

1 | Kellis in Context

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When travelling the largely deserted stretch of land between Balat and Ismant in Dakhleh Oasis, the observant visitor, or anyone armed with a guidebook including the oases of the Egyptian Western Desert, will note substantial mud-brick ruins to the south of the road. Further, if visiting it would become obvious they are the remains of a sizeable site with a range of structures quite well preserved (Figure *1.1) and others badly deflated. Most might stay in the area of these structures, but the more curious could venture further and note extensive traces of buildings extending to the north-east. The area covered by the remains is 1,050 by 650 metres, so almost $\frac{3}{4}$ sq km. The site is known locally as Ismant al-Kharab, ‘Ismant the ruined’, to distinguish it from the still occupied village of Ismant nearby; its ancient name is Kellis. While never ‘lost’ to those living in the region, and mentioned by travellers during the early nineteenth to twentieth centuries (Kaper 1997b; Boozer 2013a), generally little was reported about the site. The most extensive observations were made by Herbert Winlock, who visited in 1908 (Winlock 1936), but these amount to only a few pages. Archaeological interest in Dakhleh was triggered by the work of Ahmed Fakhry in the mid-twentieth century, which brought attention to the remains of the Old Kingdom capital at ‘Ain Aseel with its associated mastaba tombs near Balat, and other locations within the oasis (Osing *et alii* 1982). Fakhry visited Ismant al-Kharab but did not work there. His pioneering efforts not only in Dakhleh but also in the other oases were the catalyst for two large-scale projects that commenced in 1977: l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale au Caire excavations at the Balat sites, and the Dakhleh Oasis Project. Both are still operating 40 years later, indicating the significance of the discoveries. The study of Ismant al-Kharab forms part of the latter. This introduction places the site within the context of the Project and the archaeology of Dakhleh, questions it raised about the level of exploitation during Roman rule, and provides a short overview of the site.

The Dakhleh Oasis Project was formed by Anthony J. Mills in 1977 with the aim of studying human adaptation to life in a semi-arid environment across the millennia (Mills 1979; 1999). It has become a

large multi-disciplinary team with participants from institutions worldwide, and its concession was all of Dakhleh excluding those areas being studied by the French teams. The oasis is some 800 km SSW of Cairo (Map 1) and includes an area of 2,000 sq km bounded on the north by an escarpment 300+ m in height. The elevation of the depression is 100–30 ASL; the topography varies from cultivated flat plains of clay to gravel surfaces and terraces, and areas of Aeolian sand activity. The basin floor has remains of extensive playas and numerous fossil spring mounds. Many areas are affected by salt encrustation, a result of over-exploitation and poor water management. In 1978 rainfall was 0.7 mm, with humidity rarely above 50 per cent and temperatures varied from a maximum in January of 21.5 to 39°C in July. These conditions will approximate those when Kellis was occupied, though rainfall may have been even less as also the salination. The population stood at 35,000; it has now risen considerably. Dakhleh was accessible by a variety of main routes from the other oases and the Nile valley (Paprocki 2019, 218–33; Riemer 2020): one via Farafra in the north (Darb Farafra), three from Kharga on the east (Darb al-Ghubari; Darb al-‘Ain Amur; route from Dush), itself connected by several to the valley in the vicinity of Luxor and nearby Farshut, and one directly from Asyut (Darb al-Tawil). Many additional small tracks were used, as until recently, across the escarpment in all directions. Travel was anciently on foot or by donkey, and later, at least from the Persian period, by camel (Bagnall 2015, 151; Agut-Labordère 2018). Today, there are checkpoints along the roads and the same may have applied in antiquity, for a border is mentioned in Coptic letters in relation to travel to and from the valley.

