Mapping fungal ignorance: Checklists of fungi and fungal-like organisms known for Egypt in two centuries

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ABSTRACT

Information concerning biodiversity and conservation of plants and animals in Egypt are fully available, but for fungi and fungus-like organisms (other organisms traditionally studied by mycologists), still missing and overlooked till 2010 when Abdel-Azeem published a full review of the history of mycology in Egypt, together with a checklist of 2281 species of fungi for the country, and an assessment of future perspectives for mycology in Egypt. Until that review, information about fungi from Egypt had been fragmentary and highly dispersed in many often obscure and difficult to obtain publications. Abdel-Azeem’s checklist greatly increased the number of fungi recorded from the country and, significantly, is the first fully documented checklist of fungi for any country in the Arabic speaking world. Records of fungi in Egypt from the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) database (4491 occurrences represented by 602 taxa), and that of the former International Mycological Institute fungal reference collection (IMI) (650 species) were also considered. Updated checklists of fungi are very limited in Egypt even they are one of the most important and critical tool for conservation. With this Mini-review we aim to provide an up-to-date overview on the recent developments on biodiversity and documentation of fungi and fungus-like organisms in Egypt. The documentation of fungal diversity in Egypt is urgently needed because natural habitats worldwide are being lost on a large scale through climate change and to promote proper exploration as a tool to facilitate fungal identification and to aid conceptualization and justification of future research projects.

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Introduction

To date, worldwide, approximately 135,000 species of fungi have been described (Kirk 2019). Total global fungal diversity is, however, undoubtedly much greater. A figure of 1.5 million species (Hawksworth 1991) was, for many years, used as a working estimate. Currently, most mycologists believe the number is even greater, with a conservative estimate now placed in the range of 2.2–3.8 million species (Hawksworth and Lücking 2017).

One of the most important fungal conservation steps is update your information concerning what are you going to conserve. How many species of fungi are there in Egypt? That is our important question!
Very little information about fungi from the Middle East and North Africa is currently available online. For most countries within this region, the relevant published information is scattered and often difficult to access.

As previously mentioned, the information concerning the fungi of Egypt is still incomplete and cannot be fully documented without an updated checklist of all taxa reported for the country.

The goal of the present study is to gather the information available on fungal species diversity for Egypt, based on records available in scientific publications and to assess the efforts carried by mycologists to document fungi in Egypt since (1813).

**How many checklists in Egypt?**

Taxonomy requires continual updates and checklists are important tools in taxonomy, systematics and conservation (Söderström et al. 2007, 2008; Abdel-Azeem and Salem 2013). Records of Egyptian fungi are scattered through a wide array of journals, books, and dissertations, but preliminary annotated checklists and compilations are not all readily available and this is the main reason that Egypt lacks recent checklists (Abdel-Azeem et al. 2020).

Saprobic and phytopathogenic fungi on wild and domesticated plants of economic importance have been attracted the attention of many researchers in the late 19th and early 20th century in Egypt e.g. Delile (1813), Decaisne (1835), Thüemen (1878, 1879, 1880), Ascherson (1879), Roumeguère (1881, 1887), Patouillard (1895), Sickenberger (1901), Magnus (1910), Fletcher (1902), Reichert (1921), Fahmy (1923), Shearer (1924), Britton-Jones (1922, 1923, 1925), Bishara (1928) and Melchers (1931). Delile (1913) described the gastromycete, now known as *Itajahya rosea* (syn. *Phallus roseus*) which he had collected in Damietta and Assiut in 1798 and 1799, respectively (Abdel-Azeem 2010).

The credit of the first list of fungi for the Nile Valley should be given to Reichert and Melchers. They considered as the pioneer scientists in the documentation of the local mycobiota.

The Polish born Israel Reichert (1891–1975) went to study in Germany around the First World War. There he prepared a doctoral thesis entitled ‘Die Pilzflora Ägypten’, in which he listed 237 species; among the latter 42 were then proposed as being new to science (Reichert 1921). The corresponding specimens of the reported fungi had been collected earlier by the famous German biologist C. G. Ehrenberg (1795-1856) during his botanical exploration of the Middle East region. Unfortunately, none of his specimens were retained in Egypt, or if they were, there is no record of their whereabouts today. However, earlier material collected before 1914 was present in the Botanisches Museum in Berlin-Dahlem, which Reichert used when compiling his list of (1921), but it is not known if these specimens survived World War II.

