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# Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis

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# Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis

An exhibition on the occasion of the
Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project

## Foreword

Dakhleh, the "inner" of the oases to the West of Luxor is one of the most important Oases of the Western Desert. It has the main important archaeological sites including a town of the Old Kingdom and its associated necropolis, near the modern village of Balat, which show that the Egyptians' control extended more than 350 km west of the Nile Valley into the Western Desert from a very early period through the Pharaonic to the Greek and Roman periods. It also has a number of important Coptic and Islamic sites. Therefore you can smell the history of Egypt in this wonderful Oasis.

Since 1978 Antony J. Mills works on the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP). The small exhibition *Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis* at the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, is held on the occasion of the Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, held 3-6 June in Cairo. This exhibition importantly reflects the work of Olaf Kaper (Leiden University), Fred Leemhuis (Groningen University) and is supported by the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo. We would like to extend our gratitude to them for this very informative exhibition and its beautifully illustrated catalogue.

Dr Wafaa el Saddik
Director of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo

The present publication is an introduction to the history of the Dakhleh Oasis and a catalogue to the temporary exhibition *Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis*.

The compilers have chosen objects to reflect significant periods from the Oasis' history. For practical reasons, it has not been possible to include objects from prehistoric periods. This omission is partly compensated by an elaborate section on prehistory in the historical outline.

# Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis

## An exhibition on the occasion of the Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project

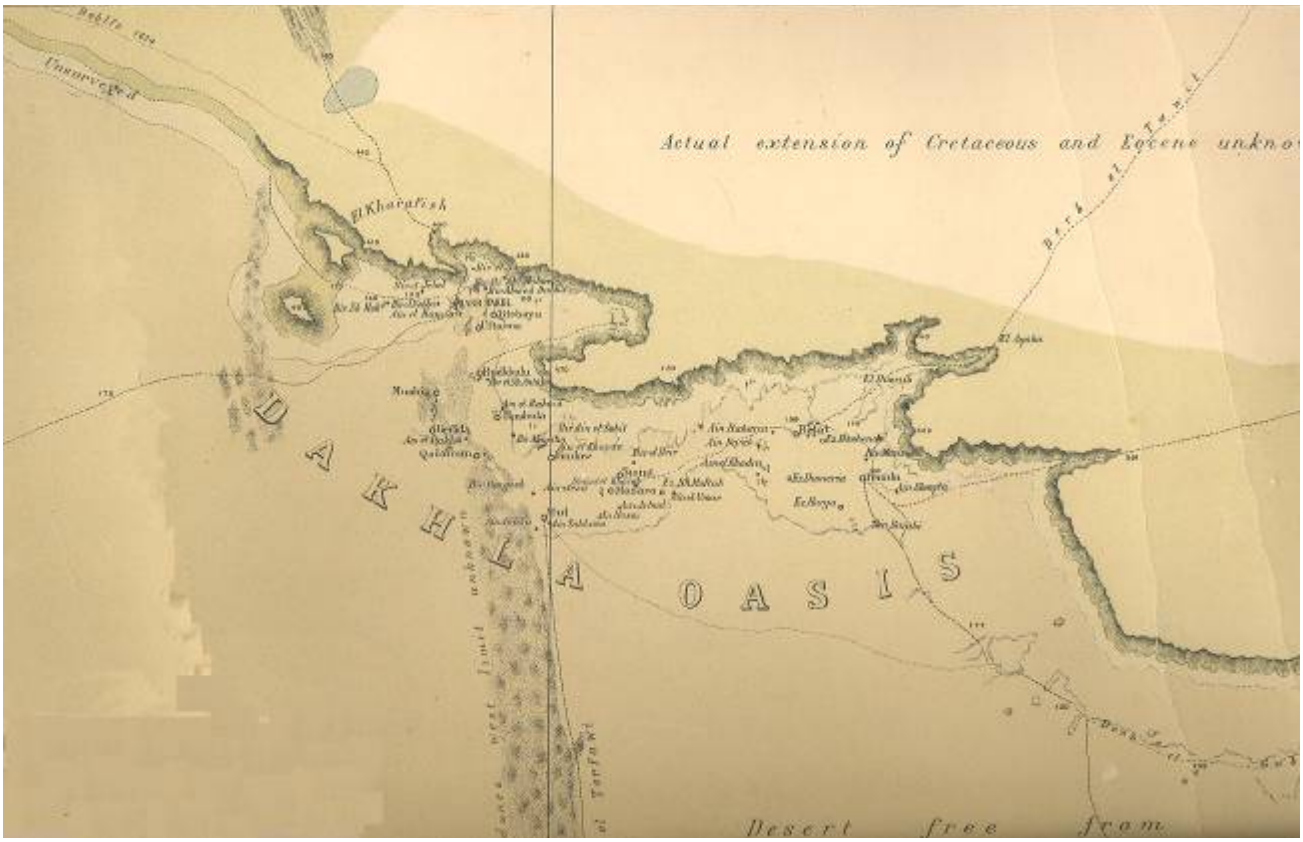
### The Dakhleh Oasis: an exceptional region in Egypt

Dakhleh Oasis is situated in the Western Desert of Egypt, 350 km from the Nile Valley, on the same latitude as Luxor. The oasis comprises around 2000 square kilometres, measuring 80 km from east to west and 25 km from north to south. Al-Dakhleh, "the inner" oasis, lies west of al-Kharga, "the outer" oasis and southeast of Farafra, known collectively as the "New Valley" (*al-Wadi al-Gedid*). In Pharaonic inscriptions Dakhleh and Kharga were referred to collectively as *Kenmet* or "the Southern Oasis". The oases lie in geological depressions in the desert floor – a basin which was called *wehat*, "cauldron" in ancient Egyptian as it is still in Arabic. The Greeks passed the word on as "oasis" into modern languages.

North of the Dakhleh Oasis, an escarpment rises up to four hundred metres above the fields and villages. To the south, east, and west, the rising floor of the depression merges more gradually with the dune landscape of the eastern Sahara.

The Greek historian Herodotus called the oases "Islands of the Blessed", and they are indeed like islands of human habitation within one of the most forbidding arid regions on earth. A series of artesian springs in these oases provides a constant flow of water from a subterranean reservoir, allowing humans, animals and plants to exist in the otherwise waterless desert – so vast and inimical that, according to Herodotus, it swallowed Cambyses' army of 50,000 troops.

Throughout the millennia Dakhleh has always been an exceptional place. Over time its inhabitants have always had to adapt to the natural environment which differed significantly from that of the Nile Valley, but from the moment when people first settled in the oasis in prehistoric times, man has found Dakhleh a particularly attractive place to live.



Only a handful of modern explorers or archaeologists had visited the oasis before the Egyptian archaeologist Ahmed Fakhry started excavations in Dakhleh at the end of the 1960s, after he had worked in all the other oases of the Western Desert.

The enthusiastic accounts of his findings sparked the interest of other Egyptologists. As a result Anthony J. Mills of the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada and Serge Sauneron of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) in Cairo asked for concessions in the oasis. The IFAO began working in the oasis in 1977 and is today still excavating the Old Kingdom sites of Balat and Ain Asil, now under the direction of Georges Soukiassian. Anthony Mills founded the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) together with George Freeman of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities, which started working in the oasis in 1978.

*DOP team members at dinner*

## Dakhleh Oasis Project: research through a broad spectre of disciplines

Since 1978 the increasingly international team of the DOP has carried out research in the oasis annually. Its initial aim was to conduct a surface archaeological survey on foot of the entire oasis, which lasted until 1983. Several hundred archaeological sites were located and described, including prehistoric camp sites, settlements and cemeteries from all different periods. After 1983 selected sites were subjected to further investigation through excavations. The DOP has always consistently studied the sites within the context of the region as a whole, and with an eye to the natural environment.