The Project commenced with a walking survey of the oasis (Map 2), starting in the west, and during the period 1978–87 recorded hundreds of localities with evidence of human activity from the Early Stone Age to medieval period (Churcher and Mills 1999). The discovery of sites continues. The range of historic-period sites includes large and small settlements, isolated structures and cemeteries of various sizes. Interaction is well documented with neighbouring regions, especially Kharga Oasis to the east, and both the nascent pharaonic state and its fully developed form, and the ensuing Ptolemaic and Roman regimes, though with varying degrees of detail and intensity (Bowen and Hope 2019 *passim*). The survey, of course, was largely restricted to the recording of surface remains, and minimal excavation was undertaken. Thus, in most cases the exact size, nature, date, cultural affiliation and character of the sites can only be estimated based on what ended up on the surface, and this represents a

variety of formation, abandonment and environmental processes, and must be treated as an indication only of what lies beneath. Data from excavated trenches or graves are more reliable and can be dated with more precision; they assist in the analysis of the surface finds as does comparison with well-dated contexts elsewhere in Egypt. The latter process poses its own problems: can the same date be automatically assigned to, for example, a collection of ceramics from a grave in Dakhleh as that determined for similar material found in the Nile valley with its mostly reliable chronology? Was the material used for the same time period as in the valley, for the same purposes? While answers appear to be in the affirmative it became clear that local chronological sequences should be determined and then comparison undertaken, otherwise the process becomes circular.

To rectify this situation the second phase of the Dakhleh Oasis Project has involved the more detailed study of a small number of sites specifically chosen to enable the survey data to be better contextualised and the cultural evolution documented with greater certainty (Map 2). Understanding the demography of the oasis required obtaining a reliably dated collection of human remains, so excavations commenced at the cemetery of ‘Ain Tirghi, south-west of Balat. Unfortunately, many of the graves had been used during different periods, from the Middle Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period, and few interments were intact (Hope 2019a). Thus, the study shifted to two cemeteries at Ismant al-Kharab, one of which has proved especially productive (Chapter 15). Two temples have been investigated because of their significance as large stone monuments and the light they shed on religious practices: Dayr al-Hagar in western Dakhleh, well known to early visitors as the only accessible standing temple, and ‘Ain Birbiyya in the east near Bashendi, which is the opposite, a temple buried to roof level. Both can be dated by the occurrence of royal name rings (cartouches) to the Roman period, though the latter was commenced in the late Ptolemaic period. Lately the source of stone used in temple construction in central Dakhleh has been documented. The periods of greatest activity in the oasis as indicated by the survey data are the Old Kingdom and, on a much larger scale, the Roman to Late Roman periods. ‘Ain al-Gazzareen in the west near Amhida was selected for the study of the former and Ismant al-Kharab for the latter. Ismant al-Kharab is the focus of this volume, but all of the other sites except ‘Ain al-Gazzareen contribute to the picture presented of Roman Dakhleh.

The survey data and subsequent surface planning by James Knudstad (Knudstad and Frey 1999) indicated that Ismant al-Kharab flourished

