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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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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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.
Contents

Dedication    [v]
List of Figures, Maps and Tables    [xi]
Preface    [xxi]
ANTHONY. J. MILLS
Acknowledgements    [xxv]
COLIN A. HOPE and GILLIAN E. BOWEN
Editorial Note    [xxvii]
Referencing Texts from Kellis    [xxix]
ANDREW CONNOR
Chronology    [xxx]
Maps    [xxxiii]

INTRODUCTION

1 Kellis in Context    [1]
COLIN A. HOPE

THE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT

2 Houses, Households, Household Activities    [15]
COLIN A. HOPE and GILLIAN E. BOWEN

3 Paintings from Domestic Contexts    [57]
HELEN WHITEHOUSE

4 Crafts    [79]
COLIN A. HOPE

4.1 Basketry, Cordage and Leatherwork    [82]
GILLIAN E. BOWEN

4.2 Ceramics    [91]
COLIN A. HOPE

4.3 Glass    [103]
MARIE-DOMINIQUE NENNA

4.4 Textiles    [116]
ROSANNE LIVINGSTONE
viii  Contents

ASPECTS OF LIFE AT KELLIS

5  Society and Social Structure  [129]
   ROGER S. BAGNALL

6  The Economy
   6.1  Local Economy  [135]
   ROGER S. BAGNALL
   6.2  Plant Husbandry and Local Subsistence  [143]
   URSULA THANHEISER
   6.3  Coinage  [155]
   GILLIAN E. BOWEN

7  The Administration of Kellis and Dakhleh Oasis  [169]
   ANDREW CONNOR

8  Literacy  [185]
   ANDREW CONNOR
   8.1  Greek  [186]
   ANDREW CONNOR
   8.2  Coptic  [193]
   IAIN GARDNER
   8.3  Demotic  [195]
   GÜNTER VITTMANN
   8.4  Hieroglyphic Egyptian  [198]
   OLAF E. KAPER
   8.5  Latin  [199]
   ANDREW CONNOR
   8.6  Writing Materials  [200]
   COLIN A. HOPE

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

9  The Pharaonic and Classical Religious Complexes
   and the Cult of Tutu  [203]
   COLIN A. HOPE, GILLIAN E. BOWEN and OLAF E. KAPER

10 Painted Decoration in the Main Temple Complex  [243]
    HELEN WHITEHOUSE

11 The Churches  [269]
    GILLIAN E. BOWEN

12 Types of Christianity: History and Spread, Organisation,
   Practices and Literature  [289]
    IAIN GARDNER
BURIAL PRACTICES AND POPULATION

13 The Traditional Cemeteries of Kellis    [307]
   COLIN A. HOPE, JUDITH McKENZIE and CARLO RINDI NUZZOLO

14 Christian Burial Practices    [343]
   GILLIAN E. BOWEN

15 Revealing Life through Death: A Review of the 
   Bioarcheological Studies of Human Remains    [367]
   TOSHA L. DUPRAS, SANDRA M. WHEELER, LANA J. WILLIAMS and 
   PETER G. SHELDRICK

CONCLUDING REMARKS

16 The Abandonment of Kellis    [391]
   COLIN A. HOPE and GILLIAN E. BOWEN

Appendix: Some Kellis Texts in Translation    [407]

Bibliography    [425]

Indices:
I. Kellis, the Site    [463]
II. People    [465]
III. Documents    [468]
IV. Sites, Excluding Kellis    [470]
V. General    [473]
Figures, Maps and Tables