The aim of DOP is to understand the relationship between human activity and environmental change throughout the 250,000 years of man's activity in this isolated and climatically sensitive region. It is a regional study, for it is only on this broader basis that the patterns of human cultural evolution can become clear. Specialists in the fields of archaeology, palaeontology, geology, DNA research, Egyptology, papyrology, and linguistics, join together to help build up a multi-faceted picture of life in the oasis from prehistoric times to the present day.

The interdisciplinary study of such a well-defined and relatively large area is unique in Egyptian archaeology, and it has led to a number of remarkable results. Among these are not only the archaeological, textual, and pictorial material which has been found *in situ*, but also insights into the interaction between the composition of past populations and the shaping of the environment.

Interaction between environmental change and human activity has three focal points in the study of Dakhleh Oasis. In prehistoric times man and animals migrated in response to climatic wet and dry cycles. After man started to settle permanently in the oasis in late prehistory, water management became key to the survival and life quality of the oasis dwellers. A large number of Roman Period sites in the oasis show – through archaeological, textual, and osteological evidence – how heavy agricultural development and irrigation impacted soil and water supplies and, in turn, their ability to support life.

## Prehistory: a lush garden in a changing environment

During the Pleistocene Era (two million to ten thousand years ago) the Sahara region was a lush savannah, where animals like the gazelle, zebra, buffalo, hyena, ostrich, giraffe and elephant roamed. Dakhleh was a haven where humans came to quench their thirst at lakes and marshes, or to hunt the animals that also came there to drink. Three large lakes and a number of smaller bodies of water were located in and around the present site of the oasis, and these were home for catfish, hippopotamus, freshwater snails and water birds. Whereas the rainfall was sufficient to support a modest number of acacia trees on the plains, the more abundant water supplies at the centre of the oasis supported a far greater diversity of trees.

Our distant ancestors, Early Stone Age hominids, also found Dakhleh a good place to visit. The Acheulians – *homo erectus* who used a particular type of hand axes – chose sites within easy reach of water to congregate. On the plain and in the tropical forest of those days they hunted the wild game and gathered fruit and edible wild plants. Their presence is marked by the distinctive stone tools and weapons which they left at now long-extinct sources of water.

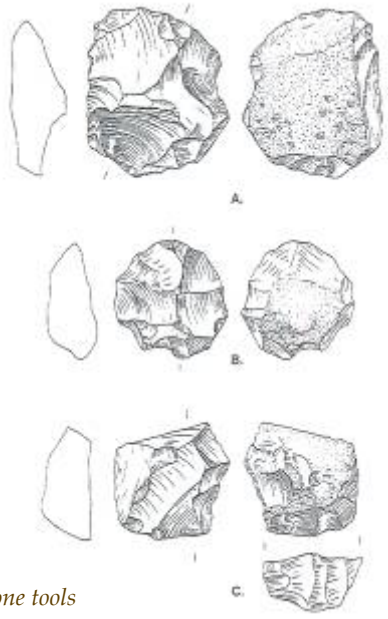
Acheulian tools continued to stay in use for over a million years, as did the Acheulian life style of following the movements of the animals and the rains. The sites of Pleistocene springs now appear as steep hills in the landscape, as wind erosion has taken away the softer sandstone and claystone around the calciferous spring sediments. Similarly, erosion gave yardangs (sandstone outcrops) their shape because their tops consist of a hard material. Dissolved eroded limestone, fed into a lake by streams and settled to the lake bottom, now lies atop yardangs. Within this sediment fossil bones and prehistoric tools from this early period can be found. Maxine Kleindienst has pioneered the research of such sites around Dakhleh, greatly expanding our understanding of the Acheulians and the environment they lived in.

*Prehistoric findspot outside Dakhleh Oasis*

The Acheulians were not the only people to leave their stone tools in and around Dakhleh. During the Middle Stone Age, the place of *homo erectus* was gradually taken worldwide by *homo sapiens*, a process that was completed around 200,000 years ago. At the same time, stone tools became consistently smaller, shrinking to the size of microliths and reflecting a larger mobility of the people who produced them. They preferred the savannah and the Dakhleh Oasis to the Nile Valley, which was at that time a region of swamps inhabited by insects and big fauna, with a hot and humid climate. Between 70,000 and 40,000 years ago, the Aterian culture flourished in North Africa. Alicia Hawkins has studied these Middle Stone Age people who produced exquisitely fashioned laurel-shaped stone tools with tangs to attach them to a handle.

About 60,000 years ago the climate in North Africa became drier. Even though this dry spell was interspersed with a few moister periods, the Sahara changed from a savannah into a desert. In these tough conditions, the Sheikh Mabruk culture, identified by Marcia Wiseman, probably survived in smaller, more mobile groups. The stone tools they produced looked much less sophisticated than those of their forebears. They lived at temporary campsites near the shrinking water supplies between 40,000 and 20,000 years ago.

At Dakhleh the subterranean water supplies continued to form a haven for humans and animals. Whether or not human habitation and the use of fire accelerated the desertification of the Sahara is still a matter of debate, as is the question whether there was human habitation in the Western Desert between 20,000 and 10,000 years ago. Attestations of human presence in this period have yet to be found.




*Stone tools*

The Holocene Era began around 12,000 years ago and saw a retreat of glaciers and a northward move of monsoons. While catastrophic floods surged through the Nile Valley, the rains turned parts of the Sahara into grassy plains again, allowing nomadic hunter-gatherers to forage widely. Now for the first time people began to build settlements for more permanent use – if perhaps only seasonal – than the temporary campsites of previous times. Mary MacDonald is investigating small circles of vertical sandstone slabs with low-lying floors. These were huts which were probably roofed over with perishable material and had storage bins attached. Eggshell beads and grinding stones were found at these sites. Analysis of charred plant remains by Ursula Thanheiser and of animal bones by Rufus C. Churcher has shown that no domesticated plants or animals were present.

*Hut remains*

2000 years later, the Bashendi people built villages of up to two hundred huts, which were larger and more elaborate in design and seem to have been inhabited primarily during winter. The animal bones found at these sites are mostly from domesticated cows and goats, a proof that these people were pastoralists. They produced stone tools, beads, woven mats and pottery. These indicators of the Neolithic Revolution are almost a millennium older than the oldest examples from the Nile Valley, and constitute the earliest proof of people experimenting with (semi-) permanent settlement in Egypt. The Bashendi have also left petroglyphs or rock art suggesting they attempted to keep all sorts of animals captive. These include depictions of cattle pens and of tethered giraffes and antelopes.

*Rock art: animals and female figures*

More difficult to understand are the images of masked women, interpreted as (statues of) goddesses by Lech Krzyzaniak. The depiction of masks in rock art, not only at Dakhleh but also at several Saharan sites, suggests that the Pharaonic practice of priests donning masks has roots deep in prehistory. The number of people and cattle that were housed in the huts and corrals, as well as the rock drawings, suggest the existence of complex social structures. Carbon dating has shown that predynastic artefacts found in Dakhleh, such as specific types of pottery and arrowheads, were used 500 to 2000 years before they appeared in the Nile Valley. This strongly suggests that the inhabitants of the Western Desert introduced these items to the Nile Valley.

The climate in the Sahara of 7000 years ago must have been similar to that of present-day East Africa, and so also the fauna: elephant, giraffe, hippopotamus, lion, hyena, buffalo, antelope, ostrich and zebra, living in a vast open landscape of grasslands, with watering holes decreasing and increasing with the rains. At the time when the Bashendi people depicted these animals and built their huts, Dakhleh enjoyed a particularly favourable rainfall. But by 6500 years ago the climate was growing drier and desertification had again set in. Cattle-herding was probably a response to the environmental stress which made wild game less abundantly available. Ironically, it contributed to the extirpation of wild animals: the diminishing water holes were used by people and their cattle, to the exclusion of other animals. Dakhleh served as a haven for a large variety of animals for tens of thousands of years, but cattle-herding humans eventually pushed them out.

