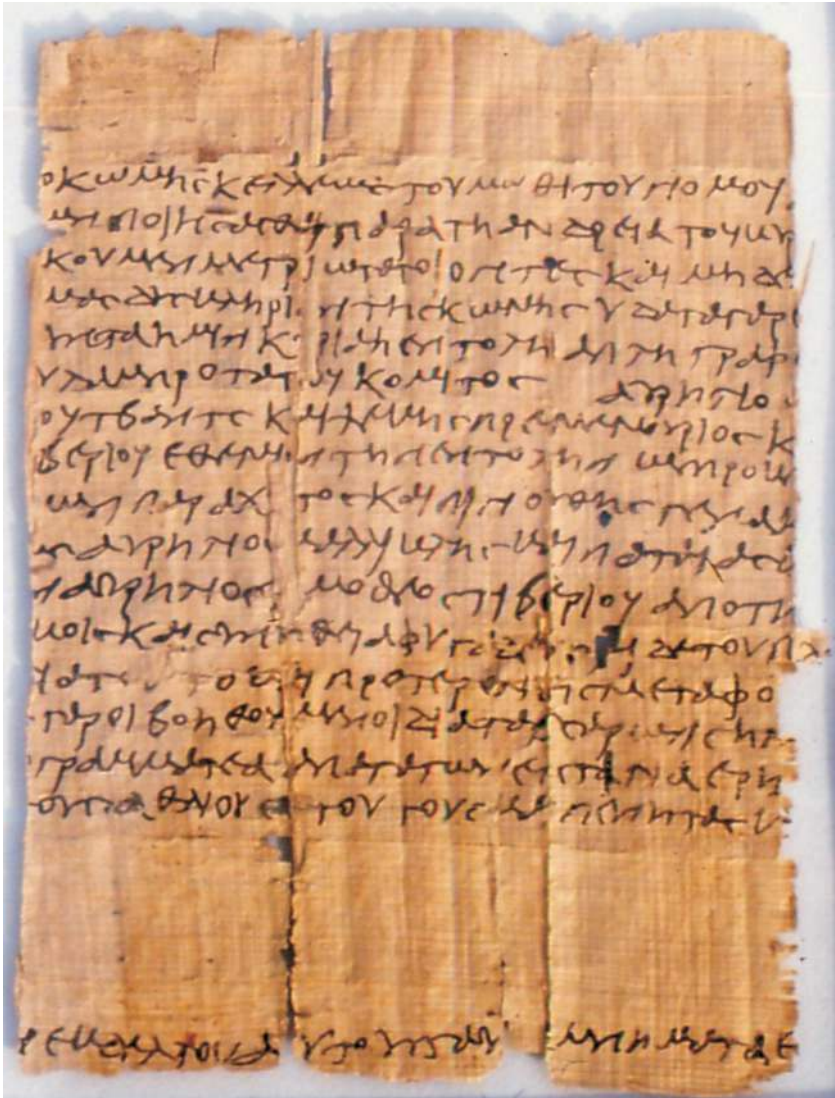


## Kellis

Kellis was a village in the Dakhleh Oasis in the Egyptian Western Desert, inhabited continuously from the first to the late fourth century CE. Previously unexcavated, it has in recent decades yielded a wealth of data unsurpassed by most sites of the period due to the excellent state of preservation. We know the layout of the village with its temples, churches, residential sectors and cemeteries, and the excavators have retrieved vast quantities of artefacts, including a wealth of documents. The study of this material yields an integrated picture of life in the village, including the transition from ancient religious beliefs to various branches of Christianity. This volume provides accounts of the lived-in environment and its material culture, social structure and economy, religious beliefs and practices, and burial traditions. The topics are covered by an international team of specialists, culminating in an inter-disciplinary approach that will illuminate life in Roman Egypt.

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*P.Kellis Gr. 3: House 1, mid-fourth century.*

This fragmentary document in Greek was the first to be discovered that provided the ancient name of the site as Kellis of the Mothite nome (top line). The document is apparently an order, referring to a petition before the *praeses* or *dux* of the Thebaid, and concerns the transfer or transport of water. The claimants refer to themselves as ‘these poor and wretched ones’, and there is a tantalising reference to banishment. It is witnessed by a considerable number of people, which may indicate that it was issued at a local, village level.

