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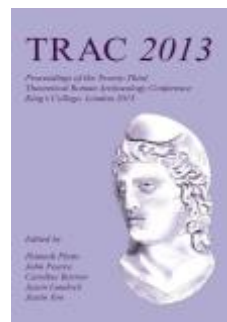
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# Decline, Migration and Revival: Kom al-Ahmer and Kom Wasit, a History of a Forgotten City

*Giorgia Marchiori*

## *Introduction*

The Nile Delta has been mostly ignored by major investigations ever since Egypt attracted the attention of scholars and explorers in the nineteenth century. The Kom al-Ahmer – Kom Wasit Archaeological Project, a joint mission under the direction of the Università di Siena and the CAIE (Italian Egyptian Archaeological Centre), started in 2012 with the objective of broadening the understanding of the archaeological heritage of the Western Delta, with particular focus on the hinterland of Alexandria. The Delta used to be periodically flooded by the Nile's inundations, making surveys and excavations quite a challenge, if not impossible, before Muhammad Ali's reclamation projects between 1805 and 1849 and the construction of the Aswan dam in 1971. As a consequence, there is much uncertainty over this region's past. The above mentioned project is currently concentrating on two specific archaeological sites: the settlements of Kom al-Ahmer and Kom Wasit, which are situated in the modern province of Beheira in the Western Delta. There are limited historical sources regarding this area due to the fact that past explorers preferred to use the Canopic branch of the Nile for travelling rather than the Rosetta branch (known as the Bolbitine branch in antiquity), which flows adjacent to the province. Many archaeological sites in Egypt have undergone investigation for decades, if not centuries, resulting in a considerable knowledge of them and material available for future studies. This is not the case with the Delta, which puts its sites at a higher level of fragility and calls for urgent archaeological investigation. The *sabakheen*, the peasants who plundered the Delta for the past hundred years in search of Nile silt, known as *sabakh*, of which many archaeological remains and buildings were formed, have irreversibly destroyed sites and de-contextualized artefacts (Manchip White 2011: 29).

This paper focuses on two relatively unexplored archaeological sites: Kom Wasit, dating between the late Dynastic and Hellenistic periods, and Kom al-Ahmer, dating from the late Hellenistic to the early Arab periods (the province of Beheira can be observed in Fig. 1). The aim is to highlight the relationship between the two settlements by utilising the information gathered in previous investigations, recent surveys and the first excavation campaign carried out by the Kom al-Ahmer – Kom Wasit Archaeological Project. The examination of the existing structures and artefacts led to the theory of migration from one site to the other following triggers of an environmental and social nature, such as the emergence of subsurface water and the administration of the area. Based on the account of Ptolemy (Thayer 2010), we propose that