Around 6000 years ago the worsening drought brought about a migration: the oases and the Nile Valley now became the only places in the Sahara where water is found in a sufficient quantity to support permanent human habitation. The flow of the Nile grew tamer and this compelled the Nile Valley dwellers to start herding in order to supplement their traditional hunting and fishing strategies. People fleeing the drying Sahara arrived in the Valley, and it is likely that people fleeing from the Eastern Desert and the Levant for the same reason arrived there at the same time. This gathering of people and cultures in the Nile Valley started the Neolithic Revolution, which eventually led to the birth of Egyptian civilisation.

Dakhleh played a pivotal role in this development. Human culture continued to thrive in the oasis while other sites in the Western Desert had to be abandoned. Its location made it a natural place of congregation for people who were driven out of the desert by lack of water. But its capacity was not large enough to support all migrating Saharan dwellers, and many must have migrated further to the Nile Valley. The Western Desert, more in particular the Dakhleh Oasis, fostered a precursor of the Nile Valley civilisation – which had a major influence on the emerging Pharaonic culture.

*Old Kingdom mastaba at Balat*

*Old Kingdom observation post outside the oasis*

## The Old Kingdom: the king's stepping stone for international trade

The Bashendi culture was superseded in Dakhleh by the Sheikh Muftah culture, which appears to have been more attached to the oasis due to the ever-increasing aridity. The oldest burials in Dakhleh date back to this prehistoric culture, between 5000 and 4000 years ago. In the Nile Valley economic prosperity and social complexity greatly increased during the Predynastic Period and the Old Kingdom. Although the Sheikh Muftah culture stayed in contact with the Nile Valley it did not mirror its developments.

The Old Kingdom Egyptians expanded their territory into Nubia and Syria-Palestine, and around 2550 BCE, into the Western Desert. Their initial purpose seems to have been to search for natural resources in the surrounding desert. Technologically advanced, they dominated the oasis dwellers and imposed on them Pharaonic culture. It meant an abrupt end to the Prehistoric Period in Dakhleh and to the simple use of the available resources of the oasis. From this time on the natural environment was to be purposefully adapted and exploited for human use.

That Dakhleh was an important centre of Old Kingdom activity is clear from the site of Ain Asil, a city first discovered by Ahmed Fakhry and subsequently excavated by French archaeologists. Eight successive governors of the oasis resided here and were buried in mastaba tombs. The city was originally a fortified garrison, surrounded by a defensive mud brick wall with watchtowers. It soon spread outside of the walls and the inhabitants seem to have enjoyed a high standard of living. The palace of the oasis governors has been unearthed, including funerary chapels dedicated to the deceased governors, storerooms and administrative quarters. The clay tablets found here, with texts written in cursive hieroglyphs (catalogue no. 1), are unique in Egypt.

On hilltops to the east and south of the oasis, a chain of observation posts manned by soldiers formed a defensive line, but against whom is still unclear. The graffiti left by these soldiers include sandals and footprints, pubic triangles, animals, human figures (including a depiction of a soldier), and rows of notches that were probably scratched to count the days. Olaf Kaper, epigrapher of the DOP, studies these graffiti together with Harco Willems.

Most Old Kingdom settlements are located in the western end of the oasis near a string of now extinct spring mounds. Some of them must have been rural communities that supplied the population with foodstuffs. At Ain el-Gazzareen, a Fifth and Sixth Dynasty village is being excavated by the director and founder of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, Anthony Mills. Among the finds are a bakery and many flint fragments, indicating that flint tools were widely produced and used during the Old Kingdom. Aided by the magnetometer survey of Tatyana Smekalova a structure has been discovered that is probably a community temple. Seal impressions from the site indicate that close relations were maintained with the capital of the oasis, Ain Asil.

*Flint tools, Sheikh Muftah culture, Old Kingdom*

Dakhleh was more than a provincial outpost in the Old Kingdom. From the size of its settlements, which were ruled over by a high official from the Nile Valley and protected by soldiers, it has become clear in recent years that the oasis served as a vital entrepot for trading expeditions to other parts of Africa. Rudolph Kuper and his team of the Heinrich Barth Institute in Cologne have studied the remains of water jars positioned along caravan routes outside the oasis. Some of this pottery dates back to the Old Kingdom, but the trails remained in use in later times.

Although the precise chain of events is still unclear, the destruction of the prosperity at Old Kingdom Ain Asil was precipitated deliberately. The governor's palace was burnt down and plundered, never to be rebuilt. During the First Intermediate Period the settlement continued to function without a central authority, as happened also in the Nile Valley at this time. Perhaps there was a local uprising, but it seems that the indigenous Sheikh Muftah people are not to be blamed. Some evidence for the presence of the Sheikh Muftah people at Old Kingdom sites has been found, but it seems that they had been acculturated before the end of this period, after which they disappear from view.

*Modern irrigation*

## The Pharaonic Period: an exotic outpost

At the moment there is a gap in the archaeological record in Dakhleh for the Middle Kingdom. There are a few tombs and petroglyphs, but information for this period on the oasis comes mainly from the written records from the Nile Valley. These show that contact with the oasis in some form or other was being maintained.

During the early Eighteenth Dynasty, the oasis seems to have intensified its contact with the Valley. It delivered its produce to the great temple of Karnak, which shows that the oasis was a self-sufficient agricultural enclave that was able at this time to export its surplus. Oasis products such as figs, dates and wine were highly appreciated in the Nile Valley. Wine from the Dakhleh Oasis is first mentioned in the reign of Akhenaten, but this industry is only partly documented archaeologically. Colin Hope has identified the heavy ceramic jars from the New Kingdom that contained the highly praised beverage.

In the late New Kingdom, and occasionally in the ensuing periods, there is evidence that the oasis was used as a place of banishment and exile.

Evidence from the Third Intermediate Period is now being accumulated increasingly. Two stelae from Mut have been in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, since 1894. Other inscriptions and stelae have since been found at Mut el-Kharab (e.g. catalogue no. 3), especially during the recent excavations by Colin Hope. The current excavations at Amheida have also yielded an intact hieratic stela from this period, as well has sundry fragments that demonstrate that a temple stood at the western end of the oasis as well.

*Archaeological research at Mut el-Kharab*

The excavations in the temple enclosure of Mut el-Kharab have brought to light evidence for a temple from the 18th and 19th Dynasties. The present-day capital of the oasis, Mut, was also the capital in the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Periods. During the latter its Greek name was Mothis. The site of the ancient capital, Mut al-Kharab, is much destroyed today, but evidence remains of five thousand years of occupation, including those periods that have, until now, been poorly represented in the archaeological record. For instance, Colin Hope has uncovered extensive amounts of material from the Late Period and Ptolemaic Dynasty as well as Coptic and early Islamic remains.

*Reliefs from the temple at Ain Birbiyeh*

The Persian Period is represented in the archaeological record by a series of cemeteries. Sayed Yamani of the Dakhleh Oasis Inspectorate has excavated at Bir Talata el-Arab in the western end of Dakhleh and found two large subterranean family graves from this period. The largest number of Persian Period burials is known from the area around Mut. A series of mounds around the ancient capital of the oasis had been used as a cemetery and hundreds of graves are located there. In the east of the oasis, the DOP has excavated at Ein Tirghi, where a large family vault from the Persian Period was found. A series of decorated wooden coffins from this vault is represented in the exhibition (catalogue no. 4).

*Christian burial at Kellis*

More information on the Late Period can be derived from research into physical anthropology. Eldon Molto and Peter Sheldrick have examined the Late Period cemetery at Ein Tirghi, using both conventional and modern techniques, such as isotopic and mitochondrial-DNA analysis. They have been able to determine sex, age, diet and family and racial lines, and so to gain an insight into the lives of almost 500 ordinary individuals from the Third Intermediate and Late Periods. Virtually all children buried at Ein Tirghi suffered anaemia due to iron deficiency, which was probably caused by gastroenteritis or malaria. The adults were short; men measured ca. 1.68 m. and women 1.55 m. The average life expectancy was twenty to twenty-six years and nearly 14% of children died at birth. The incidence of genetic diseases was high, probably as a result of inbreeding.