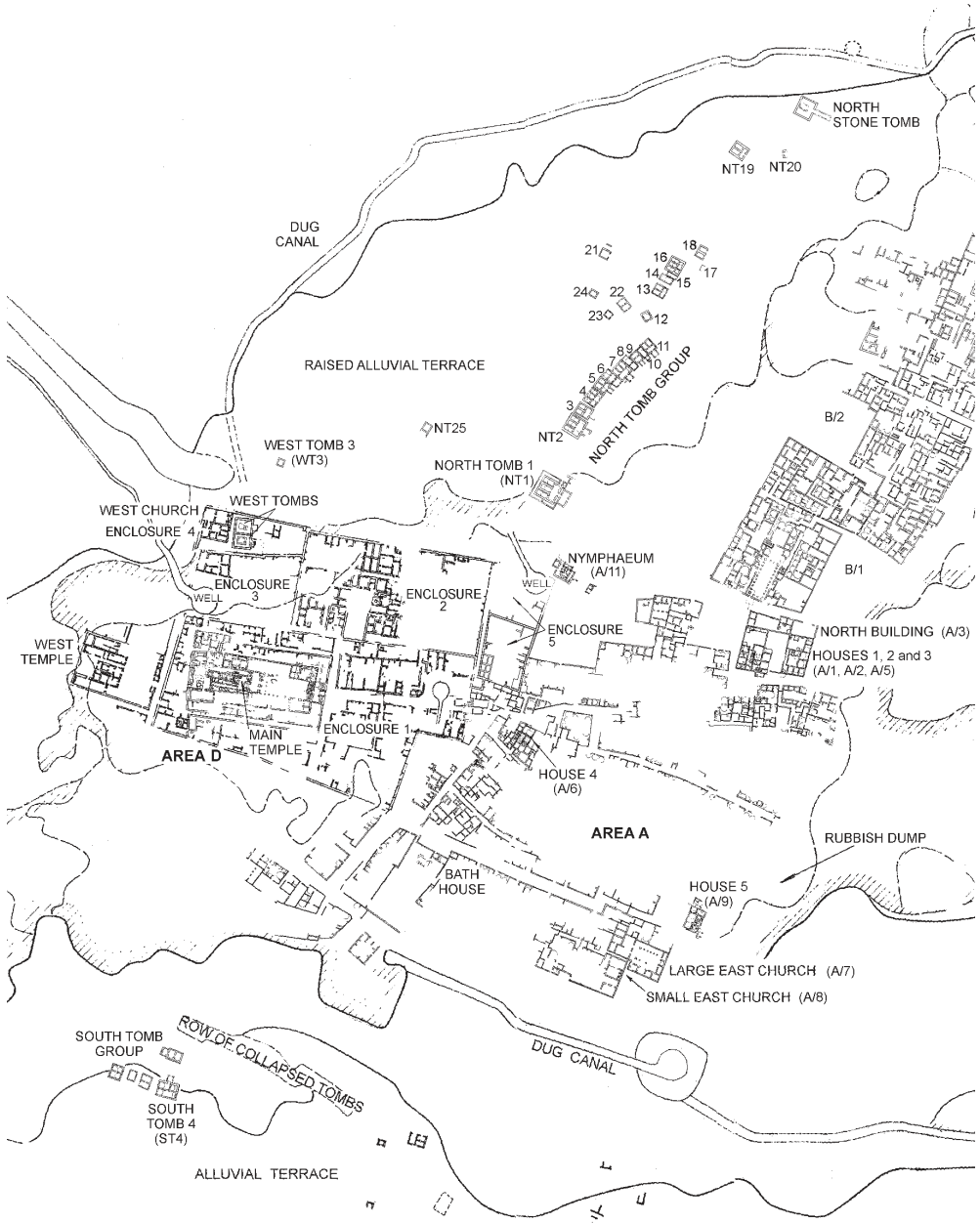


Figure 1.1. Plan of Kellis.



during the Roman and Late Roman periods. Two temple complexes, a bath house, various residential sectors and monumental tombs were identified (Figure 1.1). Furthermore, two churches were located on the east of the site and another on the west, and artefacts indicated a date within the fourth century for the eastern churches. The state of preservation was found to be good despite wind erosion; conditions are such that a wide variety of fragile categories of material survive, including papyrus, textiles, wood and bone, alongside the durable ceramic, glass and metal. A plan of the site could be easily achieved because structures are visible at surface level and the delineation of walls can be done simply with a brush! And many buildings in the central part of the site preserve their roofs. Two other possibilities for study of the Roman and Late Roman periods were indicated by the survey data: Mut al-Kharab in central Dakhleh and Amhida in the west (Map 2). While the Temple of Seth, Lord of Oasis, was known to have existed at Mut al-Kharab throughout the first millennium BCE and surface sherds indicated a long span of activity into the medieval period, it is badly deflated, and much of the site lies under cultivation and modern structures. Amhida, though extensive and with a range of building types indicative of a major settlement, and ceramics again covering a long duration, is badly affected by termites because of surrounding cultivation, and this impacts the survival of the fragile materials known to be present at Ismant al-Kharab. This site was therefore the obvious choice with which to commence the study of Roman settlement in the oasis. Subsequently, both Mut al-Kharab (Bowen and Hope 2019 *passim*) and Amhida (Bagnall *et alii* 2015) have become the focus of investigation and both complement significantly information from Ismant al-Kharab.

