THE ARTEFACT

Pacific Rim Archaeology

The Journal of the Archaeological and Anthropological Society of Victoria

AT ISSN 0044-9075

Volume 26

2003

Melbourne, Australia

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The Archaeological and Anthropological Society of Victoria, Inc.
The Artefact, Volume 26, 2003

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The 2001–2 Excavations at Mut el-Kharab in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt

Colin A. Hope

Abstract: The second season of excavations at Mut el-Kharab in Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis was conducted in 2001–2. They confirmed that the remains of the temple of the god Seth, Lord of the Oasis, are built on strata containing Old Kingdom material and exposed extensive sherd dumps with material dating from the New Kingdom to Late Period. The existing building appears to date to the Late Period, as may the construction of its massive enclosure wall; inscribed and decorated blocks from the temple area range in date from the New Kingdom to Ptolemaic Period. A domestic structure, possibly of the late Roman Period, was excavated adjacent to the temple, and activity during the Islamic Period was documented. Two tombs were investigated south of the temple, both dating to the Late Period; one is elaborately decorated and the first of its type to be found in Dakhleh. The work confirms the significance of the site over a four thousand year time span.
This rectangular building, oriented east/west, comprised five rooms in its final form that are the result of various modifications to an original structure. The external wall and probably all internal walls were constructed atop brick rubble that overlies a hardened earth surface directly above.
Old Kingdom deposits. This sequence was revealed only in the southwestern corner of the building in Room 4, where the rubble occupies a depth of 0.7m below the upper earth floor of the room. The external walls originally had three doorways: one in the eastern end of the north wall of Room 2 and two in the eastern wall into Rooms 1 and 5. The original internal layout comprised four rooms with two larger rooms on the north, Rooms 1 and 2, and two smaller rectangular rooms on the south, Rooms 3/4 and 5. Room 1 was entered through a door in the centre of its east wall and gave access to Room 2 via a door through their common wall; Room 2 was also entered by the door in its north wall. The eastern doors into each room are on the same axis. At the east end of the south wall of both rooms, doors gave access to the other rooms, 5 south of 1 and 3/4 south of 2; Room 5 was also accessed by the door in its east wall. It is possible that the eastern doors opened off a corridor that separated the structure from the main temple to the east. In Trench 4, excavated adjacent to this structure in 2001 (Hope 2001, 38–9, Figure 3), a mud-brick paving was discovered abutting the exterior of the east wall of this shrine and which extended to the edge of a pit that was probably the foundation trench for the western wall of the temple.

Room 1 was excavated in the 2000/1 season (Hope 2001, 39–41, Figure 4); it has internal dimensions of 3.87m east/west on the north and 3.92 m on the south, and 3.82 m north/south on the west and 3.90m on the east. It was originally provided with a stone-paved floor supported upon mud-brick foundation walls that abut the walls of the room. The central part of the room between these foundation walls was filled with dumped ceramic of Dynasty XXV date (Hope in press) in which were objects of earlier date, including several of the New Kingdom (Hope 2001, 39–40). The inscribed and decorated block of Psamtek I was found in its north-eastern corner. Below the dumped material Old Kingdom strata were revealed. These were also found under Room 2 in 2001/2, the walls and floor structure of which were constructed to the same depth onto this material.

Room 2 is 7.2m east/west and 4.7m north/south. Below floor level, abutting the north, south and east walls, but 0.6m from the west wall, are red mud-brick walls 0.45m high that have a width of 0.3m on the north, 0.7m on the south, 0.9m on the east and 1.4m on the west. Within the area created by these walls and abutting them are yellow mud-brick walls, also 0.45m high, but 0.6m wide on the north, south and west, and 0.7m wide on the east (Figure 2, Stage 2). Below these latter walls on the south and west a ledge of mud bricks projects 0.8m; it is only one brick in height (Figure 3, Stage 4; Plate 1). The surface of this ledge was covered by an earth layer that extended across the remaining part of the room over sand containing Old Kingdom ceramics. Above this surface, contained by the
yellow-brick walls, was a powdery earth material with some smashed sandstone under irregularly shaped stone blocks (Figure 2, Stage 3). These blocks were then covered by compacted earth to the level of the top of both the yellow- and red-brick walls. Over the entire room, save where intrusive pits had been cut, there was a deposit of water-hardened earth with areas of crushed sandstone. This material can be related to a similar deposit found in Room 1 upon which an original sandstone-paved floor was laid. No trace of this paving remained in Room 2 however, and the assumption is that it was removed during a major alteration to the room. Instead, atop the crushed sandstone and earth material in the centre of the room, there was a thin lens of clean yellow sand, 2–3cm thick, below a powdery earth material that supported the remains of a stone and baked-
brick structure (Figure 2, Stage 1). The extent and nature of this structure are uncertain. The bricks, laid obliquely from north-east to south-west, occupy a rectangular area approximately 1.85m north-south and 3m east-west in the centre of the room and the sandstone blocks occur at its edges, though only parts of nine of these remained. Traces of gypsum on the south wall of the room imply that stone blocks may have abutted this wall and partly closed the door into Room 3/4, although this may indicate that room had received a plaster facing. The feature appears to have been a stone-walled structure with a brick floor set within the original room, and which represents a major change to the original architecture.
Possibly coincident with the erection of this feature were other changes to the smaller southern rooms. Room 5, originally 4.32m east/west by 2m north/south, had two small rooms built at its eastern end that necessitated the blocking of the door from Room 1 and probably the eastern external door. To access the room it was necessary to cut a door through its western wall from Room 3/4. At some stage the latter space was divided into two creating a room 4m east/west and 2.1m north/south on the east (Room 3) and one on the west 2.1 north/south and 2.25 east/west (Room 4). When this was done no access to the western room was created. The north wall of Room 4 displays unusual construction technique, with a series of cavities within the fabric of the wall in its eastern part; the face of the western part of this wall is poorly preserved, and it may represent a repair to an original wall. The door into Room 3 from Room 2 was eventually blocked; this was done at the same stage as the stone and baked-brick structure was erected in Room 2, which implies that all other modifications to the southern chambers predated this event. Thus, in its final stage the building contained only two accessible rooms.