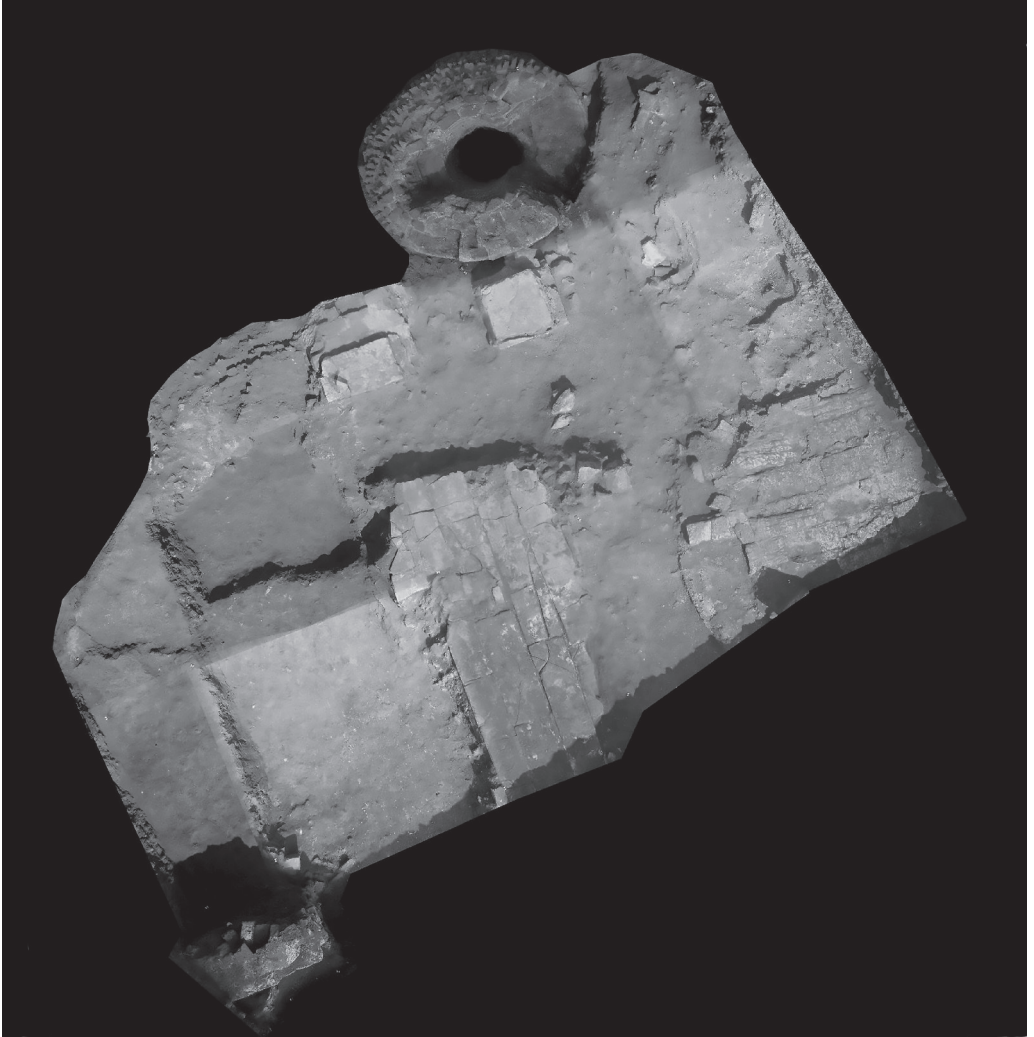
### *Kom al-Ahmer*

Kom al-Ahmer is situated 50 kilometers south-east of Alexandria and lies seven kilometers west of the town of Mahmoudia and the Rosetta branch of the Nile. There are two other sites with the same name in the region and the site in question is called Kom al-Ahmer I. It is currently part of the modern village of Al-Radwa. It is known as Kom al-Ahmer because of the reddish coloured ground surface (resulting from the presence of red bricks). Achille Adriani was the first archaeologist officially to visit the site in 1935 but he did not excavate, collecting just a few artefacts, which included a marble head (Adriani 1940: 163). The Antiquities Department was prompted to act and organise an investigation between 1941 and 1943 after the *sabakheen* found objects of a certain importance, such as the bronze statue of a woman and heads of a Ptolemaic queen (one appearing to be Greek in style). Thirteen statue heads were unearthed in 1941. They were subsequently moved to the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria.

The first systematic archaeological mission that investigated the sites was led by Abd el-Mohsen el-Khashshab (of the Cairo Museum) in 1942, who brought to light two large bath complexes, one of which was grand enough to be compared to the Roman baths of Alexandria (Kom al-Dikka). Dozens of coins were found during his excavation campaign, the earliest of which dated to Ptolemy III, while the most recent was a gold dinar from the Islamic year 154 (A.D. 771) (El-Khashshab 1949: 285). Apart from various surveys, the latest official investigation began in 2012 and it is being led by the Kom al-Ahmer – Kom Wasit Archaeological Project under the direction of Emanuele Papi (scientific direction), Mohamed Kenawi (field director) of the Università di Siena and the *CAIE*.

Due to the small size of the team for the 2012 season, it was decided to open one large trench (10 m by 11 m) situated on the slope of the north-eastern side of the kom, the highest point of which reached 13 metres above ground level. The trench was dug to a depth of five metres. The choice of trench placement was influenced by the presence of an oval hydraulic structure constructed with fired bricks and internally coated with hydraulic mortar. The purpose of the trench placement was to understand the context of the oval structure and its relation to the kom. Beneath layers of deposit, the most significant find was a limestone floor composed of large, rectangular slabs (c. 1.10 x 0.40 m) found at the centre of the trench and more or less at the same level as the fired brick structure. Just in front of the limestone floor, more features emerged such as a worn out red brick floor overlaid by a large limestone slab (possibly an entrance slab) and a pilaster base. On the eastern side of the trench and close to the limestone floor, a mortar floor base was found but the slabs were not present (it was possible to discern their size from the moulding of the mortar, (i.e. c. 0.70 x 0.37 m). Presently the building remains are thought to be part of a bath complex; however, this theory requires further clarification (Kenawi and Rossetti 2013: in press).