In (1927), the American phytopathologist Leo E. Melchers visited the Nile Valley upon an invitation by the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture as chief mycologist for 18 months. During his stay he met a series of local difficulties such as the absence of records referring to the occurrence, distribution, or dates of any mycological observations conducted previously by any investigator in Egypt. Melchers also underlined the absence of a local mycological reference collection. During his stay he could establish a notable checklist of about 345 fungal species, in particular of taxa responsible for plant diseases. Melchers published this notable checklist upon his return to the States (Melchers 1931).

In (1963) and (1966), Abas Fathy El-Helaly (Faculty of Agriculture, Alexandria University) and his co-workers updated the checklist of Melchers by surveying plant diseases and pathogenic organisms in Egypt (UAR).

Few decades later, Sammy M. El-Abyad (Faculty of Science, Cairo University) and Amira Abu-Taleb (1993), were the first local mycologists to summarize the habitat diversity of fungi reported from Egypt. Few years later, El-Abyad (1997) also achieved his pioneering checklist of the local mycoflora (Mycobiota): a total of 1246 species of fungi were then reported. Among the latter, 173 names referred to the subdivisions Mastigomycotina, 41 to Zygomyctina, 222 to Ascomycotina, 143 to Basidiomycotina, and finally 667 to Deuteromycotina.

In this major checklist, different ecological and taxonomic groups were not, however, separated; this concerned in particular the protozoan fungal analogues, as the Myxomycota and the Plasmodiophoromycota, the lichens, yeasts, aquatic and marine fungi, the entomopathogenic and nematophagous species and finally the mycorrhizal ones. Besides, a large number of taxa either reported in routine isolations or as novel species, proved to be completely absent from his list. These omissions may have resulted from the inability of the authors to trace the majority of the relevant references; this difficulty is actually regarded as the basic reason why updated information documenting the fungi of Egypt is presently strongly needed.

In 2003, Ahmed M. Abdel-Azeem (Faculty of Science, Suez Canal University) in his PhD thesis, surveyed all the available data and prepared a preliminary checklist for 262 ascosporic taxa reported from soil as well as many other habitats in Egypt. He recorded 69 taxa in his study which considered the first study focusing mainly on the ascosporic forms. Abdel-Azeem recorded 19 new records (Moustafa and Abdel-Azeem 2006) with a novel taxon to the science (Moustafa and Abdel-Azeem 2008).

The first checklist on genus *Chaetomium* recovered from different habitats in Egypt with 53 species and one variety with a dichotomous key published by Moustafa and
Abdel-Azeem (2005).

Abdul Wahid F. Moustafa (Faculty of Science, Suez Canal University) in (2006), published an updated checklist of Zygomyctaceous fungi in Egypt for the first time in the country.

In 2010, a fully revised checklist of the fungi of the Nile Valley including the lichen-forming forms increased the former total number up to 2281 by Abdel-Azeem. This figure is approximately double of what had been previously catalogued by El-Abnyad (1997). When the species richness of the different relevant systematic and ecological groups in this country is compared with the species richness of the same entities elsewhere, it clearly appears that knowledge of the Egyptianian groups is still fragmentary. This is particularly evident for the following entities: Agaricales, Glomeromycota, yeasts, lichen-forming, nematode-trapping, entomopathogenic, marine, fresh-water and coprophilous fungi. For some other groups, like the desert and thermophilic fungi, it is already clear that the Nile Valley is a biodiversity hot-spot. It should also be noted that few other entities, such as the Trichomycetes and the black yeasts, have still not yet been locally investigated.

In 2011 and based on the results of Abdel-Azeem’s thesis in 2003, Moustafa and Abdel-Azeem recorded a range of 310 taxa that could be representing the second updated checklist of Ascomycota in Egypt. In their treatment, concern was given to ascomycetous fungi of almost all terricolous substrates while phytopathogenic and aquatic forms are not included.

A checklist of sixty-one taxa, including 3 varieties, belonging to 29 genera of protozoan fungus-like analogues was came to the light with a dichotomous key by Ahmed M. Abdel-Azeem and Fatima M. Salem (2013).