Throughout the collapse that filled the building were fragments of decorated and inscribed sandstone blocks and ostraka; the latter, like others from the site, are inscribed in both demotic and abnormal hieratic, some of which can be ascribed to Dynasties XXV–XXVI (c. 750–525). They are currently being studied by Dr Günter Vittmann of Würzburg University. Two joining blocks are decorated in a style very similar to that of the Psamtek I block from Room 1, and another in low raised relief preserves part of a hieroglyphic inscription reading ‘...beloved of the Lord of the Oasis’, undoubtedly a reference to Seth. A fragment of a cartouche, in rough raised relief preserving a final sign of a scarab beetle (...kheper), would likely have contained the name of one of several rulers of the Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 BCE). Possible identifications are with the birth name of the High Priest of Amun of Dynasty XXI Menkheperre (1045–992)3 or the throne names of either kings Osorkon I (Sekhemkheperre, 924–889) or Shoshenq V (Aakheperre, 767–730) of Dynasty XXII, or Piye/Piankh (Menkheperre, 747–716) of Dynasty XXV in whose reign the smaller Dakhleh Stela was inscribed (Janssen 1968). The rough style of the cutting of the cartouche has been taken to exclude the possibility that it attests the throne name of Thutmose III (Menkheperre, 1479–1425), part of whose throne name has been found on a block from the temple area in incised workmanship (see below). The most interesting blocks were discovered reused in the lower sandstone paving in Room 2. Found face upwards was the left side of a lintel and cornice from a door; most of the surface had been cut back to remove the decoration, but fortunately not all (Plate 2). On the extreme left the figure of a female making an offering is preserved; the style is clearly Ramesside. It appears to derive from either a door of a private house or possibly a tomb. Two large sections from a cavetto cornice with torus moulding
were found, as were sections from a doorsill. A decorated and painted block from the vicinity of the northern door into the room preserved a representation of what is tentatively identified as the front of a portable barque shrine and the short section of text that survives refers to Amun-Re.4

1.1.2 Trenches 7 and 10: the Main Temple;

Figures 3 and 4

Trenches 7 and 10 are located in the area of the depression with sandstone chips. Trench 7 is 9.5m east/west and 4m north/south and lies 2m due east of Trench 4 excavated in 2000–1, the latter being 10m east/west and 3m north/south and abutting the east wall of the mud-brick structure of Trench 6. Trench 10 lies 2m to the south of Trench 7 and is 10m east/west and 5m north/south. These trenches appear to span most of the width of the temple building and both abut a north/south mud-brick wall on the east (Contexts 37 in Trench 7 and 10 in Trench 10). The area has been extensively plundered for stone and various pits cut through floors.

As in Trench 4, Trench 7 revealed deposits of sand (Contexts 49, 51 and 54) underlying the temple foundations that contained Old Kingdom ceramics and lithics, and also ceramics of the latest of the indigenous mid-Holocene cultural units of the Dakhleh Oasis, termed the Sheikh Muftah Cultural Unit (most recently, Hope 2002, 45–51; McDonald et al. 2001; McDonald in press). No structures were found, though some of this material was associated with ash lenses. The foundations for the temple were either set on top of this material or dug into it. Resulting from the depredations of those who removed the stone for use elsewhere, and also robbers digging random pits, the layout of the building is not easy to determine. Over the sand deposits, others of similar composition were laid that contain a mixture of Old Kingdom and much later ceramics (Contexts 40 in Trench 7 and 19 in Trench 10), and these formed the base upon which a layer of brick rubble (Contexts 32–33 in Trench 7, and 35 in Trench 10) was laid as the foundation for the temple building. Whilst both trenches revealed what was first thought to be the remains of two mud-brick walls on north/south alignments (Contexts 41 in Trench 7 and 1 5c, 27 and 42–43 in Trench 10); these are better identified as parts of a brick platform that extended across the entire area and which comprised sections laid at different angles (Plate 3). This may have been supported by the wall at the eastern boundary of both trenches (Contexts 37 in Trench 7 and 10 in Trench 10); a similar arrangement was found in Trench 4 (Hope 2001, 38–9). Over this paving and on top of a lens of crushed sandstone set in mud plaster (Context 15b = 41 in Trench 10), sandstone paving was laid (Contexts 16 and 18 in Trench 7 and 29 in Trench 10). No trace of this paving remained in the eastern parts of the trenches, whilst it appears to be thicker in the northwestern corner of Trench 7 than elsewhere.
In the northwestern corner of Trench 10 the intersection of parts of two stone walls is preserved, one north/south against the edge of the trench and the other east/west (Context 15; Plate 3). These walls are built on the paving; the original width of neither was determined. Trench 7 preserves parts of two north/south stone walls 2.4m apart (Contexts 11 and 14). Near the southern end of the western wall are the remains of a stone door-pivot, indicating the location of a door connecting two spaces. At its southern end, that on the west may have been bounded by the sections of wall preserved in the northwestern corner of Trench 10.