The pottery sherds recovered from the trench excavated in 2012 have undergone preliminary analysis and are dated between the fourth and ninth centuries A.D. The preliminary inspection of the body sherds' fabric revealed that 77% of the total amount of amphorae were imported from the Eastern Mediterranean, Cilicia and the Aegean (Kenawi and Rossetti 2013: in press). This suggests interregional trade networks passing through the site and also a connection with maritime trade routes. During a survey conducted in May 2013, a fragmented dynastic sphinx in quartz was found in proximity to the remains of the bath at Kom al-Ahmer. As it was discovered on the surface and it was dated to a period preceding that of the site, it is very likely that it may have been transported from the closest dynastic site (Kom Wasit) in modern times.



*Figure 2: Kom al-Ahmer: photogrammetry of the 2012 findings (Kenawi and Rossetti 2013, in press).*

To summarise, the dating of the settlement spans from the Hellenistic period (supported by the finding of Ptolemaic coins by inspector El-Khashshab) to the ninth century A.D. as demonstrated by the dating of the pottery sherds retrieved in the 2012 archaeological mission. As these are the only available elements to date the site, this chronology is certain to be validated or amended by future investigations and their discoveries.

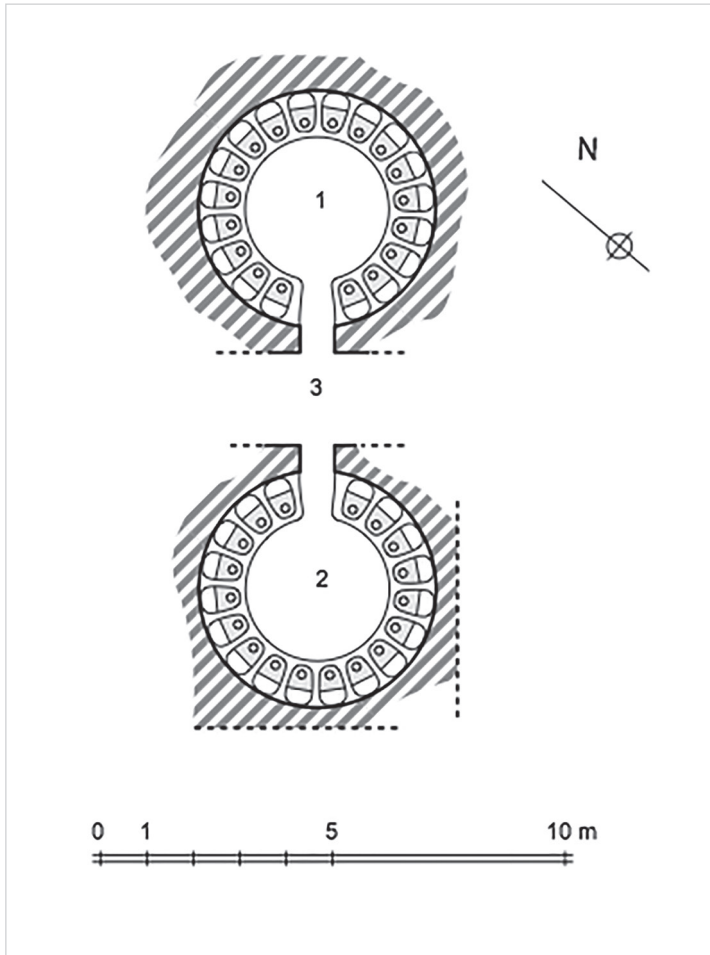


Figure 3: Kom Wasit: plan of the tholos bath (thanks to Thibaud Fournet and Bérangère Redon for editing the drawing of M. Kenawi, 2011. Copyright: © Ifpo-Amman, Balnéorient project).

### *Kom Wasit*

Two kilometers north of Kom al-Ahmer lies Kom Wasit, a settlement dating from the late Dynastic period (26th dynasty). The only archaeological works that the site has undergone were those led by inspector Labib Habachi in 1944, with the exception of some soundings that led to the discovery of a small *tholos* bath (Fig. 3). In addition to the recoveries of the *sabakheen*, which included statuettes of Osiris, hawk claws representing Horus and an Isis situla, the most impressive find was a pedestal with an annexed a bronze tunnel, as the authors describe it (a bronze pipe with an approximate length of 2.5 m) (Habachi 1947: 285–86), which was considered part of an “oracle” device (Brunton 1947: 295).

This site has not been thoroughly investigated and extensive documentation does not yet exist. From the surveys and analyses of surface pottery conducted individually by M. Kenawi and P.