So far there is very little evidence of any of Ptolemaic presence – it probably lies buried under the Roman Period remains. At Ismant al-Kharab some Ptolemaic rock-cut tombs have been found containing mummies covered in elaborately decorated gypsum masks, but the Ptolemaic origins of that village are otherwise still undocumented. A notable exception to this lack of Ptolemaic remains is the temple of Ain Birbiyeh, a stone temple dedicated to the local god Amun-nakht, which was built in Ptolemaic times and later extended in the Roman Period. It was one of the most remarkable moments of discovery when, in 1982, the DOP survey established that this temple had been preserved in its entirety, with sand and debris up to its roof. However Adam Zielinski, the conservator for the project, has been faced with major challenges during excavations there since 1985, because the soft sandstone with which it was built has severely deteriorated.

*Roman farmstead*

## The Roman Period: agricultural colonisation

When the Romans took control of Egypt in 30 BCE they started maximizing the agricultural production of the fertile country for their own use. Egypt provided grain for the city of Rome; it was Rome's granary, and the interests of the indigenous Egyptians came in second place. In Dakhleh there is abundant evidence of an intense agricultural exploitation during the Roman Period, especially in the western part of the oasis. Land use and population must have been greater than at any other time before the present. There are remains of many settlements and isolated farmsteads, industrial complexes with pottery kilns, cemeteries, even of entire cities. The fact that the Roman Period settlements at Ismant al-Kharab and Amheida have been submerged by the desert sands, instead of having been used as the foundations for later settlements, has provided archaeologists with an exceptional opportunity to study this period in the oasis.

One well-preserved Roman Period farmstead is remarkably simple in its layout, with a columbarium or pigeon loft on the second storey. Pigeons were an important element in the diet of Roman Egypt, and pigeon-dung was used as a fertiliser. The farmers who lived here irrigated and cultivated the surrounding fields, supporting the nearby cities and sending their surplus to Rome.

Amheida, ancient Trimithis, was the second largest city of Roman Period Dakhleh, after the capital Mut (Mothis). A few years ago the DOP commenced excavations also at this location. There is evidence for occupation of the site since Old Kingdom times, but it must have reached its pinnacle during the Roman Period. The DOP research has already yielded some spectacular finds even at this early stage.

One of the houses in the centre of the town was shown to be a well-preserved townhouse from the fourth century CE, decorated with frescoes depicting scenes from the Odyssey and from classical mythology. These paintings are more elaborate and vibrant than any other Roman wall paintings found in Egypt, except those from Alexandria.

The temple at Amheida demonstrates the long time span of the occupation of this city, as it has yielded remains as early as the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 800 BCE). In the Roman Period the temple was rebuilt in the reigns of Titus and Domitian with the use of building blocks from earlier temples. It is clear that years of archaeological research lie ahead for Roger Bagnall and his team.

*Tomb painting at Muzawwaqa*

A large cemetery encircles the southern part of the town. Whereas it is clear that the citizens of Roman Dakhleh were fully in touch with the rest of the country and they followed the mainstream cultural developments, on the other hand there is evidence showing the exceptional isolation of the oasis. In two cemeteries of Roman Dakhleh rich citizens have built monumental tombs in the shape of pyramids, a building form that was discontinued in the Nile Valley after ca. 500 BCE. The cemetery of Amheida contained several such tombs, one of which is among the best preserved monuments of the oasis. Another cemetery of pyramid tombs is being excavated by Maher Bashendi of the Dakhleh Oasis Inspectorate.

*Cemetery at Amheida*

Other examples of Roman Period tombs have been found at Muzawwaqa, to the northwest of Amheida, where two hills have been honey-combed with rock-cut tombs. Two of these preserve their decoration intact, and in the rock-cut tomb of Petosiris two artistic styles are present: traditional Egyptian and classical Roman. The religious content of the paintings was done in the traditional style, but this prominent citizen of western Dakhleh obviously wished to express his identity in the contemporary artistic style. Another tomb that was still decorated fully in ancient Pharaonic style is the mausoleum of a certain Kitinos, which is now located in the middle of the village of Bashendi. He was a high official from the first century CE and he may have been the son of a Hellenized Egyptian father and a Libyan mother. Though the tomb has been used as the basement for a modern house, most of its decoration has survived intact and the tomb has been consolidated by the DOP.

About twenty-five Roman Period temples have been found in Dakhleh, the best-preserved being the temple of Deir el-Hagar at the western tip of the oasis. It was built during the reign of Nero, with additions made under Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. Despite the fact that the temple was in use for more than two centuries, its decoration was never finished and a number of its sandstone walls were left only roughly dressed. Anthony Mills and Adam Zielinski undertook the restoration of the monument during the 1990s; until then it had never been cleared completely. The temple was dedicated to the Theban triad Amun-Re, Mut and Khonsu. As a festival temple it was the centre of local religious celebrations. Numerous visitors scribbled graffiti on the gateways in the mud brick wall surrounding the temple perimeter. In addition to the ancient graffiti, the names of the members of the expedition of Gerhard Rohlfs of 1874, the first scholarly expedition to the oasis, have been engraved on one of the temple's columns.

It is noteworthy that the reliefs and finds at this temple, and that of others like Ain Birbiyeh, indicate that the oasis dwellers did not simply copy the religious inscriptions of the Nile Valley. The gateway of the temple of Ain Birbiyeh was decorated with a large figure of Amun-nakht, who was a local variant of Amun of Thebes. It seems that the god Seth, the Lord of the Desert and of the Oases, continued to be venerated in Dakhleh into the Roman Period, whereas in the Nile Valley his cult steadily declined after the end of the New Kingdom. The priests who came from the Nile Valley will have looked upon him as an evil force. Amun-nakht was created as an official alternative to the worship of Seth in an attempt to suppress any veneration of Seth.

Another connection to mainstream Nile Valley beliefs is the frequent reference in the temples of the oasis to a good and timely inundation, which seems strange at first sight. Agriculture in the oasis was not dependent upon the inundation of the Nile of course, because it was supplied by the artesian springs. But the ancient Egyptians viewed this differently. Temple inscriptions studied by Kaper made it clear that the water from the Dakhleh springs was believed to be granted by the same deities who regulated the inundation of the Nile, deriving it from below the earth from the waters called Nun. In other words, the oasis was perceived as being in a blessed state of perpetual inundation.

*The temple at Deir el-Hagar*

## Kellis: a desert Pompeii

At the site now called Ismant al-Kharab lies the Roman Period village of Kellis, covered entirely by sand. The director of excavations since 1985, Colin Hope, has referred to it as "a desert Pompeii". Kellis has yielded a wealth of information on Roman Egypt, much of it unprecedented. Certainly it has contributed as much to the knowledge of Roman Egypt as Pompeii has to that of Roman Italy. Even though most of the village was built of unbaked mud bricks, it had public buildings, temples, churches, and tombs that can be regarded as fine as any other finds from Roman Egypt, attesting to a high level of affluence in this desert province.

In addition to an Egyptian style temple complex surrounded by a high *temenos* wall, the village boasted some large-scale villas, a bathhouse and three fourth-century Christian churches. Several two-storey mud brick houses have been excavated. In these, archaeologists found numerous objects for daily use – many are in fact similar to the ones still being used in the oasis today. Textile fragments were found from items of clothing. The linen garments were often decorated with wool embroidery, which was commonly dyed purple or some other colour. Old clothes were cut into pieces and sewn into blankets or heavy outer garments, an ancient form of recycling. Glass and ceramic objects of every shape and function were in use in the village, which was home to artisans such as potters, weavers, blacksmiths, glass blowers, and many more. Bones of goats, pigs, donkeys, camels, ducks, and chickens have been found. These animals could have been used for transportation or for nourishment. Olives and olive oil were exported, and the dates from the oases were probably as famous in antiquity as they are today.