Overlying the remains of the building were deposits of stone and brick rubble, amongst which was abundant ceramic ranging in date from the Late Period (664 onwards) to the medieval Mameluk Period. Architectural fragments were also found as well as decorated and/or inscribed blocks from different construction phases. The oldest surviving is from the reign of Thutmose III (1479–1425) of Dynasty XVIII; a fragment of a cartouche containing his throne name (Men-Kheper-<Re>-Setep-en-Re; Plate 4) was found in a deep pit (Context 33) in the eastern end of Trench 10, and a few other pieces stylistically datable to the same reign were also found. This pit also produced a fragment from a stela with a funerary inscription and two large blocks, possibly of the Third Intermediate Period (1069–664), one of which preserved part of an epithet of Seth. Trench 7 yielded a block from a doorway decorated in fine, low-raised relief with part of a jubilee relief, possibly also of the Third Intermediate Period. Between two notched palm fronds is part of a vertical line of hieroglyphic inscription that refers to the ‘establishment of annals (gnwt)’, and in two relief panels are the remains of a divine figure and a king. The format and text enable its identification as being from a jubilee scene (Redford 1986, 65–82). If the suggested date of the block is correct then during that period jubilee festivals are recorded elsewhere for King Osorkon II (874–850) and Shoshenq V (767–730) of Dynasty XXII, at Bubastis and Tanis respectively (Kitchen 1986, 320–2, 354), though whether they were the only rulers to celebrate such an event is perhaps unlikely. It should be noted that the quality of the cutting of this block is far superior to that of the cartouche fragment from Trench 6, one of the possible attributions of which is to Shoshenq V. One decorated sandstone block from the exterior right side of a door found in Trench 10 preserves part of the figure of a king offering linen to Amun. The style resembles that of the Psamtek I block found in Trench 6, and the upper part of a cartouche with a solar disc as the first sign inscribed on the side of the block accord with this identification, giving the throne name of this king (Wahibre). Finally, two fragments from a wall relief with a fecundity figure and an ibex may date to the Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BCE). This material indicates an extensive and continuous period of use for the temple, though the date of the construction of the surviving sections is, as yet, uncertain.
1.1.3 Trench 8: south of Main Temple Building

Figure 5

In 2000–1 Trench 5 was excavated against the western face of an approximately square mud-brick structure that appears to be preserved to two storeys in height (Hope 2001,41–3). The eastern face of this building is composite and apparently comprises several thicknesses of walls built against one another. These walls extend to the south of the building. In order to investigate the relationship between this structure and the southward-projecting walls, Trench 8 was located against the western face of a north/south wall that appears to be a continuation of one of these walls and aligned with Trench 7. It is 8m east/west and 4m north/south, and 7.9m south of the large brick structure (Figure 1).

Again, the lowest deposits excavated (Context 33), commencing 2.29m below the base of the eastern wall, contained Old Kingdom pottery with some New Kingdom and Late Period pieces at the interface with overlying material (Context 32). They were exposed only in a narrow area in the southeastern corner of the trench 1.94m east/west and 0.52m north/south (Figure 5). Above this, part of a dense pottery dump was exposed in the same area to a height of 1.88m and elsewhere in the south of the trench for its upper part only (Contexts 24–27 and 29–32; Plate 5, lower centre), but clearly this extends across the entire area of the trench including under the eastern wall. It produced in excess of 1332.5kg of pottery; the forms are dominated by roughly-made offering jars (so-called beer jars, compare Figure 8c–e), many with deliberately-perforated bases, that may be ascribed to the late Third Intermediate to early Late Period (Dynasties XXV to early XXVI; Hope in press). Also found were a variety of small bowls (Figure 6h–i), tall stands (Figure 6j), tall stands with bowls attached to their tops (offering stands, Figure 6g), fragments of local New Kingdom amphorae and decorated jars (Figure 6b–e), and bread moulds (Figure 6f). The material dates mostly to the end of the Third Intermediate Period (Dynasty XXV), though some is likely to be as early as Dynasty XIII (Figure 6g–i; Hope in press). A thick pocket of ash (Context 23) fills a pit in the sherd material in the south-west of the trench, and a deposit of compact brick rubble (Context 25) 0.375m thick separates the top of the sherd layer from the base of the east wall (Context 1). This wall is preserved to a height of 2.3m below topsoil.

