

**The Dakhleh Oasis Project
&
The Dakhleh Trust**

**A report on the 2005-2006 season
to our friends and supporters**

Because of recent increases in the cost of production and postage we have issued this seasons' report on the website of the Dakhleh Trust, at www.Dakhleh.com. Hard copies, for which we ask a minimum donation of £10, may be obtained from John Ruffle at Rockcliffe House, Kirk Merrington, Co. Durham DL16 7HP.

This year's report summarises many of the papers read at the Symposium held in Cairo in June 2006, generously sponsored by Vodafone Egypt. These covered some of the work undertaken in the 2005-2006 season but others took a longer term view of our activities.

The Dakhleh Symposium, Cairo June 2006

In June 2006 some 80 people associated with the Project met in the sticky heat and freezing air-conditioning of Cairo to describe and discuss their various activities in connection with the Project. The conference was organised by those Dakhleh veterans, Fred Leemhuis and Olaf Kaper, supported by the staff of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo and was most generously sponsored by Vodafone Egypt.

The quality of reporting from a conference depends on many factors, from the ability of the reporter to understand the many subjects under discussion to the timetabling of a paper to the first session of the day or the graveyard slot directly after a good lunch – and lunches were very good. These are notes of what caught my interest and what I thought at the time I understood. They do not pretend to be comprehensive, or accurate, but I hope they will give an impression of the broad scope of the conference, and the Project. Fuller and better accounts will be available when the papers are duly published. Meanwhile my apologies to those who feel they have been misquoted, misrepresented, misunderstood or simply missed out.

The conference began with a survey by Colin Hope of the work at Kellis and its place in the wider world of the Roman empire. Colin actually also gave two more papers in the course of the conference, based on the work at Kellis and Mut. He told us that one of his colleagues had labelled work at Kellis, as “archaeology for idiots” because the drifted sand had preserved so much and could be easily removed, although this did not always apply, for instance in the case of a collapsed vault with a painted surface on the underside! The degree of preservation and the Classical subject matter of so much of the painting and sculpture suggested the title of a Desert Pompeii, or even a wealthy retirement village. The big classical style villas, richly decorated, were not like the contemporary houses at Karanis but were built to a Roman plan with a central open atrium, although they had no need for the central rain water basin. He also described the three churches at Kellis, one of them dated to the reign of Constantine which would mean that it is one of the oldest surviving churches in Egypt. He estimated that about one twentieth of the site had been cleared in 20 years and there was enough to occupy another one hundred years.

Colin also gave an account of the work at Mut, which is anything but straightforward. Here there is much work to be done on the temple to Seth where the recovered material ranges from Second Dynasty to Mamluke.

Rufus Churcher described the formation and appearance of the huge freshwater lakes that formed in the Dakhleh depression during the Pleistocene period. The surface of these lakes was about 170 metres above the present sea level and the prevailing north wind has since eroded another 30 metres to the present level of the oasis floor. The area around the lakes was evidently attractive for hunters and, later, for settlers but even on the plateau at the top of the escarpment things were not as bleak as they are at present. Karin Kindermann reported on her discoveries at Djara, midway between the Oasis and the

Valley which was occupied from 6,400 BC. The evidence is stone tools of two types, some re-touched apparently for re-use several times while others seem to have had a one-off, ceremonial use. This undoubtedly should tell us something about the social structure of this society. The area was abandoned about 5,300 BC when the people evidently moved to the oases or to the Valley

The survey of the surrounding desert for rock art sites, begun by Lech Kryzaniak, has been continued after his death by his students, one of whom, Ewe Kuciewicz described some of the 18 new sites found in 2005-6 in what has now been termed The Painted Wadi. The subjects include giraffe, ostrich and elephant, other very basic animal shapes, and some strangely stylised women. There are as well, signs that almost seem to be a script and geometric shapes, some like birds' feet, concentric circles and circles formed with a wavy-line.

Such sites are very vulnerable and there were several other papers referring to the way in which sites are damaged by ignorance, thoughtlessness or even deliberate vandalism. At Umm Dabadib, near Kharga, the site was attacked with a bulldozer, driven out from Kharga in quest of buried treasure and Rudolf Kuper showed ugly graffiti in the Cave of the Swimmers, at Wadi Sura in the Gilf Kebir. He also showed a collection of flint tools, neatly laid out as if for a student seminar, but of course thoughtlessly removed from their context, and described how one well-meaning but equally misguided visitor had collected samples of Dakhleh Glass and buried them for their safety! He proposed the formation of a code of conduct to preserve both archaeological sites and the desert ecology which he hoped the responsible tour companies would follow, although it is difficult to see how the cowboy companies could be controlled. Adam Zielinski also spoke of the problems of controlling access to sites and the dangers posed for both the monuments and the visitors.

