominent reeds. In general, ancient Egypt was well-defended by its natural landscape. Diodorus of Sicily – a historian from the 1st century BCE who probably had visited Egypt himself (Sacks 1996) - wrote:

“In the west it is protected by the Libyan desert - which is full of wild beasts - and forms the border over a large distance, and because of the lack of water and any kind of food the journey through this desert is not only toilsome but even highly dangerous. In the south is the region of the Nile cataracts and the mountains flanking them. [...] The eastern regions are protected partly by the river, partly by a desert, and by marshy plains...” (“ἀπὸ μὲν γὰρ τῆς δύσεως ὠχύρωκεν αὐτὴν ἡ ἔρημος καὶ θηριώδης τῆς Λιβύης, ἐπὶ πολὺ μὲν παρεκτείνουσα, διὰ δὲ τὴν ἀνυδρίαν καὶ τὴν σπάνιν τῆς ἀπάσης τροφῆς ἔχουσα τὴν διεξοδὸν οὐ μόνον ἐπίπονον, ἀλλὰ καὶ παντελῶς ἐπικίνδυνον: ἐκ δὲ τῶν πρὸς νότον μερῶν οἱ τε καταράκται τοῦ Νείλου καὶ τῶν ὄρων τὰ συνορίζοντα τούτοις. [...] τῶν δὲ πρὸς τὴν ἀνατολήν νευόντων μερῶν τὰ μὲν ὁ ποταμὸς ὠχύρωκε, τὰ δ’ ἔρημος περιέχει καὶ πεδία τεσματώδη...”) (‘Library of History’ I:30,2/4).

The notion that the southern border of Egypt was easily protected is not completely true: there were various wars with the Nubian peoples of Kush, who coarsely between 750 and 650 BCE even had ruled Egypt as the 25th dynasty (Taylor 2003; Wilkinson 2011). But the major warfare of the ancient Egyptians was directed to the northeast. Egyptians had invaded these lands several times, but marshes were (and are) virtually non-existent in the regions of present-day Israel, Lebanon, and Syria because of the dry and warm climate (Rogerson 1989; De Klerk 2021): Frontinus will not have referred to a battle in these regions. When Egypt was invaded from the northeast, however, it seems logical that the Egyptians constructed defence lines near the lakes of the Suez Isthmus or the Delta. Between the 7th and the 4th century BCE Egypt was invaded various times by Assyrians,

Persians, and finally Alexander the Great (Manley 1996; Wilkinson 2011) and it is probable – if it has a historical background - that the text passage by Frontinus relates to one of these invasions.

It is doubtful that prior to a battle the Egyptian soldiers had sufficient time and seaweed to camouflage the wetlands so convincingly that the enemy would perceive it as dry treatable land: the story, thus, seems unlikely. Other accounts of such strategy have not been transmitted, but there is a distant parallel in the 'Library of history' by Diodorus of Sicily:



“There is between Coele-Syria and Egypt a lake - quite narrow but very deep and 200 stades long - named Serbonis [Lake Bardawil] that has some unexpected perils for those who visit it and don't know the area. The body of water is narrow, like a ribbon, and is surrounded by large dunes. With persistent south winds great quantities of sand are blown into the lake which makes the lake indistinguishable and is perceived as solid land. For that reason, many people - who were unacquainted with the character of the lake - have disappeared with their complete armies when they wandered off the correct road. When the sand is walked-on it gives way and deceives the wanderers for a time deviously, until they perceive the peril, and start helping each-other. But at that moment there is no way back nor an escape. Anybody who has been sucked into the marsh cannot swim since the sludge hampers all movements of the body, nor can they walk-out because they have no solid soil under their feet. Because of the mixing of sand with water - that consequently both had changed their substance - the area can neither be crossed by foot nor by boat. Thus, those who enter these terrains are drawn into the depths and have nothing to grasp for help since the sand slips with them from the surrounding grounds.”