Abutting the lower part of the west face of this wall is mud-brick rubble (Context 18), 0.75m thick at the south-eastern corner but increasing to a maximum of 1.875m on the west and over much of the trench (Contexts 26, 21, 16–18). This clearly represents several episodes of collapse or dump as the lowest 0.625–0.8m on the west extends under a north/south mud-brick wall (Context 11) at the western edge of the trench. This wall is 1m thick and preserved to a height of 0.825m; within the brick collapse running under this wall are pockets of crushed sandstone (Context 22). The top of the brick collapse at
its maximum depth is level with the extant top of the western wall and the upper rubble contains various sandstone blocks including some with traces of decoration and inscriptions. An east/west mud-brick wall (Context 15), preserved only a few courses in height, extended from the eastern face of the western wall 2.1m into the trench and was also built on top of the lowest rubble.

The width of the eastern wall (Context 1) was extended possibly by as much as 2m when another mud-brick wall (Contexts 14) was built against its western face, again over the brick collapse/rubble. It is preserved to a height of 0.65 m. It was cut into when a series of roughly-
constructed walls comprising dressed and rough stone blocks, and mud bricks were erected. The southern face of one (Context 12) extended into the trench on the north for a length of 3.46m, while one at the southern section of the trench (Contexts 10, 13 and possibly 6) appears to have been at least 8m long (Plate 5, TOP). Projecting south into the trench from the western end of the northern wall was the remains of what might have been another similarly constructed wall, but which was poorly preserved. These walls were built on the surface of a deposit of brick rubble (Contexts 16 and 17) that contains ash and which extended either up to or under the extension of the eastern brick wall (Context 14). Due to the extent of the disturbance in the area it was not possible to determine with certainty the interface between the brick rubble (Context 17) and the wall (Context 14), and it is possible that some of the former was part of the wall. Amongst the stone blocks incorporated into these upper walls were several from formal structures, including sections of columns, and others with traces of panel delineators for inscriptions. The upper deposits in the trench comprised more brick rubble with sandstone blocks. Ceramics throughout the rubble were of mixed date covering the same time span as that from Trenches 6, 7 and 10; numerous demotic and abnormal hieratic ostraka were found, as was a votive terracotta figure of a hippopotamus.

In so far as the stratigraphy can be interpreted, it would appear that the earliest constructional phase represented by the eastern wall, being built over the sherd dump that contained Dynasty XXV pottery, must post-date that period. At the earliest it is, therefore, of late Dynasty XXV or Dynasty XXVI; whether it represents an extension of an existing building or a new structure has yet to be determined. Considerable amounts of mud-brick rubble containing many yellow brick (Contexts 26 and 21) then accumulated; most of the fragments from a two-handled jar (Figure 6a) that may be ascribed to Dynasty XXV (compare Aston 1999, Nos 1597, 1869) were found in Context 26. Broken sandstone beneath the western brick wall may relate its construction to that of the building in Trenches 7 and 10, especially as amongst the brick rubble under the wall are sections of articulated brick (Context 16) that may represent the remains of a brick floor. It may be much later in date, however. The extension to the eastern wall (Context 14), lying atop rubble with sandstone blocks, appears to be a fairly late addition after the Main Temple was being used as a source of building material, and the rough stone-wall structure is later still. It is possible, in light of the occurrence of Mameluk pottery amongst the rubble, that the later structure is of that date (1250–1570 CE), while other ceramic of the 5th–7th centuries CE attests Late Roman Period activity.

1.1.4 Trench 9: Domestic Structure south of Trench 6

Figure 7

To the south of the mud-brick shrine of Trench 6, and separated from it by a narrow lane, lies a mud-brick
structure that appears to be of a domestic nature. It has internal dimensions of 7.4m east/west and 5.8m north/south. It is entered via a door on the south that leads to an entrance hall, Room 1, 2.5m north/south by 1.55 east/west, off which opens a stairway, Room 2, to the west against the south wall. A door in its east wall provides access to one of two large rectangular rooms, Room 3, 3.9m north/south by 2.8m east/west, while another in its north wall originally opened into the second, Room 4, 4.1m east/west by 2.7m north/south. This door was blocked before the structure was abandoned. On the south of the latter, abutting the stairway, lies Room 5, 2.2m east/west by 1m north/south, and in the north-eastern corner of the structure is Room 6, 2.8 east/west by 1.4 north/south, which opens off Room 3. Traces of water-hardened earth floors were found throughout. Although no
obvious roofing material was noted amongst the brick collapse that filled the structure, we can assume that it had a flat roof, probably supported on timber beams, given the existence of the stairway.