Figures

1.1 Plan of Kellis. [4 and 5]
1.2 Topography of Ismant al-Kharab. [10]

2.1 Area B: plan of B/1 to B/3 structures. [16]
2.2 B/1/2: south-west corner of the court. [18]
2.3 B/3/1: plan. [20]
2.4 B/3/1 Room 7: paintings and roof collapse. [22]
2.5 B/3/2: staircase against Room 3. [24]
2.6 Area C: plan of C/1 and C/2 structures. [26]
2.7 C/2/8: general view. [28]
2.8 Area A: plan. [29]
2.9 Area A: plan of Houses 1–3 and the North Building. [30]
2.10 House 1 Room 4. [32]
2.11 House 1 Room 1: the kitchen. [33]
2.12 House 1 Room 7: the dining area (stibadium). [34]
2.13 House 2 Room 3: note plastering of the wall above the central door in ventilation space. [35]
2.14 House 4: plan. [36]
2.15 House 4: Rooms 4 and 6, and remains of upper storey. [37]
2.16 House 5: plan. [38]
2.17 D/8: plan. [39]
2.18 House 3 Room 6: floor deposit. [41]
2.19 Tentative family tree of Psais. [44]
2.20 Family tree of Tithoes, son of Petesis. [46]
2.21 House 2: wooden mallets and preformed blocks. [47]
2.22 House 2 kitchen: the Kellis Isocrates Codex and KAB in sand fill. [47]
2.23 Second-century family tree. [48]

3.1 B/1/2 Room 1: west wall in south-west corner. [59]
3.2 B/1/2: ‘Tumbling Blocks’ motif. [60]
3.3 B/3/1 Room 1A: ‘wallpaper pattern’. [61]
3.4 B/3/1 Room 11: apsidal niche at end of corridor. [62]
3.5 B/3/1 Room 1B: north wall. [63]
List of Figures

3.6 B/3/1 Room 6: north wall. [65]
3.7 B/3/1: plaster decoration from wall. [66]
3.8 B/3/1 Room 7: northern half. [68]
3.9 B/1/2 Room 30: wheeled vehicle. [70]
3.10 B/1/2 Room 30: possible erotic scene. [70]
3.11 B/1/2 Room 30: a gladiator. [70]

4.1.1 House 1: sewn-plaited basket. [83]
4.1.2 Kellis 1, Tomb 13: decorative sewn-plaited basket. [83]
4.1.3 West Tomb 1: coiled basket. [83]
4.1.4 North Building: paired counter-twined rush bag. [83]
4.1.5 House 1, Room 1: drawing of bed springing. [85]
4.1.6 North Tomb 2: sandals buried with Senpsais. [86]
4.1.7 House 4: fragment from a decorated leather basket. [86]
4.1.8 Main Temple: pair of leather sandals. [87]
4.1.9 B/3/1: leather sandal. [87]
4.1.10 Kellis 1, Tomb 23: depiction of boots on footcase. [88]

4.2.1 Ceramics of the Roman period from various locations. [94]
4.2.2 Ceramics of the Roman period from various locations. [95]
4.2.3 House 1: ceramics of the Late Roman period. [97]
4.2.4 House 1: ceramics of the Late Roman period. [98]
4.2.5 House 2: reconstructed vessels of the Late Roman period. [99]
4.2.6 Main Temple, north-west corner of Inner Temenos: elaborately decorated jar. [100]

4.3.1 House 4: mosaic glass. [104]
4.3.2 Enclosure 4 cache: the diota, head-vase and painted gladiator jug. [105]
4.3.3 Large East Church: engraved cup. [108]
4.3.4 Blown glass vessels from various locations. [109]
4.3.5 Large East Church: fragments of painted glass. [110]
4.3.6 Main Temple (D/1): remains of multi-string necklace. [114]

4.4.1 Main Temple: patchwork; the decorative pieces are cuffs from a narrow-sleeved woollen tunic. [119]
4.4.2 Kellis 2 Grave 271: remains of an infant’s woollen hooded dalmatic. [120]
4.4.3 Main Temple Shrine II: two views of the hat. [122]
4.4.4 Main Temple: part of two pin bands and a tapestry-woven orbiculus from a corner of a woollen mantle. [123]
4.4.5 C/2/2: part of a soft furnishing, possibly a wall hanging, woven in cotton with dyed wool decoration. [124]
4.4.6 House 4: fragment with coloured bands, possibly a pillow or other bedding item, woven in cotton and dyed wool. [125]
4.4.7 B/1/2: fragment of imported cotton cloth from India. [127]