It has been indicated that the Roman period, defined here as the first century to third quarter of the third century CE, witnessed considerable activity in Dakhleh; this is an understatement. Dating, primarily based on ceramics, implied a major increase of sites possibly by tenfold compared to the preceding Ptolemaic period. This was believed to be the result of a deliberate policy by the central administration of Egypt to exploit the agricultural potential of the region in keeping with Rome's attitude to the country in general. More recent study as a result of excavations at Mut al-Kharab has enabled a better understanding of Ptolemaic ceramics in Dakhleh, and the number of sites at which activity occurred during that period is now estimated to be at least 50 (Hope 2019b) and possibly more (Gill 2016; 2019). Even the lower number is a significant increase on the preceding Late Period (Hubschmann 2019), itself far better attested than those before (Long 2019a; 2019b). Excavations at Ismant al-Kharab have

yielded securely contexted and dated ceramic assemblages of the second to third centuries and of the late third to fourth centuries, and so these can be used to assess the dating of sites assigned to the Roman and Late Roman periods during the survey. It can now be seen that the increase in sites, reflecting increase in human activity, was gradual during the first millennium, accelerating in the Ptolemaic period, but in the three centuries of the Roman period site numbers almost quadrupled, and in the Late Roman period they reduced to double the scale of the Ptolemaic period (Hope 2019b). The number of sites within each century of the Late Roman period, as with those of the Roman period, cannot yet be determined. How far into the Late Roman period the sites extend is yet to be determined also, but certainly, there is ample evidence for the sixth to seventh centuries, especially at Mut al-Kharab.

Many questions remain unresolved. The numbers of sites during the periods we are concerned with here indicate substantial variation in population, but it is not possible to estimate actual sizes. We do not know either from where the people came who occupied the many new sites. Was there a redistribution of population already in Dakhleh? Were people from the valley and other oases encouraged to take up residence, and if so, were incentives offered as in the recent past? Does the latter scenario account for the close connections between Kellis and various valley sites seen in the documents and the knowledge of classical painting (Chapters 3 and 10) and architecture that the wealthier Kellis residents adopted (Chapter 2)? The interest in Dakhleh has been attributed to investment in its agricultural potential (Bagnall 2015) and especially the production of certain crops and their products for which there was demand in the Nile valley: olive oil, dates, figs, jujubes and cotton, along with alum. These commodities could be transported relatively inexpensively by camel, but the costs involved would have been factored into the viability of the trade. The environment in the valley was also not suitable for growing cotton. While the data on which this is based are mostly fourth century, it is believed to reflect the situation also in preceding centuries. Trade with regions both to the south and north along well-established routes will also have been a factor. The general statements about settlement numbers must be treated with caution as they do not take into consideration the size and nature of sites: some are single buildings, some small and some large settlements; the size of cemeteries is an estimate only. In addition, it must be remembered that, undoubtedly, not all sites have been identified; some are under sand dunes, others under cultivation, while more have been completely lost as a result of wind erosion and a combination of these factors.