The ceramics from the building were again of mixed date, though mostly of the Late Roman period; several fragments of terracotta figurines were found, including part of one of Harpocrates, as were a variety of ostraka. Underlying the wall separating Rooms 4 and 5, below floor level, a cache of ceramic vessels was found, mostly comprising roughly-made jars, several with perforated bases (Figure 8b–e). They may be ascribed to the Third Intermediate Period or early Late Period (Hope in press). Amongst the deposit were several fragmentary tall stands (Figure 8f–h), one with a bowl attached to its upper part. Such items have a long history of production from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period (Hope in press), and the association of this example with the coarse jars implies that is contemporary with them. The building was constructed atop some brick rubble with broken stone pieces that overlies a compact red-earth material.

1.2 Excavation in the South-Eastern Corner of the Temenos, Trench 11 Figure 9

The course of the temenos wall around the temple area can be determined for its full extent on the south and west, but only for approximately half of its length on the east and it is almost completely absent on the north (Figure 1). Where the walls are missing on the north and east, modern houses and animal mangers are present. On the south and west the wall is in excess of 5m thick and stands approximately 8m above the surface of the site in sections on the south. No obvious gates can be located, but it is possible that there are traces of such on the west and south. The walls are constructed in the typical technique employed throughout Egypt for such walls with separate sections; brick and mortar colours vary. Abutting the exterior of the eastern end of the south wall are mud-brick structures of uncertain function and date. The actual southeastern corner of the temenos wall is missing, having been cut away when a modern asphalt road was constructed; damage to the southern end of the eastern wall continues as a result of the dumping and removal of garbage against it and building of adjacent houses.

Excavation within the southeastern corner of the enclosure was conducted by the Mohar Bashendi, chief inspector of the Dakhleh/Farafra Antiquities Inspectorate in the early 1990s. This exposed parts of the lower walls on the east and south, and the existence of a late mud-brick structure built directly upon an earlier one of substantial size that filled the area to within 3m of the southern temenos wall and 0.8–1.5m of the eastern wall. The excavations did not reach the base of either the external walls or the lower inner building. It was decided to clean this area of accumulated garbage and sand, and to continue the excavation to basal layers so as to determine the relationship of the lower inner building to the temenos walls, and hopefully to date both of these features. To this end the area between the temenos wall and the lower building was excavated, and designated Trench 11. Four distinct building phases were documented:

Phase 1: Construction of the temenos walls (Plate 6, rear and left). The base of the temenos walls was not reached, in part due to the confined area available. The eastern wall has been traced to a width of 8m, at which point it disappears under the modern road, and a height of 4.6m has been exposed. The mud-brick courses are laid horizontally and comprise bricks 0.5m long, 0.25m wide and 0.1m high, and of maroon and yellow colour in the lowest courses but brown in the upper ones. The inner face is battered. The outer face of the south wall is poorly preserved, but the wall appears to be at least 6.5m thick and has been exposed to a height of 6m. Brick types and details of construction are similar to the eastern wall. Against these walls sand and clay deposits accumulated (Contexts 33 and 42); these have been exposed to a depth of at least 1.2m against the eastern temenos wall, after which another construction phase occurred.

Phase 2: Extending to the west from the inner face of the east wall, two mud-brick walls were erected on top of the sandy-clay deposit (Context 42): one on the south 3.5m
from the southern temenos wall, 1.8m wide, and one 5.85m to its north, 4.9m wide. The southern wall is preserved to a height of 1.55m; the base of the northern wall was not revealed. At the same time another mud-brick wall was built 6m west of the eastern temenos wall; only part of this wall was revealed to a width of 1.1m. The nature of the structure to which these walls belong is unknown. During its use, further sand deposits with ash pockets formed (Context 41) containing ceramics, followed by another phase of sand deposition, but this time associated with small pieces of mud brick (Context 32) and ceramics in greater quantity than the underlying deposit, and finally an ashy-sand deposit with brick rubble (Context 34). Over this there accumulated more sand with brick and plaster eroded from the exterior walls; this material extended over the extant tops of the walls built against the temenos.

Phase 3: Following this, a substantial mud-brick building was erected using a variety of bricks of different colour, but predominantly of lighter shades than the earlier walls,
ranging in length from 0.38–0.48m (Plate 6, lower centre). This structure has been revealed over an area of 14m north/south and 5.25m east/west and comprises sections of walls abutting one another; no internal features were exposed and its function has yet to be determined. The construction of this building truncated the walls of Phase 2; it was set into a foundation trench cut into Contexts 32 and 34. Windblown sand deposits again built up against the walls of this building and the temenos walls.

Phase 4: After the partial collapse of the walls of the Phase 3 building and also the temenos walls, a further mud-brick structure was erected, in parts built directly onto the Phase 3 building (Plate 6, upper right). It is poorly preserved but covers an area of at least 14m north/south and 8.5
east/west; whilst internal divisions are visible, its overall plan is uncertain. Ceramics from the area surrounding this structure cover a wide time span, from the Late Roman Period to Mameluk Period.