9.1 Main Temple complex. [204]
9.2 Main Temple: column bases and pedestals of the Portico. [207]
9.3 Main Temple: reconstructed lintel from door 1B. [208]
9.4 Main Temple: the Contra-Temple. [210]
9.5 Main Temple: plaster bust of bearded male in a tondo. [211]
9.6 Shrine I: reconstruction of Tutu with Nemesis. [211]
9.7 Shrine I, Room 1: western half, looking west. [212]
9.8 Shrine I: part of the reconstruction of the scene of the Seven Hathors. [213]
9.9 Shrine II and Shrine III, looking west. [217]
9.10 Main Temple, West Court: well and sub-floor structures. [219]
9.11 Main Temple: southern part of the façade showing niche and remodelling, looking west. [222]
9.12 Main Temple: faience Harpokrates. [226]
9.13 Main Temple: painted panel depicting Isis. [226]
9.14 Main Temple: bronze figure of Hermes. [226]
9.15 Temple of Esna: portable barque shrine of Neith. [230]
9.16 West Temple complex. [232]
9.17 The West Temple: the two stone rooms. [233]
9.18 The Nymphaeum, looking north-east. [235]
9.19 The Nymphaeum: plan. [235]

10.1 Shrine II: green panel scheme. [244]
10.2 Shrine I Room 1: fragment from the western end of the vault. [244]
10.3 Shrine I Room 1: reconstructed south-east corner of the square centrepiece, goddess supporting the shield. [246]
10.4 Palmyra, Temple of Bel: the ‘Zodiac ceiling’ in the north thalamos. [247]
10.5 Shrine I Room 1: fallen vault fragment with part of imbricated shield and central tondo. [248]
10.6 Shrine I Room 1: detail of the bust within the tondo. [249]
10.7 Shrine I Room 1: western end of south wall. [252]
10.8 Shrine I Room 1: north section of east wall. [253]
10.9 Shrine I Room 1: detail of lotus motif between panels of the dado. [254]
10.10 Shrine I Room 1: apron from niche in west wall. [255]
10.11 Shrine I Room 2: reconstruction of the figures on the lower west wall. [257]
10.12 Shrine IV South Room: decoration of the north wall. [260]
List of Figures

Shrine IV Outer Room: detail of the south wall. [261]
Main Temple colonnade: detail of column decoration. [262]
B/3/I Room 7: frieze with yellow snapped draughting lines and compass-drawn circles. [264]
B/3/I Room 7: mask-like faces in the panels. [265]
Shrine I Room 1: graffiti on the north wall. [268]

The East Churches. [270]
The Small East Church: north–south section in front of the sanctuary. [271]
The Small East Church: the sanctuary. [272]
Small East Church: apse south jamb decoration. [273]
Small East Church: apse north niche and decoration. [273]
The Large East Church: the pedestal, gouges in the columns for the screens and the bases of the seating. [275]
The Large East Church: return aisle. [276]
The Large East Church: the ambo, looking east. [276]
The Large East Church: the platform and apse entrance. [278]
The Large East Church, Room 4: the ovens and staircase. [279]
The West Church complex. [283]
The West Church complex looking south-east. [284]
The West Church complex: south rooms 3–7. [285]