# Kellis

## A Roman-Period Village in Egypt's Dakhleh Oasis

---

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## *Dedication*

---



James E. Knudstad at work  
in Dakhleh Oasis  
(courtesy Rosa A. Frey).

It is with great pleasure that we offer a double dedication of this volume:

To all of the Egyptian antiquities inspectors who participated in the excavation team and without whom our work would not have been possible, and especially Maher Bashendi Amin, Ashraf Tarboushi and Kamil Bayoumi.

To the memory of James E. Knudstad, who revealed the potential of Kellis through his detailed architectural survey, drawings and notes, and insightful advice on site.

The Editors on behalf of all contributors.

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- \*8.5 The two wooden books from House 3.
- \*8.6 Drawing of both sides of a board fragment from C/2/7.
- \*8.7 B/3/1: inscribed clay tablet.
- \*8.8 Main Temple Shrine III (D/4): one of six reed pens.
  
- \*9.1 Main Temple, Contra-Temple: Pertinax venerating Tapsais.
- \*9.2 Main Temple, Contra-Temple: bronze figure of Tapsais.
- \*9.3 Shrine II Room 3: dipinti on the lowest layer of plaster.
- \*9.4 Main Temple, West Court: stela of Tutu as a sphinx with added lion's and crocodile's heads.
- \*9.5 Main Temple, Forecourt: stela of Septimius Severus.
- \*9.6 Main Temple: plaster bust of Isis-Demeter.
- \*9.7 Main Temple: fragment of a statue of Isis Lactans.
- \*9.8 Main Temple: reconstruction of imperial figure in stucco.
- \*9.9 Shrine II: fragments from a gilded wooden box-shrine.
- \*9.10 Main Temple: fragments from a wooden barque shrine.
  
- \*10.1 Shrine I Room 1: mask-like face in interlocking octagon design on west vault.
- \*10.2 Shrine I Room 1: scale-like pattern from west vault.
- \*10.3 Shrine I Room 1: vine motif around panels in south-west corner.
- \*10.4 Shrine I Room 1: detail of black borders and vine decoration.
- \*10.5 Shrine I Room 1: nearly complete bird atop panel on north wall.
- \*10.6 Shrine I Room 1: detail of mask (Medusa) on east wall.
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- \*10.9 Shrine I Room 2: partial reconstruction of face.

- \*11.1 The Small East Church: decoration in the apse and the sanctuary façade.
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- \*11.7 Oxyrhynchus: Chapel Tomb 23.
  
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- \*14.2 The Christian cemetery in the Sacred Animal Necropolis, Saqqara.
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## Preface

In 1977 the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) was formed as a consortium of archaeologists and environmentalists, designed to study the history of Dakhleh Oasis, Western Desert of Egypt. Our self-imposed remit is to investigate the history of human activity and development and the history and development of the landscape and resources of the oasis during the period of human presence, which has turned out to mean a span of some 400,000 years. Various investigators of the team have been responsible for the recovery and study of all the many aspects of this oasis area.

Dakhleh Oasis is about 2,000 sq km in area, centred on 25° 30' N and 29° 07' E, with a largely agricultural population. The flat oasis bottom land is watered only from underground sources in the sealed sandstone aquifers, which are not replenished from elsewhere, but which were filled with rainwater thousands of years ago during a recent Saharan wet phase. The population is distributed in villages, each village being surrounded by its farmland. The crops grown are basic food crops – cereals, vegetables and some fruits. Animal husbandry includes cattle, goats and sheep, poultry and rabbits, kept for meat, eggs and milk. The donkey is the main beast of burden, now being replaced by mechanical transport.

The Project began its study with a walking survey during which were recorded all ancient remains, all environmental evidence, as well as the present-day oasis landscape and settlement. In all, some 450 ancient 'sites' were recorded during the five years of the main part of the survey, as well as geological, zoological and botanical information. During this period, the Project staff expanded annually as more specialists were added to the group. Sometimes, DOP fielded over a hundred people each season from many different countries around the world.