Considerable quantities of ceramics were found in the main deposits associated with various developments in the architecture of this region, which enables tentative dates to be ascribed to the main phases. Of particular significance is the material from Contexts 41 and 32, which accumulated after the Phase 2 walls were built; the Phase 3 building was cut into Context 32. A selection of the main forms is illustrated in Figures 10–12. Of those from Context 41, the shallow bowls with ring bases and everted rims (Figure 10a) are common. In analysing the evolution of this form, Paice (1986/87, 99) suggested that those with down-turned rims were of Dynasty XXVI (664–525) while those with horizontal or inclined rims were Dynasty XIXVII (First Persian Period; 525–404). In the well-dated sequence of material from Elephantine, however, the evolution, which continues well into the Ptolemaic Period (Aston 1999, Plates 93 and 118), does not appear to be so clear cut, and examples with down-turned rims occur in Dynasty XXVII (Aston 1999, NOS 1964, 2000) while in the third century BCE examples with both horizontal and down-turned rims also occur (Aston 1999, Plates 78, 81 and 82). Similarly, from ‘Ain Manawir in neighbouring Kharga Oasis, examples with down-turned rims have been ascribed to Dynasty XXVII (Marchand 1996, Groupe 2).

Elephantine has also yielded parallels of Dynasty XXVII to Figures 10e and 10i (Aston 1999, Nos 2034 and 1999), though others to 10i are as early as Dynasty XXV (Aston 1999, NO. 1587; compare also Figure 6A herein). Parallels to Figures 10f and 10j come from the fourth century BCE (Aston 1999, Nos 2631 and 2605); Figure 10h has parallels from Dynasty XXV to the early fourth century BCE (Aston 1996, Figure 235; French 1992, Nos 25 and 26). From this preliminary assessment it would seem that the context may be ascribed to Dynasty XXVII or slightly later, implying that Phase 2 is either of that period or late Dynasty XXVI, and Phase 1 possibly of the early Dynasty XXVI. Context 32 (Figures 11 and 12), which overlies 41, contains many similar forms, especially the bowls with everted rims. There are also several distinctively Dynasty XXVII forms: 11d (Paice 1986/87, 100), 111 (Aston 1999, Nos 1919, 1979 and 1980; French 1992, Nos 27 and 28), 10n, 10o–p (Hope 1999, 229 Plate 25; Hope 1983, Figure 6A), 12f–i (Hope et al. 2002, Figures 4f–6a, 6e, Appendix 3, Figure 4), and 12j (Aston 1999, Nos 2034–2035). The rim of 11r maybe compared with very similar ones on different forms of Dynasty XXVII from ‘Ain Manawir (Marchand 1996, Groupe 9). Other forms have parallels slightly earlier and later: 11r and 12a–b of the fourth century BCE (Aston 1999, Nos 2279, 2410 and 2411), and 12c–d in Dynasty XXV (Hope in press, Figure 8n). Figure 12k may attest the occurrence of a Bes-image vase in this context. Again, the context may be provisionally ascribed to Dynasty XXVII or slightly
later into the fourth century, and Phase 3 to the very late dynastic period of the fourth century or possibly of the early Ptolemaic Period.

1.3 Excavations in the Cemetery south of the Temple Enclosure: Tombs 1 and 2
During the 2000/1 season the existence of a cemetery in the mound to the south of the temple complex was noted, primarily as the result of the digging of pits by robbers. This revealed the presence of a large sandstone sarcophagus within one of these tombs, from which small, roughly-made faience shabti-figures originated. Amongst the rubble that resulted from the exposure of this tomb were found fragments of pottery vessels of Late Period date, mainly of Dynasty XXVII water kegs (Hope et al. 2000, Figure 5). The number of tombs within the cemetery is uncertain, but there may be in the region of 30; their location is revealed at surface level by the mud-brick walls of their superstructures. In one part of the cemetery relatively recent domed, mud-brick tombs exist. During
the latter part of the 2001/2 season parts of two tombs were excavated (Figure 1). The one revealed by robber activity in 2000/1 is designated Tomb 1, while Tomb 2 is located immediately to its north. Other cemeteries with Late Period to Roman Period tombs are located to the immediate north of the site, and also to the northwest, and at various locations on the east.

1.3.1 Tomb 1 Figure 13
At surface level, this tomb comprises two rectangular rooms on an east/west alignment (Plate 7). The eastern
room is defined by mud-brick walls up to 1.3m wide and is 5.18m east/west and 3.38m north/south. The brick walls of the western room are not well preserved, but it appears to have measured 4.6m east/west by 3.9m north/south. These rooms communicated by a door at the southern end of the partition wall and may have been vaulted. The floor of the eastern room was of compacted earth set directly on top of basal clay; no trace of the floor of the western room survived and no means of accessing the upper rooms was found. The western room contained a lower burial chamber.