WT1 and 2: looking north-west. [309]
WT1 and 2: plan. [309]
Wadi Ghirza North Tomb A. [309]
WT1: capital with attached Medusa head in a tondo. [309]
North Stone Tomb: plan and sections. [311]
The North Tomb Group. [312]
NT1: plan and elevation of the south wall. [314]
NT2: plan, section and elevation of the east wall. [314]
NT1: south wall looking north. [314]
The Kellis 1 Cemetery: plan. [318]
K1 Tomb 8: entrance. [319]
K1 Tomb 10: burials with red shrouds. [320]
WT1: longitudinal alignment of bodies. [320]
NT6: pit burials. [321]
K1 Tomb 2: body attached to palm-rib rack. [322]
K1 Tomb 5: well-preserved human remains. [323]
NT2: the body of Senpsais within a ceramic coffin. [324]
K1 Tomb 10. [326]
K1 Tomb 25. [326]
List of Figures

13.20  K1 Tomb 10: footcase.  [327]
13.21  K1 Tomb 10: upper part of the full body cover.  [329]
13.22  K1 Tomb 10: body 1.  [330]
13.23  NT2: reconstruction of the funerary bier.  [332]
14.1  K2 cemetery: plan showing the area excavated by 2011.  [344]
14.2  K2: sections of substructure types.  [346]
14.3  K2: plans and sections of various superstructures.  [346]
14.4  K2: Tombs 1, 2 and surrounding graves.  [348]
14.5  K2: Tomb 3 and surrounding graves.  [348]
14.6  K2: Tomb 4 and surrounding graves.  [349]
14.7  K2: Tombs 5 and 6 and surrounding graves.  [349]
14.8  K2: Tomb 4 showing the portico and surrounding graves, looking east.  [350]
14.9  K2 Tomb 4 Grave 669: oval ceramic coffin.  [352]
14.10 K2 Grave 636: anthropomorphic ceramic coffin.  [352]
14.11 K2 Tomb 4 Grave 692: top of ceramic coffin and vaulting.  [352]
14.12 K2 Tomb 4 Grave 677: infant buried in ceramic vessel.  [353]
14.13 K2 Grave 35 (formerly 29): ceramics above the body.  [354]
14.14 Enclosure 4: graves in the West Church and elsewhere in the enclosure.  [358]
14.15 Enclosure 4: Graves 1 and 2 superstructures, before and after removal of mud plaster.  [359]
14.16 Enclosure 4: Graves 1 and 2 female burials.  [360]
14.17 NT1: room numbers and Christian graves.  [362]
14.18 Cemetery near Muzawwaqa: plan.  [364]

15.1  North Tombs 5, 7 and 16: mummified individuals.  [371]
15.2  Area A House 4: preserved fetal individual.  [375]
15.3  Kellis 2: cribra orbitalia indicated in the superior portion of two adult eye orbits.  [383]
15.4  Kellis 2: severe osteoarthritic changes in the knee joint of an older adult individual.  [386]
15.5  Kellis 2: environmental indicators of life demonstrated by kidney stones and arteriosclerosis.  [387]
15.6  Kellis 2: four examples of dental disease.  [388]
15.7  Kellis 2: four examples of traumatic fractures.  [389]
15.8  Kellis 2: three different examples of hip fractures due to osteoporosis; each fracture shows healing and use of leg.  [390]
List of Figures, Maps and Tables

16.1 B/1/2: south wall showing blocking in the original door and raised sill.  [397]
16.2 Main Temple: brick blocking in the outer gate.  [398]
16.3 Shrine I Room 1: a temporary camp.  [399]
16.4 Shrine I Room 1: graffiti on west section of north wall; Coptic inscription is on lower part of right panel and the cross left of the bird.  [400]
16.5 Shrine III: channel in the floor.  [401]
16.6 Main Temple West Court: stone blocks under the collapsed Inner Temenos wall.  [402]
16.7 Large East Church: stone pavers sitting on brick rubble.  [405]

Maps

1 Map of Egypt showing sites mentioned in the text, based upon C. Riggs (ed.), 2012, Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt, Oxford University Press, Oxford.  [xxix]
2 Map of the Great Oasis showing sites mentioned in the text.  [xxx]