In (1986), late professor Magdy Khalil Bagy (Faculty of Science, Assiut University) and his coworkers, studied the coprophilous fungi of different animal substrates for the first time in Egypt (Bagy and El-Sharouny 1985; Bagy et al. 1985, 1986). In 2015, Abdel-Azeem and Salem published a checklist with a provisional key of coprophilous fungi in arid Sinai based on phenotypic criteria. Taxa distributed within 61 species and 39 genera with Coprinopsis stercorea as a new record for Egypt.

Nivien Nafady (Faculty of Science, Assiut University), Ahmed Abdel-Azeem and Fatima Salem (Nafady et al. 2016), surveyed information about arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) and was abstracted based on an intensive search of publications, thesis, and preliminary annotated checklists and compilations. They reported forty-eight taxa belonging to one class (Glomeromycetes), four orders (Archaeosporales, Diversisporales, Glomerales and Paraglomerales) and six families (Acaulosporaceae, Archaeosporaceae, Entrophosporaceae, Gigasporaceae, Glomeraeace and Pacisporaceae) of golmeromycota in Egypt.

In 2016, Esraa A. Soliman (undergraduate student, Faculty of Science, Suez Canal University) with her professor Ahmed Abdel-Azeem and his co-workers published a revised checklist of fungi recorded in Egypt through a revision of 13 publications published since 1813 to 1931. They reported 340 taxa and were taxonomically re-evaluated. Published checklist included two kingdoms and three major groups: zygomycetes (1 spp.), ascomycetes (124 spp.), basidiomycetes (197 spp.) and chromistian fungal analogues (18 species). Taxa of true fungi are distributed among three phyla, ten classes, 38 orders, and 67 families, while Chromistean fungal analogues distributed in only one phylum, two orders and three families.

Recently, Abdel-Azeem and his co-workers (2020) published the first check list on genus Aspergillus in Egypt. They recorded a range of 150 taxa that could be representing that genus in Egypt and recorded taxa were assigned to 5 subgenera and 25 sections. They provided a comprehensive checklist of species with a provisional key to the identification of reported taxa is given.

How many species of fungi in Egypt?
In his recent estimate, Abdel-Azeem (2020) recorded 2477 species of fungi in Egypt, a figure apparently exceeding that of the higher plants developing in this country. This marked figure resulted from an exhaustive revision of all the existing literature and information sources established since the year 1813 up to the middle of the current one by Abdel-Azeem. On the kingdom level, the group Fungi comes first by its 2230 species; this is followed by the Chromistean fungal analogues (186) and the less provided Protozoan fungal analogues: 61. The Ascomycota form the major largest group within this checklist with about 1762 species; among the latter 158 units are lichen-forming and about 1000 are still presently known only by their conidial (asexual) states. The remaining recorded units are distributed in the following manner: 90 Chytridiomycota, 27 Blastocladiales, 70 Zygomycota, 48 Glomeraeace, and 233 to Basidiomycota.

Fungal documentation and conservation in Egypt
Egypt in general, hosts a rich biological diversity of fungi. Conservation of nature by ancient Egyptians was recorded on walls of temples and papyrus sheets. Egypt, known as the cradle of civilisation, has documented its fascination with fungi, when ancient Egyptians produced a number of hieroglyphic depictions of psychedelic mushrooms on temple’s walls and through hieroglyphic texts throughout the country (Abdel-Azeem 2010). In contemporary Egypt, however, this is not the case. The documentation of activities related to fungi, whether of collection,
conservation, bioprospecting or biodiversity are extremely limited.

Our survey showed that only fifteen checklists of Egyptian fungi were produced in the last two centuries.

In Egypt, the impact of human activities on fungal diversity is unquantified, and the need of fungal conservation is often ignored. Some threats can already be identified; loss of habitat, medicinal plants over-collection, climate change, growth of human population/urbanisation, the Nile’s river pollution, continuous bioprospecting in the harsh ecosystems (desert, salt marshes, etc.). Other threats doubtless exist.

In Egypt, as a pioneer country in the Middle East and North of Africa which has a society for fungal conservation (Arab Society for Fungal Conservation), it is an important example in explaining the wealth of fungi found there, but it is also an indication that fungal conservation needs encouragement and funding so that surveying, systematic exploration can be carried out, inventories made, and more updated checklists urgently needed. In most cases, however, the lack or shortage of information about diversity, documentation of Egyptian fungi and populations sets conservation status evaluations as either “not evaluated” or “data deficient”.

Conflict of interest
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript.

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