The picture now emerging of the settlement pattern and history in Roman and Late Roman Dakhleh can be summarised (Hope 2019b). The principal foci of activity were four large sites. From west to east they are: Amhida, now known to have been called Trimithis in Greek, derived from the Egyptian name for the site, possibly to be equated with the ‘town of *sa-wehat*’ in earlier inscriptions (Kaper 2012a, 271); Mut al-Kharab, the Mothis of the Kellis texts and Mut in earlier inscriptions (Kaper 1992, 130–2); Ismant al-Kharab; and ‘Ain Birbiyya, ancient *‘Imrt* in Egyptian and possibly the Mesobe of the Kellis texts (Kaper 1992, 122–4; 2012a, 270). Mothis and Trimithis had been occupied since the Old Kingdom, and Mothis was the capital of Dakhleh in the Late Roman period and undoubtedly the largest settlement, though today only the huge temple enclosure, the largest in the Western Desert, survives. The settlements at the others were approximately the same size. Each of these sites has stone temples, a mark of their significance, and all but ‘Ain Birbiyya have closely associated large cemeteries. Another stone temple is located at ‘Ain al-Azizi, south-west of Ismant al-Kharab, around which there is a sizeable settlement; its ancient name is unknown. Settlements, isolated structures and cemeteries cluster around the four main sites but are also scattered between them (Hope 2019b, figure 1). Today the area due west of Balat for some 15 km is largely deserted; this is on the whole reflected in the survey data. Roman activity otherwise occurs throughout the oasis. In general, the distribution coincides with areas of contemporary cultivation, showing that the same regions were fertile and exploitable two millennia ago; some occur beyond this on the west and east. An estimated total of 245 sites is known; 196 were active in the Roman period and 112 in the Late Roman period, with 62 being occupied in both (Table *1.1). Gross figures show an even distribution of sites in the major sections of the oasis: west from Dayr al-Hagar to Amhida, centre from south-east of Dayr Abu Matta to Ismant al-Kharab, and east from south-west of Balat to Teneida. The isolated buildings are often associated with wells and were clearly farmsteads, and major earth works occur near Dayr al-Hagar to enhance water supply to cultivation. This was greatly improved by the digging of many wells, use of the water wheel (*saqiyya*) and in the east near Teneida by underground water reservoirs (qanats).

Two particular types of structures deserve comment for the information on economic and religious activity that they provide: pigeon lofts and mud-brick temples. Either singly or in groups, pigeon lofts, or *columbaria*, occur throughout the oasis (Mills 1993); they seem to date to the Roman period, but whether later also is not known. They are characterised by

two vaulted rooms at ground level with an upper storey arranged to accommodate ceramic nesting pots set into walls and/or pillars. Often there are hundreds of these vessels or their emplacements; in Kharga Oasis one is estimated to have had 700 recesses (Warner 2018, 381–2). The pigeons would have provided protein but also guano for fertiliser. The number of such buildings is uncertain due to issues of preservation and lack of excavation, but there are at least 42, and possibly 47. They are on average quite small, from 6 x 7 m to 10 x 8 m, though some are far larger; one in the west is part of a complex 17.5 x 23 x 7 m with a central court 12 m square, and another possesses three storeys with 10 rooms. Approximately 30 of these lofts occur in the west around Dayr al-Hagar, clearly indicating significant agricultural activity in the region. There are five in the centre of the oasis, including one at Kellis (Chapter 2; Figure 2.5), and at least six in the east, with two in the barren area south-west of Balat.

The temples are of two plans (Figure *1.2; Mills 1982b, 129; Kaper 1997b, 7). Type 1 is elongated with a large outer room, which may have niches in its walls, giving access to 2–3 smaller inner rooms all on one axis. Type 2 possess 2–3 rooms axially arranged that may be preceded by other rooms, but they lack the elongated outer room. There are 11 examples of Type 1 and four examples of Type 2. The distribution pattern is interesting as they generally occur in rather isolated locations, some with small settlements and some without, often on the perimeter of the oasis, and a few are on the low terraces beyond the cultivation. Type 2 is attested in the west near Dayr al-Hagar and due east of Amhida, in the centre south-west of ‘Ain al-Gedida and in the east at Bashendi. Examples of Type 1 do not occur in the west, but are known in the centre at ‘Ain al-Gedida (Aravecchia 2018) and Qasr al-Halakah east of Kellis, while the remainder are in the east, including two in the barren area south-west of Balat. Only one has been fully excavated, at ‘Ain al-Gedida, so their date is largely unknown, but they undoubtedly functioned during the Roman period. Whether any were active before this cannot be determined yet, though some Ptolemaic ceramics have been identified at four, including examples of both types. Choosing the location of such important structures would have been carefully deliberated and should reflect local perceptions of the significance of landscape and specific topographic features. Fifteen mud-brick temples are reported in Kharga (Ikram 2018a).