Wilson it seems that the town was inhabited from the seventh century B.C. until the first century A.D. The results of Wilson's survey on the surface pottery of Kom Wasit revealed a very high predominance of Ptolemaic sherds. Some fragments were dated to the Early Roman period, two of which could possibly be Late Roman, and some others to the Late Dynastic period (Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: 176). According to Wilson, the survey's outcomes are reliable since a *lekythos* and a Ptolemaic coin were found on top of the tell. Kenawi's survey provided the same information: almost no trace of ceramics belonging to the Roman period (Kenawi 2012: 309). There are no visible fired brick structures present on site, all of the architecture seems to have been constructed with mud brick. The *tholos* bath exposed during Habachi's campaign is dated to the Hellenistic period. It was common for Ptolemaic baths to undergo heavy modifications during the Imperial period: they were altered from their original form and style (individual foot-baths or hip tubs) in order to be transformed into plunge baths, i.e. in the style of Roman baths (Wilson 2012: 139). Kom Wasit appears not to have undergone any modifications. Therefore, it can be suggested that the site was completely abandoned during the first century A.D. (Kenawi 2008: 73; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: 176).

Kenawi has determined the likely reason that pushed the inhabitants of Kom Wasit to desert their town: a sudden increase in subsurface water, probably related to flooding, that seriously impacted on the mud brick structures of the sites (Kenawi 2008: 72–3; 2013: 309). Due to the insecurity of the buildings and the peril of construction on an unstable terrain, the local residents were forced to look for alternatives. It is not unlikely that this may have been the primary cause for the abandonment of the kom despite a few incongruences. The two koms are located in very close proximity and it is curious that this phenomenon only impacted on a certain area, given that both sites were close to the Nile branch and Lake Idku. Kom al-Ahmer may have been spared the rise in water level because of its higher positioning. When visiting both sites, the difference between the soils is clearly noticeable: at Kom Wasit it is rather silty with a high presence of salt particles whereas Kom al-Ahmer presents this kind of soil only in its lower areas and the current kom is unaffected by salt. By the ninth century A.D. Lake Idku had covered all the agricultural land of the area. In this instance, both sites suffered from water expansion equally. However, in their present state they show diverse conditions. Therefore, it is possible to argue that Kom Wasit was more affected by these phenomena.

### *Migration Theory*

The abandonment of a whole settlement required the movement of a large number of people to another site which could support not only its original inhabitants but also welcome new ones. It is not easy to disperse a large community used to living in a specific area. Our hypothesis is that following the abandonment of Kom Wasit, its population migrated two kilometers south to Kom al-Ahmer, which in all likelihood had the ability to support a sudden population expansion. The motivations behind this decision may be interpreted as a social strategy varying according to the environmental, historical and political circumstances; for instance, the Roman administration of Egypt would be part of the realm of political circumstances that would have affected the migration, especially if the city in question was of administrative and political significance (Hakenbeck 2008: 18–19).

Abandonment can occur on any kind of scale and it is not restricted by distance or size. Indeed a whole settlement, or just a specific part of it, can be deserted (Cameron 1993: 4). The process of abandonment does not necessarily follow a set pattern but can occur either as a quick, urgent

action or as a gradual and well prepared process (Cameron 1991; Deal 1985: 269; Schiffer 1987: 91). The variables affecting the situation call for diverse grades of urgency. The subsurface water was compromising the stability of structures in mud brick and if this was one of the triggers that resulted in the abandonment of the whole settlement, it meant that the effects were evident and called for drastic action. We are in support of a slow, well-planned abandonment followed by a small controlled migration to the largest, closest settlement. It must also be considered that the nature of the abandonment would have been influenced not just by the reasons behind the decision but also by the options regarding the new living location (Cameron 1993: 4; Schiffer 1972: 160). Kom al-Ahmer's proximity might have influenced the speed at which abandonment and migration occurred. In addition, it offered the possibility to make multiple trips to transfer more objects including heavier, more cumbersome items.