Among the greatest discoveries from Kellis are the texts. Excavations have brought to light the oldest manuscript of Isocrates' orations on kingship and the so-called Kellis Agricultural Account Book, both written in Greek on thin sheets of wood bound together by string – the oldest type of book or codex in the world. The Agricultural Account Book dates to the mid-fourth century CE and lists the goods and services provided by tenant farmers of Kellis over a period of four years. It constitutes a textual treasure of information on the economy and life history of the village. Many more texts on papyri and ostraca have been discovered. These texts, written in Greek, are being pieced together and studied by Klaas Worp. They include documentary texts such as records of tax collections, bureaucratic memos and judicial proceedings as well as also texts pertaining to personal economic, religious or private matters.

The third-largest cache of papyri found in Egypt, numbering over 10,000 documents, is constituted by the family archive of Aurelius Pamour, which covers four successive generations. Their family business was the transportation of a variety of goods between Dakhleh and the Nile Valley by camel. Documents pertaining to business and private matters produce a vivid image of the oasis village as a community composed of many social layers, with tenant farmers, landlords, tradespeople, artisans, magistrates, religious officials and many more. They also reveal that women may have had more liberty to act on their own than in the Nile Valley – often referred to as "Egypt" in the papyri, indicating that the oasis dwellers considered themselves a separate community.

Another exceptional discovery made at Kellis is the glass find on display in the present exhibition (catalogue no. 7).

*The smaller church at Kellis*

No less than 450 burials from Kellis have been analyzed by Molto and Sheldrick, aided by Arthur Aufderheide, a specialist in mummy research. All the bodies were excavated from the various cemeteries of Kellis. One cemetery of rock-cut tombs from the Ptolemaic and early Roman Period belonged to high-status individuals; a series of mausoleum family tombs, constructed with mud brick, lies close to the village and they are from the same period; the third is a field of simple pit graves from the fourth century CE, which includes mainly Christian burials. In contrast to the elaborate mummification practices in the Nile Valley, most mummies found in Dakhleh have had the brain but no other internal organs removed and the body was preserved naturally by the hyper-arid climate rather than by any artificial means. Only a few mummies seem to have been embalmed by a professional embalmer, suggesting that there was no resident embalmer in the oasis. Body tissues are therefore often ill-preserved, but the bones of the mummies yield much information.

Compared to the people buried at Ein Tirghi, the people in Roman Kellis were slightly taller – the elite even more so – probably because they benefited from a more nutritious diet. Fertility was probably higher and the average life expectancy was 35-40 years, and many more women than men lived into their seventies. From arthritis in the neck region it is clear that women often carried heavy loads on their heads. Many skeletons showed a remarkable degree of healing and absence of infections where bones had been fractured. Tetracycline found in the bones was the explanation: a naturally occurring antibiotic occurring in grain when stored in large quantities. But as in the Late Period, anaemia was widespread. Other illnesses attested at Kellis are leprosy (three cases), tuberculosis (three cases), cancer (including leukemia) and spina bifida (open spine). Together with Ryan Parr at Lakehead University, Molto has been able to make a population study through mitochondrial-DNA profiling – a first for Egypt.

Not only the papyri from the village demonstrate contacts between the oasis and the Nile Valley; the large diversity of matrilineal lines in the human remains confirms that people from outside regularly augmented the community.

*Mammisi of the Tutu temple*

In Kellis, the religious practices of ancient Egypt, the Classical world and Christianity existed alongside each other. Adjacent to the temple of Tutu, which was built in the later half of the first century CE, was a large mammisi built of mud brick. This shrine was dedicated to the birth and rejuvenation of the sphinx-god Tutu, the "Master of Demons", who was the principal god of Kellis. This god first appeared in Egypt during the Late Period and enjoyed huge popularity during the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods; in Dakhleh he is often accompanied by his consort Tapsais. Unlike the sandstone main building, the mammisi was a mud brick vault decorated with long rows of Egyptian deities above Roman-style panels painted to imitate decorative stone. Collapsed in antiquity, the vault's painted plaster has been pieced back together by Olaf Kaper, who has discovered much about the religious beliefs of the period in the process.

A few streets away from the temple of Tutu were two early Christian churches. These were excavated and studied by Gillian Bowen and Colin Hope. The remains at Kellis are of great importance for our understanding of the formative years of Christianity in Egypt. The appearance of Christian personal names in the papyri, for example Timotheos, can be employed to date the appearance of Christianity in Kellis. Bowen has estimated on this basis that at around 250 CE Christians must have been living in Kellis.

Early Christians may have sought refuge from persecution in the oasis, lived in the desert as hermits, and, when Christianity was no longer a forbidden religion, churches were built. Three churches dating to the fourth century have been found in Kellis, including a house-church, a large basilica that could accommodate hundreds of people and a cemetery church.

*Modern olive press*

In addition, a community of Manichaeans lived at Kellis during the fourth century, probably because the Dakhleh Oasis was far away from authorities opposed to this gnostic faith. Their writings in Coptic are being studied by Iain Gardner. Interestingly, at this time the dividing lines between Manichaeism, Christianity, and the ancient polytheistic practices were not as strict as one would expect, as evidence from more than one of these religions has appeared together in several of the excavated houses of Kellis.

The oasis village was abandoned at the end of the fourth century to the advancing sand dunes. Olive cultivation had depleted the soil, and irrigation with the *saqia* (water wheel) had provoked salinization and made agriculture increasingly impossible.

## The Islamic Period: a remote trading post

The population of the oasis declined dramatically during the Byzantine Period and several settlements were abandoned. It seems that the fourth and fifth centuries, the formative period of Christianity, were times of hardship in the oasis.

By the mid-seventh century Islam arrived in Egypt, and probably soon afterwards it arrived in Dakhleh. Little is yet known about the situation of the oasis up to 1171, the beginning of the Fatimid Period. Dakhleh was probably a convenient halt on the trade routes from the Lake Chad Basin and from western Sudan to Egypt.

Under the Mamluks (1250-1517) the walled city of al-Qasr flourished. This city with its fairytale-like appearance of mud brick houses, covered streets and minarets, was still inhabited up to the 1980s. It was recently discovered that this town was built over the ruins of a Roman fort or *castra*, the word which appears in Arabic as *qasr*. Stones from ancient temples were incorporated into the fabric of doorways, in particular from the Thoth temple at Amheida. Under Ottoman rule the city was the capital of Dakhleh, but this function was returned to Mut at the end of the nineteenth century. Architectural, linguistic and ethnographic research in this town is now being done by Fred Leemhuis together with the Islamic Inspectorate of Dakhleh Oasis. Several of the larger houses of the town have already been restored and reconstructed.

*Qasr el-Dakhleh*

# Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis

An exhibition on the occasion of the
Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project

## Catalogue

# 1

## Account tablets

Egyptian Museum, Cairo; JdE 98775
Clay, signs incised
Height 4.3 cm, width 8.5 cm, depth 1.5 cm
Balat; Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (G. Soukiassian), 1988-1997
Old Kingdom, 6th dynasty, reign of Pepi II (ca. 2246-2152 BCE)

The excavations by the IFAO at the governor's palace of Ain Asil (Balat) have yielded some important new insights. A large palace complex dates to the end of the sixth dynasty (ca. 2200 bce), and it was home to a family of governors originating from the Nile Valley. Within the precinct of the palace, each successive governor had a chapel built for the cult of his *ka*, which functioned as a memorial chapel. A royal decree of king Pepi II has provided the date for these chapels and for the palace complex as a whole.