During the walking survey of the oasis in 1980 and 1981, the large site known as Ismant al-Kharab was examined by several members of the field team. Our testing here demonstrated the size and depth of the site, the quality of its extant mud-brick architecture, and the general dating, principally from the ceramics found. Prior to this fieldwork, the site had been visited by several early travellers, each of whom made note of the mud-brick ruins and the remains of a sandstone temple and chapel

structures, but none of whom made any significant archaeological observations.

Ismant al-Kharab ('Ismant the Ruin') lies south of the paved road on somewhat higher ground, and a couple of kilometres east of the modern town of Ismant. It is situated at 25° 31' 38" N and 29° 04' E. The site has been indexed as 31/420-D6-1 in the DOP system. Throughout the Roman and Late Roman periods it was known as Kellis.

The DOP, following the completion of the walking survey of the oasis, decided to excavate in a number of sites in order to further expose the quality and size of occupation in the oasis at various periods. One of the periods of greater occupation was during the centuries around the turn of the millennium when the Romans occupied Egypt, and thus it was decided to investigate one of the major sites of this period. I invited Colin Hope to direct this and, of the three large settlements in Dakhleh – Ismant al-Kharab, Mut al-Kharab and Amhida – chose Ismant al-Kharab, the one showing the greatest promise of return of information, judging from the results of the preceding survey. The site appeared to hold temple structures, churches, many mud-brick houses, industrial areas and cemeteries of considerable size. It would be a microcosm of the entire Roman period occupation in the Western Desert.

Colin Hope has functioned as the ceramics expert of the DOP since its beginnings in 1978, when he joined the Project. His contributions have been a most important aspect of our study in an area where every site since the Bashendi has a quantity of ceramic materials as a major factor in its artefact composition. Throughout the survey (1978–82) he had studied the pottery industry of the oasis in all its history. Included were the Neolithic assemblages, pharaonic settlement sites and cemeteries, Ptolemaic and Roman periods, and the succeeding Christian and medieval Islamic centuries. All of this was Colin's interest and provided him with a long sweep of development of the technology and the style of ceramics. Pottery, being ubiquitous on archaeological sites in Egypt, provides an open window to many aspects of ancient cultures. Interconnections between oasis sites, between oases, and between the oasis and other regions of NW Africa and the Mediterranean world, developments in both time and space, and cultural influences are but a few of the types of information provided by ceramics studies.

Excavation of Kellis has provided much more than the great benefits of ceramics studies. Here is a complex site that has yielded hard information on the economy of Dakhleh Oasis over a period of four hundred years, on domestic architecture of several social groups, on three distinctive religions,

on oasis agricultural practices, on trade and export, and on industrial processes. These and all other aspects of daily life at Kellis are the product of this painstaking excavation. Over the past seasons Colin's archaeological expertise has produced a large and detailed understanding of life in the oasis during the several centuries after the time of Christ, in particular at the town of Kellis.

The work of Colin Hope is a model of practice. He has always brought a number of his students into the Project. Several of these have now completed Ph.D. degrees on aspects of the site and the period and are actively pursuing independent research. Among these is Gillian Bowen, now a specialist on the Christian period of Dakhleh and a major contributor to each field season; she is the assistant director of the excavations at Kellis and has studied many of the other Christian sites in the oasis. Many of the Project's senior investigators have also participated in the study of the site. Colin and Gillian have developed a basic approach to the fieldwork which allows assistants to work without continual supervision, but which allows them to keep current with everything being done on site and which ensures that recording of the excavation is complete and up to date before returning to Melbourne at the end. Numerous publications of the field seasons and results at Kellis have appeared; seven volumes on the texts have been published and two on the excavations are in preparation. The present volume presents a survey of the results of the excavations and illustrates well the important contribution Kellis makes to the study of not only Dakhleh but also Roman Egypt at large.

ANTHONY. J. MILLS

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## Editorial Note

It has been necessary to place some of the illustrations used to accompany the text of this volume online in the website for the volume. Readers should consult these in conjunction with the volume at: [www.cambridge.org/9780521190329](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521190329). Such illustrations are indicated by an asterisk, e.g., Figure \*1.1. We hope this does not prove inconvenient.

A selection of the Kellis texts is provided in translation in the Appendix and they are referred to in the text where appropriate with a sequential document number given in bold.