### *Nome Capital*

Given the finds recovered at both sites, which include the remains of statues of rulers, the Ptolemaic and Roman baths, the structural remains, objects related to religious cult and a high percentage of imported pottery sherds, it is plausible to say that the capital of the Metelites *nome*, whose location has not yet been confirmed, may be at one if not both of the two sites under investigation. This theory emerged when the possible relationship between the two koms was taken into account: the sites are in a close spatial relationship, both had access to the Bolbitine branch of the Nile, which allowed them to be potential trade centres, and exhibit an unusual trend in their chronology connecting the decline of one and the prosperity of the other. The trade network of the region passed through the sites and included prime and distant cities such as Heracleion, Naukratis and Alexandria (Kenawi 2012: 312). The Bolbitine branch of the Nile used to flow closer to Kom al-Ahmer and Kom Wasit than it does nowadays, its course has shifted progressively towards the east distancing itself from the koms (Lanna 2006: 358, 362). The evidence that Kom Wasit was inhabited from the late Dynastic period to the early Roman period is provided by the analysis of the pottery sherds recovered during Wilson and Kenawi's independent surveys and the findings of Labib Habachi in the 1940s, including the *sabakheen's* accidental recoveries, as noted above (Habachi 1947; Kenawi 2008; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009). For Kom al-Ahmer, El-Khashshab recovered Ptolemaic coins during his excavation, suggesting that the area had already been occupied in the Hellenistic period. Recent pottery analysis confirms that part of the site was inhabited between the Ptolemaic and Late Roman periods (Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: 179–181). From the recovered evidence it can be argued that the site of Kom Wasit ceased to be by the first century A.D. and soon afterwards Kom al-Ahmer began to prosper. Kom al-Ahmer was probably a secondary site before the abandonment of Kom Wasit.

The *nome* and, most probably, its surroundings were habitable, which leads to the assumption that the inhabitants of Kom Wasit had no need completely to abandon the region. The easier way to relocate would have been to settle in the nearest site. Kom al-Ahmer is larger in size than Kom Wasit; this may have been an inherent difference but it may also be the result of the merging populations. Kom al-Ahmer's active involvement in trade and commerce illustrated by the recovery of a large quantity of imported amphora sherds (Kenawi and Rossetti 2013: in press) underlines that the area was frequented and profitable.





Figure 4: Kom al-Ahmer: the remains of the Roman baths (Kenawi 2011).

When discussing the possibility that Kom al-Ahmer may have been the ancient city of Metelis (and previously Kom Wasit), further reasons can be identified to explain the eagerness to maintain a profitable city in almost the same location. Kom Wasit was located in a pivotal position for the administration of the *nome* and for its continuous urban development. The Romans were supporting the urbanisation of Egypt by establishing more settlements; what is more, they did not alter the pre-existing *nome* administration and instead evolved the Ptolemaic *nomes* into cities (Capponi 2005: 25–6, 43, 48). In some instances, however, it was convenient for settlements to evolve in order to fulfil managerial gaps for the purpose of better administering the land (Alston and Alston 1997: 199–200). The changes brought by the increase in population were factors that induced the prosperity of Kom al-Ahmer. The sudden population explosion would have resulted in an augmentation of the work force and in an increased requirement for craftsmanship. With the increase in population, the demand for basic necessities and more luxury commodities would have escalated (Rathbone 1990: 121). The large baths of Kom al-Ahmer were arranged so that they could accommodate both men and women. Given the size of the complex and the fact that the use of the baths was taxed, we can assume that a high number of people had the means to pay for the baths. Urban settlements had become widespread; they had high-density populations and were involved in non-agricultural activities (Alston and Alston 1997: 207). It is rare, however, for a second rank settlement to include a structure such as a bathhouse almost as grand as the one present in the most important city in the country. Power and authority would be exhibited through wealth and stunning buildings; Kom al-Ahmer had the means to do so.

Archaeological evidence shows continued activity at Kom al-Ahmer into the Arab period (El-Khashshab 1949: 285; Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: 181). The name of the *nome* capital Metelis was mentioned in historical Arabic sources dating to the tenth century A.D. (De Geoje 1892: 339; De Geoje 1889: 74). This suggests that the *nome* was not deserted after the Roman occupation ceased.

### *Comparable Case Study*

A similar case, this time in the Eastern Delta, concerns two of the most important settlements of the Mendesian *nome*, Mendes (modern Tell El-Ruba) and Thmuis (modern Tell Timai). The city of Mendes was located on the Nile's Mendesian branch and had been inhabited from Predynastic times (Blouin 2012: 57); by the seventh century B.C. it was considered one of the most prominent port cities of the Delta (Redford 2010: 173–178). There is no archaeological

or historical evidence for the existence of Thmuis before the fourth century B.C.; given their closeness, it is probable that it was founded as an industrial area of Mendes and eventually evolved into an independent settlement (pers. comm., directors of the University of Hawaii Tell Timai Project, July 2013). It was also a port city but unlike Mendes, Thmuis exhibits an urban grid plan, whereas Mendes has an irregular one. At the beginning of the second century A.D., Mendes was subject to decline as Thmuis took its role, becoming the economic centre and capital of the Mendesian *nome* (Ochsenschlager 1971: 185; Redford 2010: 199–202). The reason for this was the shift of the course of the Mendesian branch of the river, which moved closer to Thmuis (Blouin 2012: 61, 65). As a consequence, Thmuis evolved from a secondary site into an industrial and commercial centre.