Sites in danger was a recurring theme. We saw how mudbrick walls, once exposed are quickly eroded and how stonework deteriorates. We saw the problems of painted plaster detaching from a mudbrick base, not helped at Amheida, for instance, where there is also rising damp. Constance Silver compared the sophisticated subject matter of the wall paintings at Amheida with the primitive technique, comparing it with the wall paintings of Neolithic date from places like Catal Huyuk. Termites also create problems and collapsed vaults which are, inevitably, painted on the plaster surface on the underside present a major challenge. Such problems raise in turn a further question – whether delicate areas are best preserved *in situ* for the “visitor experience” or should they be removed to be reconstructed in the safe conditions of a museum.

The work at Amheida was reported on by several speakers. This site has produced a large number of texts in context. Unlike Kellis, the site is too wet to have preserved papyrus but there are many other types of written material as Roger Bagnall outlined. This often told us the names of the inhabitants of houses and their activities, and ostraca provided evidence about the contents of containers. There were graffiti in both public and private contexts, including some on blocks which would have been hidden in the construction work. The literati of Amheida could also quote from Classical poets. The source of much of this knowledge could have been the wall of one villa, painted like a

whiteboard and covered with Greek couplets, complete with the diacritics.

Egyptian colleagues from the SCA described their excavations and some of the conservation problems they had met. Maher Bashendy Amin and Bahaa Goma spoke about the Roman Period tombs with painted burial chambers at Bir esh-Shagala and at Bir Talata el Maohoub and Sayed Yamani had worked on the cemetery of a settlement site related to the temple at Deir el-Hagar. Olaf Kaper dealt with a series of coffins from this site. Kamil Ahmed Bayyumi reported on his work at Ain el-Gedida where he has excavated a complex of rooms, including a small church dated to the first half of the 4th Century. It has been suggested, but he could not confirm, that it was a monastic site.

Tony Mills announced the discovery of a new quarry, south of Mut, some 1.5 km from the temple site of Ain el-Azizi and 6 km from Mut el-Gharab. Adam Zeilinski has calculated that some 1,000 cubic metres of stone had been removed presumably for use at one or both of these sites. He also calculated that 1,600 cubic metres would be needed for a temple the size of that at Ain el-Birbiya so we assume there are some big holes still to be found in the oasis.

Heiko Reimer outlined his new work on the Abu Ballas trail where some 30 stations are now plotted, leading from Dakhleh to the Gilf Kebir. Water transported by donkeys in 25 litre jars was dumped at these points to provide service stations. At some of the stations there were also stores of straw and grass. The road was marked by a series of signs, mostly a single stone set upright or a small stone on a larger one. Frequency depended on the openness of the landscape. The trail leads to the foot of the Gilf Kebir and apparently into a wadi that takes one further into the plateau but there is so far no indication of the ultimate destination or what was trafficked along this road.

Research does not only produce answers; sometimes it simply produces yet more questions and El Molto presented the Kellis II Cemetery Conundrum. In this cemetery are some 3,000 burials, usually described as Christian because the dead are laid facing East and there are no grave goods. Radiocarbon 14 testing however suggests an earlier pre-Christian date for some interments and a very late date for others. The problem seemed to be highlighted by one tomb in which were found two children dated by radiocarbon 14 260 years apart. Further study showed that they were in fact two separate interments but there are still examples where there appears to be a conflict between the dating evidence provided by procedures such as radiocarbon 14 and the evidence of coins, pottery types, other grave goods, the position of the body and other archaeological techniques.

The researchers at Dakhleh use all the most modern techniques and we heard of exciting work on isotopes in the bones and teeth which could reveal how long an infant was breast fed and other work that could indicate the season of death. The highest death rate seemed to be at the end of summer which would make sense because that was probably the time of greatest stress.

Peter Sheldrick described his study of the pathology of the bodies from Kellis. In particular he described the various types of arthritis and their causes, showing, for instance, how the common squatting posture adopted by many workers puts undue strain

on the knee, carrying loads on the head stresses the neck vertebrae causing a problem for many women and using the *turiya* creates lower back injury in men. Peter's reflections showed how the common problems of the ancient inhabitants and the current population of the oasis are closely related.

Tosha Dupras also talked about research on the bodies from Kellis where children under 15 make up 63 % of the cemetery population.. They showed signs of trauma, chronic leukaemia, and infections such as dysentery, typhoid, malaria and smallpox. Tragically there seemed also to be evidence of child abuse.

