

NOTES FROM THE LAND OF FORGETTING

Holger Gladys, September 26, 2021



El-Qāhirah as printed in 932 AH / 1525 CE in the *Kitab-i Bahriye*, the Book of Navigation. Author's name given on fol. 376b as Ra'is al-Bahr Piri ibn Muhammad; author dates preferred by (Walters) cataloger: d. 962 AH / 1555 CE. Walters Art Museum, W.658, fol 17b, © 2011 Walters Art Museum, used under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 license ¹

¹ David Rumsey Historical Map Collection www.davidrumsey.com

For quite some time, I've nurtured an amateurish fascination for historical maps, particularly for the *Kitab-i Bahriye*, the Book of Navigation by the commander at sea Ra'īs al-Baḥr Pīrī ibn Muḥammad. The precious book from the early 16th century is a guide for seafarers and navigators. The comprehensive work by Pīrī Ra'īs collects detailed cartographic and geographical information about the coastlines and islands of the Mediterranean basin, the sea towns and ports for ships to safely berth, and among others, techniques of navigation and navigation-related information. Since *El-Qāhirah*, the city of Cairo, lies at the southern tip of the Nile Delta, at some 200 km south of the Mediterranean coastline, it does not seem to fit the topical range. Yet reaching its golden age in the 14th century, the center of the Islamic world is apparently portrayed as well.

It has been said that Pīrī Ra'īs "keenly observed the places he visited and drew upon his personal notes as well as information and documents he obtained from other travelers."² Folio 305a of the *Kitab-i Bahriye* shows *El-Qāhirah* in safe distance from the winding Nile. The cartographic depiction of *El-Qāhirah* is likewise accurate and imaginative. Every architectural and landscape component seems to be carefully positioned, contributing to a well-balanced living environment. The walled city is densely populated and positioned away from the Nile towards the edge of the valley's floodplain, close to the 180-meter-high El-Mokattam plateau. The Islamic-era burial grounds appear on the sandy surfaces to the east of the city, and the fertile land, a domesticated landscape with palm groves and vegetable gardens; to the west, reaching down to the riverbanks. We may notice the aqueduct from the Ayyūbid period connecting the citadel, identify the mausoleum of El-Imam el-Shafī'i, distinguish the earlier center of administrative and economic power Fustāṭ, and the Nile port Būlāq, and certainly, we can all spot the Pharaonic necropolis with the three large pyramids on the western banks of the Nile.

As we may anticipate, the idyllic balance of this living environment is long gone. The primate city that had been once compact and defined, stretches and sprawls today over a distance of 110 km from east to west. In the name of progress, the initial modernization process and the construction of numerous new towns at Cairo's fringes merged the city into a shapeless, supersize agglomeration. The modernist ideal of functional zoning and compounding clings to each of the new extensions, and none of these additions and transformations would embrace the *tabula scripta*, or the inscribed properties of the territories' pluriform topographies and ecologies.

The land along the Nile was once so attractive that the Cairene elite claimed it for their palaces, which were situated amidst the verdant vegetation. Yet the lush countryside was not to stay. Since the mid-19th century, building on farmland has become increasingly acceptable. From 1863 onwards, a new Khedival Cairo emerged on this prime agricultural land. It started as a low-density development, dividing the land into building plots, roads and vistas, ambient arrangements based on French/Italian elective affinities. Yet the pioneer development of mainly villas with lavish gardens was short-lived. Very soon, solid apartment buildings and department stores would replace the early planning. Most of the pleasing gardens disappeared as this new part of town densified and expanded outwards. Similar developments echo in the

² Ibrahim Yilmaz (2010) *The Kitab-i Bahriye* (Book of Navigation) of Piri Reis in The Cartographic Journal, The World of Mapping, Volume 47, 2010 - Issue 3, Pages 278-283 | Published online: 18 Jul 2013

Giza district of Mohandisīn, again erected on precious farmland, and as a concept, eventually rationalized in other places. Modern normative urban planning does not include the rural in its thinking. Ideologically, the modern city dominates the traditional countryside. It appears that from the 1950s onwards, building on green land at the fringes of the ever-expanding city rapidly increased through both planned and unplanned developments, each in their own right and with their own shortcomings.

When architectural insight and ambition is neglected, imagination freezes under the hands of the technical engineer. Current infrastructural transformations resemble the 1960s ideal of the automotive city. The irreversible restructuring and rescaling of primary road infrastructure has a great impact on the overall structure of today's metropolitan conurbation. New traffic arteries, widened throughways, and roadway bridges degrade the densely populated areas in central parts of the agglomeration, externalizing the social and ecological costs. Hardly a day passes without a news avalanche over tree removals, mainly along the roads in more sensitive locations in historical, as well as much younger, districts.

In this landscape, characterized by architectural indifference and bureaucratic inertia, Bustan Bayt Yakan at El-Darb Al-Ahmar becomes a reminder that something essential keeps disappearing from the urban constellation. The burgeoning herb garden in the courtyard of Ola Said's and Alaa El-Habashi's 16th century house is an unmistakable gem. Though privately owned, the house and garden serve the close-by, as well as the broader, community. The courtyard with the herb garden is fundamentally a meeting place for neighbors and researchers, who are willing to gather, enjoy and learn. In essence, it is a place of exchange. Have we truly forgotten that cities are more than spaces of accumulation and transit?

I wonder if the experience of the courtyard's captivating commonality is essentially limited to its specific context and modest scale, or would it be possible to rescale the concept of collectiveness towards the size of the entire metropolis. What would such an attempt produce? How would the agglomeration change if major unused areas between and around the current settlements would turn into flourishing foodscapes³, food forests and fruit gardens; and if this transformation would be promoted as an aesthetic, productive and necessary common infrastructure that is appropriate in such an arid climate?⁴

The impressive map by Pīrī Ra'īs shows us an urbanity that, together with the adjoining productive landscape, formed a coherent living environment; leaving us to ponder over how to envision a contemporary version of this historic ideal. Equally, for the benefit of present and future generations, such an alternative scenario may promote much needed additions to the current transformation process, all the while demanding rapid advances with respect to the great climatic and ecological urgencies of our time.

³ Han Wiskerke, Saline Verhoeven (2018) *Flourishing Foodscapes: Designing City-region Food Systems*. Valiz Publisher.

⁴ Cornelia Redeker, Monique Jüttner (2020) *Landscaping Egypt: From the Aesthetic to the Productive*. Jovis Verlag.