The written material from the excavations takes the form of seal impressions and, more spectacularly, of clay tablets. Dakhleh Oasis was the only place in Egypt where the inhabitants used clay tablets of a regular size for their writings and accounts. This tradition has also been observed at the contemporary site of Ain el-Gazzareen, where the DOP has excavated a single tablet. They wrote in cursive hieroglyphs (hieratic), incised into the clay with a stylus.

Significantly this local tradition was taken up again in the much later contexts of Kellis and Amheida, where a few rare clay tablets written in Greek have been found dating from the Roman Period.

At Balat, so far about 500 clay tablets, most of them fragmentary, have been found. They record inventories, name-lists, accounts and letters. In its present state the epistolary collection includes more than 50 letters, most of them in a fragmentary state.

Two types have been distinguished by their editor, Laure Pantalacci. There are letters sent from other oasis villages to the governor, and internal letters circulating within the city or palace itself. The letters emphasise the complexity of the administration of the oasis at this time. Whereas most of the account tablets record personal names associated with amounts of various goods, some of them preserve elementary accounts without words: rows of notches serve to record amounts of certain goods that were handled within the palace.

Literature:
G. Soukiassian, M. Wuttman, L. Pantalacci, *Le palais des gouverneurs de l'époque de Pépy II. Les sanctuaries de ka et leur dépendances*, FIFAO 46 (=Balat VI), 2002, 339 (no. 3446).

Cat. no. 1.1 (recto)
Account tablet recording an amount of 109

Cat. no. 1.1 (verso)
Account tablet recording an amount of 110

## 2

## Ostrich egg vessel

Egyptian Museum, Cairo; JdE 98774
Ostrich egg, decoration incised; rim and base calcite; stopper greywacke
Height 14.2 cm, diameter 13 cm
Balat; Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (G. Castel), 1983-1993
Old Kingdom, 6th dynasty, reign of Pepi II (ca. 2246-2152 BCE)

The body of the vessel consists of an ostrich egg; a flared rim and base of calcite have been added. It is decorated with an incised figure of a falcon that spreads its wings around the body of the vessel. It holds *shen*-rings in its claws, a commonly encountered motif signifying that the King, symbolized by the Horus falcon, reigns over all that the sun encircles. A third, large *shen*-ring is incised around the opening at the top. A limited number of round vases made of alabaster with similar decoration is known from the Old Kingdom, to which the present vase may be compared.

The vessel was discovered in the subterranean tomb of a female relative of Khentika, Governor of the Oasis during the reign of Pepi II. It was either a gift of the King to one of the members of the Governor's court, or a piece produced locally. The latter is more probable because the decoration is not as refined as that of the alabaster parallels, and it does not bear a royal name.

Ostrich egg vessels were not uncommon in prehistoric and dynastic Egypt and are still in use today among certain African tribes. In ancient Egypt and Nubia they were often placed in tombs as funerary offerings, which seems fitting, as the egg was a symbol of resurrection in ancient Egypt – and still is in Christianity. It may be significant that the present vessel with its connotations of new life was found in the tomb of a woman.

Furthermore, decorated ostrich eggs were luxury items, which made the vessel a prized possession.

Literature:

N. Cherpion, 'Annexe II. L'oeuf d'autruche du mastaba II' in: G. Castel, L. Pantalacci, N. Cherpion, *Le mastaba de Khentika. Tombeau d'un gouverneur de l'Oasis à la fin de l'Ancien Empire. Vol. 1: texte*, FIFAO 40 (=Balat V), 2001, 279-294.

Cat. no. 2
Ostrich egg vessel

# 3

## Fragmentary stela of a priest of Seth named Khai

Egyptian Museum, Cairo; JdE 52478
Sandstone, incised
Height 56 cm, width 80 cm, depth 20.5 cm
Mut el-Kharab; local discovery, 1928
Date: later part of the Third Intermediate Period (22nd -23rd dynasties, 945-715 BCE)

The sandstone block contains nine lines written in cursive hieroglyphs. The carving is poorly executed, and the dividing lines are irregular. There would have been a relief on the upper part of the stela, but this is missing, as well as at least two lines from the beginning of the text. The sides and lower part are heavily damaged.

Parts of the inscription remain unclear, because it is damaged and difficult to read. It was most probably a funerary stela, as is indicated by the offering formula at the top and the designation "true of voice" (i.e. deceased) added to the name of the owner. A cemetery of priests from the Late Period was located next to the temple at Mut al-Kharab.

A partial translation of the text runs:
"[…] An offering for the *ka* of the scribe, the priest of Seth, Khai, of the house of Igai […]. He says: 'I am a servant of Seth…
[…] You have caused me to be (one) of your sweet … and good *ba*-souls. I have given to the people …
[…] I have provided 127 people with bread and my offerings of …'
[I am] a servant of Seth, great in might from front to back, the sole one…
[…] for the *ka* of the scribe, the priest Khai, true of voice."

The stela provides important evidence for the cults of the gods Seth and Igai in the oasis. The owner was a "priest of Seth of the house of Igai", suggesting the presence of a hitherto unidentified temple dedicated to Igai at Mut. Furthermore it indicates a strong connection between the cults of Seth and Igai. Both gods carry the title "Lord of the Oasis". The cult of Igai is also mentioned in the Old Kingdom sources from Balat, but there is no other mention of the god in Dakhleh from later times except for this stela. The cult of Seth was centred on his temple in Mut, where blocks with reliefs and inscriptions have been found dating to the reign of Thutmosis III and later. It is known from several sources that Seth continued to be the principal god of Dakhleh into the Roman Period.

Literature:
M. Elebaut, 'Stele JdE 52478 aus der Oase Dachla' (in preparation).
H.G. Fischer, 'A God and a General of the Oasis on a Stela of the Late Middle Kingdom', JNES 16 (1957), 232, pl. XXXV.
B. Gunn, 'Additions to the Collection of the Egyptian Museum during 1928', ASAE 29 (1929), 89-96.
B. Porter & R.B.M. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Texts, Reliefs and Paintings, VII. Nubia, the deserts, and outside Egypt*, Oxford 1952, 296.

Cat. no. 3
Fragmentary stela

# 4

## Anthropoid wooden coffin

Egyptian Museum, Cairo; JdE 97647.
Other coffins from the same tomb have been transferred to the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada.
Wood, painted gesso
Ein Tirghi, grave 14; Dakhleh Oasis Project (R. Frey), 1986
Late Period, 27th dynasty (525-404 BCE)

Technically this anthropoid coffin is rather crudely modelled; the head and feet are angular. Skilled artists as well as good wood were scarce in the oasis at this time. The coffin was constructed from a number of small pieces of wood – a common feature of coffins from the Late Period. The rough finishing of the planks is hidden under a layer of painted gesso, but is clearly visible on the inside.

Even if executed hesitatingly, the decoration includes all the usual elements: a striated wig with lappets on the shoulders, a broad composite collar on the chest, the mummiform sons of Horus and texts on the stomach and legs. The ears, nose and mouth have been modelled and painted. The coffin has a pedestal; an *uroboros*, a serpent biting its own tail as a symbol of eternity, is painted around the side of the coffin. It is considered to date from the First Persian Period, contemporaneous with the pottery found at the tomb.

The coffin was found together with four others in a single chamber of a tomb at Ein Tirghi. The tomb is of a local type, consisting of a stairway and a burial chamber cut into the hard soil. The inscriptions on the coffin lids show that the various owners were related, so it might be understood as a family tomb.

In Dakhleh the dead were not mummified in an elaborate embalming process, but following oasis practice, the body was desiccated naturally and wrapped in linen.

Analysis of the bodies found at Ein Tirghi has shown that iron deficiency anaemia affected every infant and child in the population and was active in many adults. On the other hand, antibiotic resistance to infection was high due to the ingestion of tetracycline, a natural antibiotic occurring in wheat. The genetic profile of the population was noticeably homogenous and the incidence of certain anomalies indicates that few outsiders married into the oasis population.