Fred Leemhuis kept to the end what was perhaps the most exciting news. After he had shown the finished reconstruction work on the Beit el-Qadi he explained how, passing by part of the outer wall of the town, on a route that he had walked many times, he happened to see a length of mudbrick wall with the light falling in such a way that he recognized it as different from the usual mediaeval wall. He soon realized that he was looking at a section of Roman wall six metres thick, which, once recognized, could be traced for several metres. Next year he has offered a reward for the person who finds the graffito HADRIANUS HIC ERAT!

The Dakhleh Oasis Trust and the Eden Project

In 2005, Tony Mills and Andy Parish paid a visit to Tim Smit at the Eden Project. Tim had studied archaeology at Durham, and the plans for a Dry Tropics, a.k.a. "Desert" Biome, made the possible links between the two organisations attractive. This news filtered down to me as Curator of this forthcoming biome, and the idea of a visit to the DOP took root. Following a visit to Tony and Lesley at their home in Cornwall, and a nod from my line manager, plans were put into effect for a visit in February of 2006.

I am not an archaeologist, and if there is such a thing as a typical visitor to the DOP, I doubt that I am such a person. As a horticulturist who has lived most of my working life in seasonally dry or just dry areas within or near the Tropics, I have been fascinated with the growing of as wide a range of plants as I can get my hands on, and living and working with people of like persuasion. But never in an oasis, and I wanted to get beyond the limitations of the Hollywood versions. The more I read up on the DOP, the more I felt that here was extraordinary story unfolding - a seemingly torrid patch of the world that had managed to support life, including people, back to the origins of agriculture, and way back to the earliest humans. Swallowing my misgivings of naivety on matters archaeological, and fear of being trapped in a collapsing crypt, this had to be a story for the Eden Project.

Travelling out to Dakhleh with Andy, a regular helper at the project, and Carol and David Tandy, newly converted supporters of the Project, gave me the chance to ask some of the dumber questions to fellow travellers, for it soon became obvious that the team who were at the site could not afford to spend their days instructing a novice - at least during daylight hours. Come nightfall, and a relaxed social atmosphere was the order of the day.

I spent my 10 days with a mixture of a gentle introduction to the archaeological sites and work being done by the likes of Mary McDonald and Adam Zielinski, combined with sorties into areas of cultivation. The layout of the cropping, the mixture of crops, and the degree of self-sufficiency was, and remains, a unique experience for me. The farmers were without exception very welcoming, although my knowledge of Arabic did not progress beyond 5 words or phrases - and this despite my crossing their plots in a haphazard fashion and taking photos at every new sight.

Botanically, I had invaluable help from Johannes Walter, a botanist and paleobotanist who gave me his spare time to come on forays with me, and crucially help with plant identification.

When the time came to leave Dakhleh I had developed a strong tie with the DOP folk and their way of life, and even began daydreaming of coming back one day to make a study of the agricultural economy of the oasis. I have compiled a report of the visit, but like the DOP project itself, it threatens to keep on growing as more information is gathered. I would like to thank Tony and Lesley and all those I met at the DOP, and hope that one day I can do justice to their hospitality, and to their story of the DOP and the oasis.

Ian Martin, Curator for the Dry and Seasonally Dry Tropics, Eden Project

The Dakhleh Trust

In the year ending 1st April 2006 the Trust was able to give £2,500 to the Dakhleh Oasis Project. This money is used for the less exciting aspects of the Project's activities such as air fares, house and vehicle maintenance, visits to Cairo to deal with security and administration and the like.

The intention to run a day-school in the South of England was put on ice when the British Museum announced a colloquium on the Kharga and Dakhleh Oases. The Project was strongly represented amongst the speakers and we were able to publicise the Trust, although we unfortunately did not raise enough interest to make a proposed tour of the oases viable.

The web-site was launched in time to publicise that at the colloquium. It can now be seen at www.dakhleh.com. Comments and suggestions for improvements are welcome.

In our last report I mentioned that there is also a need for an investment fund to provide a replacement vehicle. We have now set up a fund for this purpose with the Charities Aid Foundation and we intend to move our current account to the same institution in due course. In future, donations that are ear-marked for the Dakhleh Oasis Project or the Vehicle Fund will be credited accordingly; donations with no specified destination will be allocated to either fund according to the discretion of the trustees.

As you will be well aware, postal charges have been increased again this year and the costs of preparing these reports are also increased. If you wish to continue to receive the reports we invite you to make a donation of £15 which will cover our costs, and include a small contribution to the Project and enable us to keep you informed of matters relating to the Trust and the Project.

All donations should be sent to the Treasurer, Prof. J Trowell, 45 Heath Drive, Potters Bar, Herts EN6 1EJ.

Other correspondence should be sent to me at Rockcliffe House, Kirk Merrington, Co. Durham DL16 7HP or John@jruffle.plus.com

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