A brief description now of Kellis will serve as an introduction to discussions throughout this volume. Excavations commenced in 1986 and continued to 2010; more work is planned. The research objectives of the

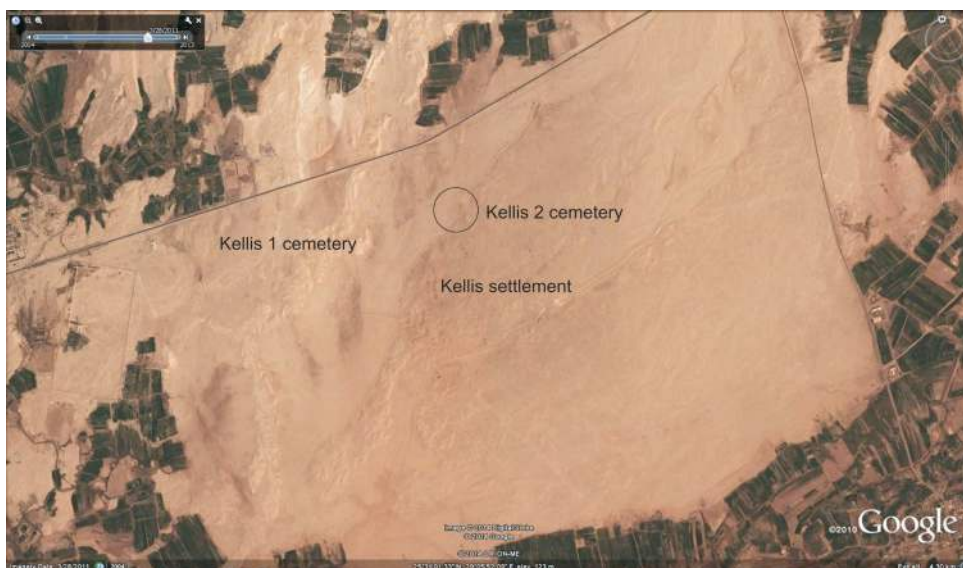


Figure 1.2. Google Earth image (2010) showing topography of Ismant al-Kharab.

excavations were many, especially as it was the first large site of the Roman–Late Roman period to be explored in Dakhleh. They relate to both the individual site, such as its date of occupation, nature of activity at the site, religious beliefs, economic basis and interconnections locally and nationally, and specifically obtaining data that might cast light upon the expansion discussed above. Most of these themes are examined throughout this work. First the name. Its origin is uncertain. It is found in hieroglyphs in Shrine I of the Main Temple complex (Chapter 9), in the titles of the goddess Neith, who is called Mistress of *Qylt* (𓆎𓆏𓆑𓆒), and this renders the pronunciation of the Greek name Kellis quite accurately (Kaper 2010a, 197). The Greek *kappa* (K) is generally rendered in Egyptian as *q*. Remarkably, when the name is written in Coptic Egyptian sources from the fourth century the spellings, which are varied, mostly commence with *G* (g), derived from Demotic Egyptian. The *-is* ending of the name occurs regularly in Greek renderings of Egyptian words or names. A possible non-Egyptian origin of the name Kellis may be the Latin *cella*, ‘storeroom’, written as *kella* in Greek. This might explain the hieroglyphic writing with its final sign of a house. The main objection to this etymology is that the term *kella* has not been found in Egypt from the early Roman period, when the village of Kellis received its name. Until more data are available, the meaning of the name and its derivation must remain