Literature:

C.A. Hope, 'Dakhleh Oasis Project: preliminary report on the study of the pottery - fifth season, 1982', JSSEA 13 (1983), 150.

A.J. Mills, 'The Dakhleh Oasis Project: report on the fifth season of survey, October 1982-January 1983', JSSEA 13 (1983), 128-129 and plate VIII.

A.J. Mills, 'Recent work of the Dakhleh Oasis Project', ASAE 73 (1998), 84-92.

Cat. no. 4
Coffin

Find circumstances of cat. no. 4:
grave 14 at Ein Tirghi

# 5

## Stela depicting the ritual of offering *heb-sed* jubilees

Egyptian Museum, Cairo; JdE 51943;
ground floor, room 35
Sandstone, bas-relief, painted
Height 79 cm, width 51 cm
Deir el-Hagar; SCA (Tewfiq Boulos), 1927
Roman Period, reign of Vespasian,
27 December 78 CE

The rectangular stela shows a scene of the god Shu offering palm ribs to the gods Thoth and Nehmetaway. Above the offering scene is an elongated sky hieroglyph painted with stars; the top of the stela is crowned by a winged sun disk with two low-hanging uraei. Inscriptions in short columns of hieroglyphic texts accompany the three gods. The base of the stela is inscribed with a Greek text, which reads:
"(This) place is occupied by Apollonios, son of Petephnotes, and by his sons. Year 11 of the emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus, first day of (the month) Tybi (= 27 December 78 CE). For the good."

The figures have been beautifully carved with great attention to detail, such as Nehmetaway's plumed head-dress and vulture cap, the male gods' broad collars. Shu has an elaborate kilt and is offering two notched palm ribs at the base of which are tiny frogs.

The palm rib is a symbol for a lifetime or a reign of innumerable years – hence the frequent addition of the frog, the hieroglyphic numeral 100,000 – and it may also symbolize festivity and joy.

The depiction of this ritual is particular to Dakhleh Oasis: in the Nile Valley it is invariably performed by the gods for the king. Called the "offering of *heb-sed* jubilees" in the lower right text column as well as in inscriptions elsewhere in the Oasis, the ritual is a variation on the offering of the *heh*-symbol. In the Nile Valley the king is the recipient of "millions of (regnal) years", in Dakhleh it emphasizes the royal aspects of the local gods – in this case Thoth and his consort Nehmetaway. The temple of Deir el-Hagar, where this stela was found, was built at the same time as the temple of Thoth at Amheida (ancient Trimithis). Relief blocks of the latter temple have been reused in the Ottoman village of el-Qasr.

The date mentioned in the votive text, 1 Tybi, is the day of the *Neheb-kau* festival, a celebration or renewal of the king's reign. On this stela from Deir el-Hagar it is not the king but the gods that are rejuvenated on this day – indicating that religious beliefs and practices in the Oasis were not always identical to those of the Nile Valley.

Literature:
O.E. Kaper, *Temples and Gods in Roman Dakhleh. Studies in the indigenous cults of an Egyptian oasis*, doctoral thesis Rijksuniversiteit Groningen 1997, 169-170 and fig. 71.
G. Lefebvre, 'Petits monuments du musée du Caire', ASAE 28 (1928), 29-34.

Cat. no. 5
Stela

# 6

## Bronze statuette of Hermes

Egyptian Museum, Cairo; JdE 97633
Bronze
Height ca. 15 cm
Ismant al-Kharab; Dakhleh Oasis Project (C.A. Hope), 1981/1982
Roman Period

Despite the corrosion on this statuette, the skill with which it has been crafted is apparent. The figure is that of a nude male, his cape hanging over his left arm. The right arm has broken away, as has the right foot. At the left foot a part of the base of the statuette remains. The cape covers the upper part of the chest, with the hem running diagonally across the chest. It is fastened with a clasp on the shoulder. The protrusions on the head are most likely a wreath with possibly two small wings.

In a preliminary excavation report the figurine was presented as a "bronze Harpocrates", but it lacks the child god's characteristic attributes. The face and stomach are finely modelled with the traits of an adult male, favouring an interpretation of the deity as Hermes or Mercury. The object in the left hand is badly corroded and hard to distinguish; it is most probably a caduceus rather than a cornucopia. The staff with two entwined snakes was Hermes' symbol of office as the divine messenger. His missing right hand would have held a money pouch, signalling the connection of the Roman god Mercury with commerce.

Mercury or Hermes was identified with Thoth, who held a position of prominence in the oasis, with a temple at the city of Trimithis (Amheida).

A visitor to the temple of Tutu at Kellis (Ismant al-Kharab) probably offered the statuette as a votive gift. It is known from archives found in the oasis city that trading goods with the Nile Valley was a family business. The bronze was found in the temple, and can therefore not be later than the fourth century CE. At that time, there were included in the population of the city devotees of the Egyptian and Graeco-Roman gods as well as Manichaeans and other Christians.

Literature:
A.J. Mills, 'Dakhleh Oasis Project: report on the fourth season of survey, October 1981-January 1982', JSSEA 12.3 (1982), frontispiece.

Cat. no. 6
Bronze Hermes

# 7

## Seven glass vessels

Excavation find nos.
31420-D6-1/D/7/0/3-10
Ismant al-Kharab; Dakhleh Oasis Project (C.A. Hope), 2000
Roman Period, 4th century CE

**1**. Head-shaped bottle on foot
Pale green glass; head mould-blown, lower part free-blown; string wound around the foot and the neck
Contents: residue of pine, cedar or fir resin
Height 19.8 cm, max. diameter 9 cm

**2**. Flask with wide neck and convex body
Pale green glass, blown
Height originally 12.9 cm, diameter 8.1 cm

**3**. Two-handled jug
Pale green and darker green glass; blown, handles applied separately, faceted spout drawn; a string around the neck indicates that the vessel was once closed with a stopper
Height originally 13.5 cm, diameter 6.6 cm

**4**. Flask with globular body
Pale green glass, blown
Contents: unidentified brown residue
Height 9 cm, diameter 6 cm

**5**. Flask with lentoid body and tall neck
Pale green glass, blown
Contents: unidentified brown residue
Height 14.7 cm, diameter 9.3 and 4.2 cm

**6**. Two-handled jug with fluted body
Pale green and darker green glass; mould-blown or fluting on body produced by optic blowing, handles drawn; string wound around the base of the neck for attachment of a stopper
Height 27.6 cm, diameter 14.1 cm

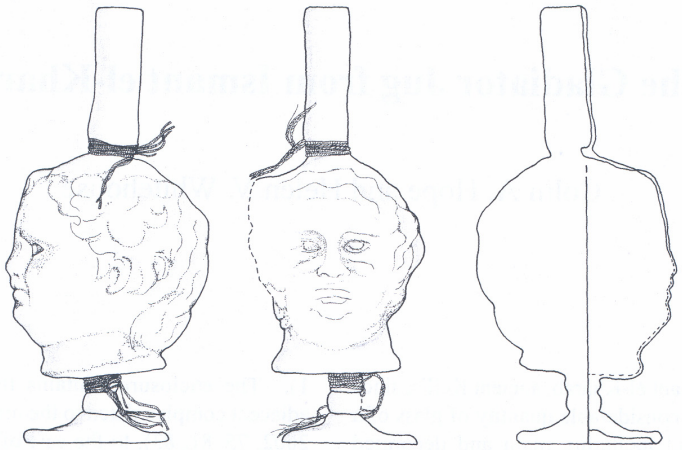
**7**. Painted one-handled jug
Pale green and darker green glass; blown, handle drawn and applied after the application of enamelled/cold-painted decoration.
Height 26.1 cm, max. diameter 9 cm

These seven glass vessels were found together in two deposits in the Roman village of Kellis (Ismant al-Kharab), on the spot where they had fallen in antiquity. They were probably dropped around the time of the abandonment of the village at the end of the fourth century CE. The forms of the vessels and the use of pale green glass suggest they were manufactured during the fourth century.