Excavation showed that the tomb was constructed by cutting the burial chamber into the surface of the mound to a greater depth than the eastern room. The chamber was then paved with sandstone blocks and its sandstone walls, one block wide and four courses in height, were then constructed to a height level with the base of the cut for the eastern room. The brick walls were then constructed against the sides of the cut for the western room and extending over the stone walls of the burial chamber. There is an arched door in the northern stone wall at its eastern end that leads into a chamber on the north; this was not excavated. There are traces of red paint on the east and

Figure 12: Pottery from trench 11 (31/405-G10-1/11), Context 32 and Tomb 2, surface. Scale 1:4 (drawings by B. Parr).
west walls implying that they were once decorated. The centre of the burial chamber is filled by a large sandstone sarcophagus, cut from a single block of stone (Plate 7). This measures 2.54m in length and has a width at the foot end of 0.93m and 1.21m at the head end; it is 1.37m deep and has walls 0.19–0.25m wide. Its lid, fragments only of which survive, was also cut from a single block.

The fill of the tomb comprised brick collapse from the walls and blocks from the stone walls. The lid of the sarcophagus had clearly been broken through to access the contents; soot covers most of the walls. Human skeletal remains were found in the fill; at least two individuals are represented. Of the grave goods some ceramic material was found, as were fragments of faience and metal vessels; large quantities of small, poorly-made, faience shabti-figures were retrieved. Following the completion of excavation the burial chamber was back-filled.

1.3.2 Tomb 2

Surface remains indicate that like Tomb 1, Tomb 2 comprises an upper series of chambers with mud-brick walls, and a burial chamber that is stone-lined below a western room with another chamber opening to its north (Plate 8). Only the burial chamber was excavated. Its stone walls are set within a pit in the surface of the mound. This chamber measures 2.96m north/south, 1.76m east/west and stands 1.76m in height. It is constructed from ashlar sandstone blocks of various dimensions and has a barrel-vaulted stone roof; originally it also had a sandstone paved floor, though this has been removed almost in its entirety. Over the stone vault are the remains of a mud-brick vault (Plate 8). The chamber that opens to the north of the burial chamber, and from which it was originally entered, is constructed of mud brick; the door between the two chambers was 1m high and 0.95m wide, and is arched.

The interior walls of the stone chamber are covered with a very thin layer of gypsum plaster that may also have covered the vault, and they are painted with religious/mortuary scenes in polychrome. On the northern wall, flanking the door into the secondary chamber, are two squatting figures; on the east the figure is that of a male deity with a crocodile head (Plate 9), while on the west there is another male figure possibly with a lion head. A text panel in front of the crocodile-headed god provides the name and rank of the tomb’s owner: he was a priest of Seth (Sutekh) named Sutekhirdis. On the left of the panel above the door is a winged oudjat-eye. A lower panel on both the eastern and western walls contains a row of anthropomorphic gods facing north, holding sceptres and ankh-signs; they are each shown within a shrine with vaulted top. There are panels of text in front of each figure that provide names and titles; not all of these are legible and the figures on the eastern wall are mostly poorly preserved. On the west the figures of Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Anubis and Geb are identifiable; there is also a god whose name is determined by a crocodile. The south wall was decorated with the figures of two winged goddesses flanking the Abydos fetish on top of a neb-basket. On the western wall above the lower panel is a row of stars and circles and the lowest part of an upper register also with figures. Comparison of the decorative scheme of this, the first painted tomb of any period following the late Middle Kingdom and before the Roman Period to be found in Dakhleh, with others in the northern oases enables a date within Dynasties XXVI–XXVII (664–404) to be suggested for its execution.

The tomb had been completely robbed; a hole through the northern part of the vault shows how the robbers gained access. Interestingly, this was covered with the stone blocks that had been removed to enter the tomb.
Plate 7: Tomb 1, looking north-north-east.

Plate 8: Tomb 2, vaulted chamber, looking south-west.
The interior fill comprised loose rubble and sand in which there was ceramic and some modern rubbish. The robbers had removed most of the stone floor blocks, many of which were found in the fill. Only a few objects that could have been part of the original burial equipment were found; these included fragments of small faience shabti-figures and fragments of a hard white stone decorated with geometric designs. Little remained of human skeletal material. Either the majority of the contents had been removed or had decomposed as a result of exposure to moisture. That the latter has posed problems to the tomb can be seen from salt formations on the walls and behind the plaster. A deposit of blackened sand was found below the original floor level and immediately above the yellow basal clay, which might represent decomposed human and artefactual materials.

Essential cleaning and consolidation of the sections of wall worst affected by moisture was carried out by our conservator Laurence Blondaux. This task will be completed in collaboration with the conservator of the Dakhleh Antiquities Inspectorate in future seasons. A complete photographic record of the wall paintings was made before the tomb was closed and buried.