The case of Mendes and Thmuis resembles that of Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer but a significant difference must be noted. Mendes was not completely abandoned since it did not suffer from a disaster of an environmental nature (such as the rise of subsurface water). The migration from Mendes to Thmuis is related to social and economic dynamics. A successful city was on the verge of losing its status and its commercial profit; the migration of its population and wealth to the nearest settlement, whose close location became advantageous especially as the river branch approached it, was the solution to maintaining the prestige of the area. The same can be said about Kom Wasit and Kom al-Ahmer. When referring to the case of Kom Wasit, it must be taken into consideration that the triggers behind its abandonment were primarily environmental, followed by economic, social and possibly political. The movement from Mendes to Thmuis can be seen as a continuum instead of crisis, as it was a more gradual movement (Blouin 2012: 61). The premises of the two migrations are the same but they unfolded in different manners according to their situations. The theory of migration from a settlement to a nearby one is not far-fetched. The Delta offers two examples and it can be extrapolated that there may be more similar cases given the Nile's shifting course (Hassan 1997: 53–54). However, the chances for researching further cases for comparison are few, due to the lack of interest in the Delta region (in fact, it was due to the insistence of the former Minister of State for Antiquities, Dr. Zahi Hawass, that the Delta began to be archaeologically investigated extensively by foreign missions), heavy looting and land reclamation.

### Conclusions

The evidence at our disposal is valuable but limited as this research is still in its initial phases. It is possible to discern, however, a pattern of movement between the two sites by taking into consideration the material evidence. The few archaeological inspections that have taken place at the two sites agree that they must be studied together in order to better determine their connections (Wilson and Grigoropoulos 2009: 177). The basis for the migration hypothesis conceived by the research behind the Kom al-Ahmer – Kom Wasit Archaeological Project derives chiefly from ceramics and from the observation of the visible architectural remains. The framework is limited but the theory is supported by the correspondence between archaeological surveys performed by different researchers. Almost no evidence was found for pottery dating to the Roman period at Kom Wasit. In fact, the ceramics that were analysed lay on the surface on top of the kom and are Hellenistic in date. There is a very small risk that they may have been de-contextualised as no large-scale excavations have occurred and the *sabakheen* remove material rather than displace it.

The exact location of ancient Metelis is still unconfirmed. The excavations at Kom al-Ahmer

aim to retrieve material evidence to validate the theory that the *nome* capital may have been located at the site. The theory is supported by the evidence collected up to now: the size of the site, the presence of the Roman baths, the evidence for occupation of the site during the Arab period and the written evidence stating that Metelis was inhabited until the tenth century A.D. In addition, the close proximity to Kom Wasit is critical if we consider the existence of a similar case of migration in the Eastern Delta, that of Mendes and Thmuis. Therefore, it is likely to think that the abandonment of Kom Wasit was followed by the emergence of another settlement that could take its place, especially if it concerned a *nome* capital and the administration of the area.

The investigation of the sites of the Western Delta, particularly those located in the hinterland of Alexandria, is pivotal to the understanding of the administration of the area, trade routes and urbanisation. The dynamics of interaction between the cities of the Delta and the Mediterranean could be better documented through the examination of the surviving sites. The constant threat posed by reclamation of agricultural land by locals and frequent episodes of looting reduce the possibilities for extensive recording. Kom al-Ahmer and Kom Wasit represent an example of “forgotten” archaeological heritage. The lack of research does not allow for well documented theorisation of their past relationship and therefore impels the continuation of the archaeological excavations in order to provide more tangible evidence for the theory of abandonment and migration. The next excavation season of the Kom al-Ahmer – Kom Wasit Archaeological Project is planning to work at both sites in 2014 and represents an opportunity to explore further the context of the sites and assess evidence for a mass migration, as well as strengthening the dating sequence. This will be the first legal excavation taking place at Kom Wasit since inspector Habachi’s campaign in the 1940s.

Centro Archeologico Italo-Egiziano

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