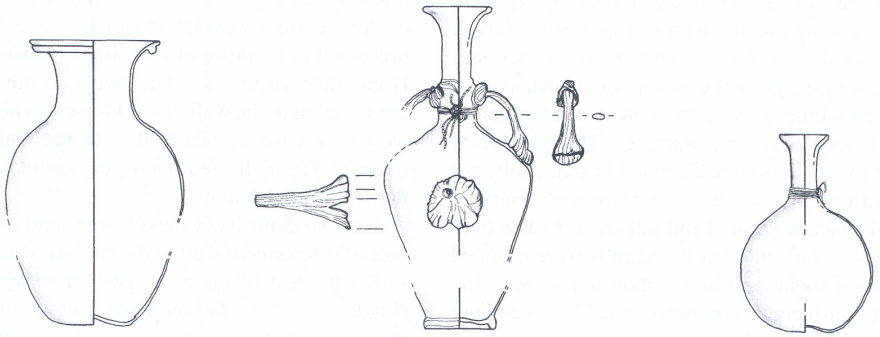
Most of the seven vessels in this group may be described as luxury products that were intended to contain oil or perfume. They may have been the charge of a salesman, although some of the pieces seem to be older than others.

One vessel (catalogue no. 7.1) is in the form of a chubby child's head, representing either Dionysus or Eros. But the most spectacular item of this glass find is the jug painted with gladiatorial combat scenes (catalogue no. 7.7).

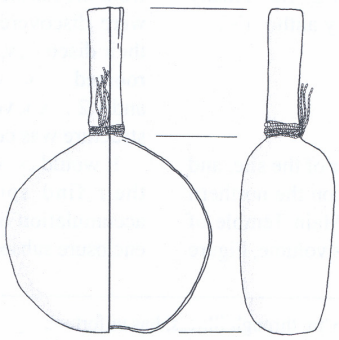
Examples of glass painted with such scenes of gladiatorial combat have been dated from the late first to the third centuries CE, and parallels in mosaics are known from the second to the early fourth centuries CE. The figure zone, spanning around the body of the jug, is bordered above and below by elaborate floral motifs. The scenes are very lively and executed in vibrant colours. To the left of the handle a gladiator with dark curly hair stretches his left arm out to the shield of his opponent. His arm is protected by a *manica*, a metal-scale protector. In his right hand he grasps a short sword or dagger. Behind his left foot lies a trident.



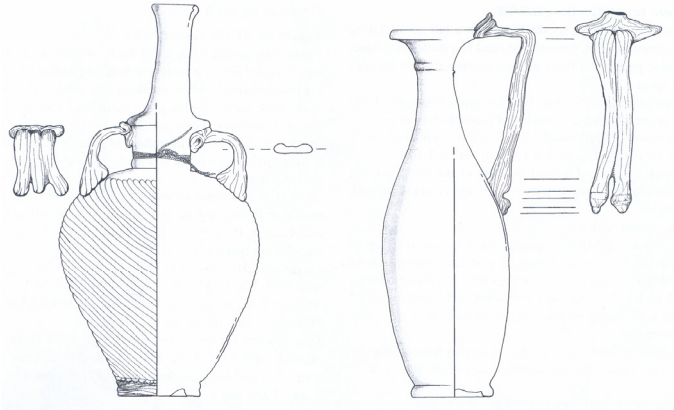
Cat. no. 7.1
Head-shaped bottle



Cat. nos. 7.2–7.4



Cat. no. 7.5



Cat. nos. 7.6 and 7.7

## 7

## Seven glass vessels

His opponent has even more bodily protection, with his metal helmet and his cloth leg wrappings. He also wears a *manica* and holds a short sword or dagger. Behind his right shoulder we see the referee pointing to the other gladiator. The bearded *summa rudis* is clad in a tunic with *clavi* and his gesture seems to indicate that the helmeted gladiator is losing the fight.

In the other scene, three similar figures are depicted; but both combatants are wearing non-metal arm guards and the curly-haired gladiator now has a yellow metal shoulder guard. This gladiator is clearly winning: he seems to leap as he pushes his opponent's shield down with his trident. The helmeted gladiator attempts to stave off the trident with his short sword. The referee points his curving rod to the gladiator who has the upper hand. He holds two further rods and a black trumpet(?) in his left hand.

Small differences in the details of both scenes seem to indicate that the scenes are not two episodes from the same fight, although they are similar pairs. The helmeted gladiator was known as *secutor*, who would normally fight a *retiarius* equipped with a net, though here no net can be seen.

Possibly the jug was manufactured in Alexandria; it is not known whether gladiatorial games were still held there in the fourth century. The depiction of combat scenes does not necessarily imply that the artist witnessed such games; the iconography is very similar to other known scenes on glass objects, mosaics and clay medallions. It is impossible to determine whether the jug was brought to Kellis because of its decorative value or for its contents – presumably some precious oil or resin such as that found in the head-vase. It was a rare luxury item, which must have been antique at the time it was dropped, broken and abandoned.

Literature:
C.A. Hope and H.V. Whitehouse, "The Gladiator Jug from Ismant el-Kharab", in: G.E. Bowen and C.A. Hope (eds.), *The Oasis Papers 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project*, Oxford 2003, 291-310.

Cat. no. 7.7
Painted glass jug
(front and side views)

# 8

## *Ja'ala* contract

SCA Coptic & Islamic Inspectorate Mut; D04.166
Paper with writing in ink
Height 45 cm, width 18 cm
Qasr Dakhleh; Dakhleh Oasis Project (F. Leemhuis) 2004
Ottoman period, 6 Rabiʿ II 1187 AH/27 June 1773 CE

The document, which was found folded up, is a sharecropping contract in which it is stated that al-Zayni Salih, son of al-Qurashi Muhammad Salih al-Tawil, in exchange for cultivating a piece of land of his aunt in ʿAyn al-Najjabin, south of the town of al-Qasr, has the usufruct of one third of said piece of land.

According to Dr Ruud Peters, who is studying the legal documents from al-Qasr, this kind of a *jaʿala* contract is interesting because its use for sharecropping is questionable under Shafiʿi *shariʿa* law, which was adhered to in the Dakhleh Oasis during Ottoman times. The person who drafted this document apparently was well aware of this. At the end of the document it is therefore explicitly mentioned that consent has legal effects and custom and customary practice as well. The Koran is quoted to underpin this: "Hold to forgiveness; Command what is right [the word *ʿurf* which is used here can also mean "custom"]; But turn away from the ignorant." [Surat al-Aʿraf (7):199].

This document is a good example of the ca. 170 legal documents which were among the more than 500 documents that were discovered when the rubble of the collapsed Bayt al-Qurashi in al-Qasr was cleared out prior to its reconstruction. Most of these documents clearly belong to a family archive.

According to the now absent lintel of the main door the house was built in the 12th century AH/18th century CE, but the dated legal texts show that the archive is much older. Their dates range from 987/1579 to 1929. These legal documents show a high level of legal expertise and sophistication. Together with the religious texts, personal letters, magical texts and amulets they are an important source for the social history of pre-modern al-Qasr. This is especially valuable because nearly nothing is known about the Ottoman (or other) history of this apparently important town which probably dates back to Roman times as the recently discovered remains of a 6 metre thick Roman wall may indicate.

Literature:
Unpublished.

Cat. no. 8
*Ja'ala* contract

Cat. no. 8
*Ja'ala* contract folded as found

# Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis

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Donations to the Dakhleh Oasis Project are invited at all times and can be made through the Dakhleh Trust.

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### Text

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### Illustrations

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### Web sites of DOP excavations

http://bolt.lakeheadu.ca/~lucas/pdnamain.htm

http://www.arts.monash.edu/archaeology/excavations/dakhleh/

http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/amheida/