Tables

6.3.1 Provenance of major coin finds at Kellis.  [157]
6.3.2 Coin finds from House 3 by emperor/period.  [158]
6.3.3 Mints represented in the Kellis coinage.  [161]
6.3.4 Striking mints represented in the Kellis coinage according to period.  [162]
6.3.5 Coinage from ’Ain al-Sabil according to mints and periods represented.  [163]
6.3.6 Coins from the Luxor Hoard according to mints and periods represented.  [164]
6.3.7 Coins from a hoard purchased in the Fayyum according to mints and periods represented.  [164]
6.3.8 Coins from the rubbish dumps at Oxyrhynchus according to mints and periods represented.  [165]

15.1 Kellis 1: Total number of individuals in Tombs 1 to 21.  [368]
15.2 Kellis 1: Available age at death data for individuals from Tombs 1 to 13.  [369]
15.3 North Tombs 5, 6, 7 and 16: demographic breakdown of the number of juveniles and adult females and males.  [371]
15.4 West Tomb 1: demography of the individuals.  [372]
15.5 Kellis 2: demographic profile of analyzed individuals.  [379]
Online Figures and Tables

*Figures*

1.1 The remains of one of the large structures (B/1/1–4) at Kellis visible from the road.
1.2 Mud-brick temples: Type 1 from near Teneida and Type 2 from near ‘Ain al-Gedida.
1.3 Area D enclosures.
1.4 The Bath House showing plan of surface remains and results of magnetometer survey.

2.1 Reconstructions of a plaster bust of Isis from B/3/1.
2.2 B/3/1 Room 10: Reconstructed plaster capital.
2.3 B/3/2: Mud jar sealings with small inscribed ceramic docket and fibre strap.
2.4 Plastering in House 2 Room 4.
2.5 D/8 Room 7 with hearth and grinding stone.
2.6 D/8 Room 2: remains of window frame.
2.7 Spindles and spindle whorls from Area A houses.

3.1 B/1/2: fragment of ceiling from the Colonnaded Court, painted with a repeat pattern of octagons.
3.2 B/1/30: red-ground panelled scheme painted at the north-west end of the Colonnaded Court, with a bust of Athena at the centre of a panel.
3.3 B/3/1 Room 1A: busts of Isis and Serapis featured in fragments of the ceiling, painted with a geometric repeat pattern.
3.4 B/3/1 Room 1B: latticework design painted on the preserved base of one of the four columns.
3.5 B/3/1 Room 1B: mask-like female face and a golden vessel, the central motif on one of the north wall panels.
3.6 B/3/1 Room 1B: cockerel and lilies painted on a north wall panel.
3.7 B/3/1 Room 4: corner detail of the fictive architectural scheme, with sketchy ‘Corinthian’ column capitals.
List of Online Figures

*3.8  B/3/1 Room 3: painted imitations of geometric opus sectile designs in coloured stones.
*3.9  B/1/2 Room 30: detail of a charcoal sketch of figures in an arcade.

*4.1  Fragments from wooden door locks.
*4.2  Wooden door key.
*4.3  Wooden hair comb.
*4.4  Bronze brooch from House 4.
*4.5  Bronze ewer from D/8.
*4.6  The Imperial Faience vessel from House 4.

*4.1.1  Sewn-plait basket from C/2/4.
*4.1.2  Section of a decorative coiled platter from the Main Temple.
*4.1.3  Section and base of a stake-and-strand basket from House 3.
*4.1.4  Fragment of a mat from C/2/5.
*4.1.5  Crudely made sandal from C/2/8.
*4.1.6  Soles from quality footwear with the inners woven in dark and light palm-leaf from the Main Temple.
*4.1.7  Palm-leaf shoe from Shrine II.
*4.1.8  Fragment of rope from Shrine I.
*4.1.9  Fragments from a saddle blanket from Shrine IV.
*4.1.10  Fragment of a donkey muzzle or an item used for suspension from Shrine II.
*4.1.11  Leather sandal from Kellis 1 cemetery Tomb 16.
*4.1.12  Child’s sandal from the Main Temple forecourt.
*4.1.13  Upper section of a leather shoe from Area B/3 surface.
*4.1.14  Heel of a leather shoe from C/2/1.