(“ἔστι γὰρ ἀνά μέσον τῆς Κοίλης Συρίας καὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου λίμνη τῷ μὲν πλάτει στενὴ παντελῶς, τῷ δὲ βάθει θαυμασίος, τὸ δὲ μῆκος ἐπὶ διακοσίους παρήκουσα σταδίους, ἢ προσαγορεύεται μὲν Σερβωνίς, τοῖς δ' ἀπίροις τῶν προσπελαζόντων ἀνεπίστους ἐπιφέρει κινδύνους. στενοῦ γὰρ τοῦ ρεύματος ὄντος καὶ ταινία παραπλησίου, θινῶν τε μεγάλων πάντη περικεχυμένων, ἐπειδὴν νότοι συνεχεῖς πνεύσωσιν, ἐπισείεται πλήθος ἄμμου. αὕτη δὲ τὸ μὲν ὕδωρ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν ἄσημον ποιεῖ, τὸν δὲ τῆς λίμνης τύπον συμφυῆ τῇ χέρσῳ καὶ κατὰ πᾶν ἀδιάγνωστον.

διὸ καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν ἀγνοούντων τὴν ιδιότητα τοῦ τόπου μετὰ στρατευμάτων ὄλων ἠφανίσθησαν τῆς ὑποκειμένης ὁδοῦ διαμαρτόντες. ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἄμμος ἐκ τοῦ κατ' ὀλίγον πατουμένη τὴν ἔνδοσιν λαμβάνει, καὶ τοὺς ἐπιβάλλοντας ὥσπερ προνοῖα τινὶ πονηρᾷ παρακρούεται, μέχρι ἂν ὅτου λαβόντες ὑπόνοιαν τοῦ συμβησομένου βοηθήσωσιν ἑαυτοῖς, οὐκ οὔσης ἔτι φυγῆς οὐδὲ σωτηρίας. ὁ γὰρ ὑπὸ τοῦ τέλματος καταπινόμενος οὔτε νήχεσθαι δύναται,

παραιρουμένης τῆς ἰλύος τὴν τοῦ σώματος κίνησιν, οὐτ' ἐκβῆναι κατισχύει, μηδὲν ἔχων στερέμνιον εἰς ἐπίθασιν: μεμιγμένης γὰρ τῆς ἄμμου τοῖς ὕγροϊς, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τῆς ἐκατέρων φύσεως ἠλλοιωμένης, συμβαίνει τὸν τόπον μήτε πορευτὸν εἶναι μήτε πλωτόν. διόπερ οἱ τοῖς μέρεσι τούτοις ἐπιβάλλοντες φερόμενοι πρὸς τὸν θυθὸν οὐδεμίαν ἀντίληψιν βοηθείας ἔχουσι, συγκατολισθανούσης τῆς ἄμμου τῆς παρὰ τὰ χεῖλη.“ (‘Library of History’ I:30,4-9).

Initially Diodorus did not give any information on which event(s) his account was based, but at a considerable later place he specified that it happened to the Persian army during the invasion under king Antaxerxes III Ochus in the mid-4th century BCE (‘Library of history’ XVI:46). Contrary to a human deceit as described by Frontinus, the text by Diodorus only deals with natural characteristics of the landscape that became fatal for the hostile army. Lake Bardawil – in antiquity known as Lake Serbonis or Sirbonis - is a very saline coastal lagune with a mean depth of 1 m (Elshinnawy & Almaliki 2021), which implies that the characterisation “very deep” by Diodorus is highly exaggerated. Using the word “λίμνη” (“limne”) Diodorus principally called Bardawil a lake, but the word “τέλματος” (“telmatos”) that he used later predominantly denotes a shallow and marshy setting. The depiction of sand floating on water instead of sinking appears strange. However, Diodorus may have attempted to describe a quicksand setting rather than an actual lake or marsh. Although in reality quicksand does not allow a person to sink-in completely or drown (Khaldoun et al. 2005), the description by Diodorus greatly resembles the common perception that still exists today.

The text passage on camouflaged marshes/lakes by Frontinus is most likely false, whereas the wrong depiction of quicksand by Diodorus shows that his text can also not be an accurate description of actual events. It would be interesting to trace how the passages entered their works since it would provide valuable information on the research and writing methods of ancient Roman writers.

I am grateful to Immanuel Musäus for his help with the translations.

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