*4.2.1  C/2/4: remains of the pottery kilns.
*4.2.2  House 4: large decorated bowl.
*4.2.3  House 4: decorated flask.
*4.2.4  Ceramic lamps from House 3 floor, House 2 floor, Large East Church, and surface.
*4.2.5  Surface, Main Temple: multi-spouted lamp.
*4.2.6  House 4: frog lamp.
*4.2.8  House 5: figurine heads.
**List of Online Figures**

*4.4.1* Kellis 1 tomb 18: child’s linen *kolobion*.

*4.4.2* A sticharion, decorated with plain clavi and sleeve bands.

*4.4.3* Kellis 2 grave 360: child’s linen dalmatic with blue-dyed woollen clavi and sleeve bands.

*4.4.4* Area A, North Building: part of a woollen sleeve cuff decorated with tapestry-woven bands.

*4.4.5* House 3: remains of saddle padding.

*4.4.6* West Tomb 1, body 5: end of a linen shroud.

*8.1* B/3/2: inscribed ceramic label in jar stopper.

*8.2* Main Temple Shrine I (D/2): page from the miniature codex with parody of Homer.

*8.3* Main Temple (D/1): fragments of Demotic papyrus.

*8.4* C/2/8: Demotic ostrakon mentioning a bank.

*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.


*9.2* 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.

*10.7* Shrine I Room 1: cockerel on east wall.

*10.8* Shrine I Room 2: leg from an armed divinity.

*10.9* Shrine I Room 2: partial reconstruction of face.
List of Online Figures and Tables

*11.1 The Small East Church: decoration in the apse and the sanctuary façade.
*11.2 ‘Ain al-Sabil: the church showing the ambo and sanctuary.
*11.3 The Large East Church: line-drawing of a capital.
*11.4 The Large East Church: decoration on the soffit.
*11.5 Decoration on two of the half-attached columns.
*11.6 The Large East Church: painted crux ansata.
*11.7 Oxyrhynchus: Chapel Tomb 23.

*14.1 Bagawat, Kharga Oasis: Fakhry Tomb Type 1.
*14.3 The cemetery at el-Deir, Kharga Oasis.
*14.4 The Main Cemetery at Poundbury, United Kingdom.

Tables

*1.1 Suggested numbers of Roman and Late Roman sites.
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.
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. 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.
Referencing Texts from Kellis

Texts from Kellis are found in a variety of languages and on a variety of material. These are referenced according to a standardised, abbreviated system for papyri, ostraka, and tablets from Graeco-Roman Egypt. In the case of Kellis, texts are generally referenced by their object type ($P =$ papyrus, $O =$ ostrakon, $T =$ tablet), publication series ($Papyri$ $from$ $Kellis$), language (Greek, e.g.) and publication number. The twelfth Greek papyrus document published in the $Papyri$ $from$ $Kellis$ series, therefore, would be $P.Kellis$ $Gr.$ 12. Because texts in multiple languages are published within the same volume of Kellis papyri, the use of volume numbers can introduce confusion and has been omitted. The following concordance gives the volume and title of, and in which volume a particular text might be found, according to its abbreviated reference. The aforementioned $P.Kellis$ $Gr.$ 12, for instance, is found in $Papyri$ $from$ $Kellis$ I: $Greek$ $Papyri$ $from$ $Kellis$ I. Some additional texts have been published elsewhere. These are cited by a separate abbreviated reference or, when in an academic journal, in the conventional reference style. All volumes in the $Papyri$ $from$ $Kellis$ series are published by Oxbow Books.

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xxix