During the course of clearance of surface debris across the area of the tomb superstructure a fragment from an interesting handled vessel was found (Figure 12L). It is made in a local pottery fabric and the shape enables it to be identified as a copy of either a Hellenistic hydria of the late Ptolemaic or early Roman Periods (compare Poludnikiewicz 1992, 98; Harlaut 2000, 156) or an amphora (Poludnikiewicz 1992, 100).
II Conclusions based upon the results of the 2001/2 Excavations

It is now clear that Mut el-Kharab was first settled during the early part of the Old Kingdom, probably in Dynasty IV (2613–2494) on the basis of the ceramics discovered in the lowest deposits and data from recent discoveries made in the vicinity of Dakhleh. Similar material, sometimes mixed with slightly later material, has been found in a series of hill-top rock shelters or watch posts that lie around the perimeter of the oasis and which were occupied by soldiers (Kaper and Wilems 2002). The same is also the case at the walled Old Kingdom settlement of ‘Ain el-Gazzareen in the west of Dakhleh (Mills and Kaper 2003). This activity appears to relate to the first major phase of Egyptian activity within Dakhleh, the response to which from the indigenous occupants had to be carefully monitored by the new arrivals. It is possible that the earliest activity at ‘Ain Aseel (Soukiasian et al. 1990) in the east of Dakhleh, which became the capital of the Egyptian administration in the oasis possibly until the Second Intermediate Period, is contemporary with these watch posts. Here, in Phases I–II, a fortified settlement was constructed, above an earlier settlement that awaits examination, likely before Dynasty VI. It is probable that from here the exploitation of the oasis and its environs, and the observation of its occupants were coordinated. Whether the large spring mounds at the site of Mut el-Kharab supported another watch post is unknown and there are no obvious remains of such visible at the site now.

At one watch post, yet to be examined in detail, there are various representations of the god Seth, both in the form of his sacred animal, the identity of which is still uncertain (McDonald 2000), and with a human body and this animal’s head. Ceramics indicate that it should also be dated to the same period as the other watch posts, and this raises the likelihood that Seth was revered in Dakhleh from the early Old Kingdom onwards, in addition to being venerated in the Nile Valley as a god of the oases. Whether this was at Mut el-Kharab is unknown as yet.

The Egyptians of the Old Kingdom ventured further to the south and south-west of Dakhleh as other recent discoveries have shown. Along the route to Abu Ballas and the Gilf el-Kebir, at Egypt’s south-western border, numerous regularly-spaced stopping posts have been located with quantities of ceramics. Whilst these cover the entire pharaonic period (Kuper 2001; 2003), many are of the Old Kingdom with ceramics attesting use in Dynasty IV (Riemer 2002). Another site, approximately 100km distant from Dakhleh but not part of this route, has yielded inscriptions of the reigns of Khufu and his successor Radjedef of Dynasty IV (Kuhlmann 2002, 133–7), while a C14 date upon a carbonized locust from excavations at the base of the site is contemporary with Dynasty III to IV. All of this activity clearly documents intense interest in the exploration of the Western Desert during the early Old Kingdom, and it is likely that the activity at Mut el-Kharab was connected with this and Egyptian dominance of Dakhleh. It is certainly ideally located to have participated in both. The site may already have been called Mut, as it was in the Roman Period (Kaper 1992, 130–2), for a toponym transcribed Mjt(y)w or Mdw has recently been identified three times on blocks from the chapel of Khentika, one of the Dynasty VI governors of the oasis (Pantalacci 2001, 141).

From the dump of ceramic material revealed in Trench 8 come pieces that may be of Middle Kingdom date (Dynasty XIII). Contemporary activity is known from various sites within Dakhleh (Hope 1999, 225), and the occurrence of offering stands amongst the Mut el-Kharab material may indicate that there was cult activity during this period within a formal religious establishment. The discovery of New Kingdom ceramics and decorated and inscribed stone blocks is a very welcome addition to the corpus of material from the oasis of that date. The material ascribed to the reign of Thutmose III is particularly important as from the reign of this king within the Theban necropolis there is evidence of nine officials connected with the oases of the Western Desert (Giddy 1987, 68–74). The import of agricultural produce into the Nile Valley from these regions is documented, and the Mut blocks imply a religious structure functioning in his reign at this site. During the course of earlier work by Ahmed Fakhry in Dakhleh another block that may be of the same date was found at Mut (Osing 1982, 38 NO. 44). The New Kingdom ceramics supplement the body of data recently assembled (Hope et al. 2002) that documents a lively trade in oasis wine for consumption in the valley from the later XVIIIth Dynasty onwards, a trade that lasted into Roman times.

The veneration of Seth at Mut el-Kharab is most clearly and vividly illustrated during the Third Intermediate Period by the larger of the two so-called Dakhleh Stelae; this has recently been re-ascribed to the reign of the first king of the XXIInd (Libyan) Dynasty, Shoshenq I (Kaper 2001, Note 6), though some uncertainty still remains. This monument (Gardiner 1933), in addition to documenting the existence of a full cult personnel and temple, shows Mut to be the main administrative centre of the oasis. It is possible that this temple had functioned continuously from Dynasty XVIII, and the high priest of Seth named Penbast of Dynasty XXI (Kaper 1997a) may have officiated therein. The Thutmoside block discovered at Mut by Fakhry (see above) was reused in Dynasty XXI or thereafter and carries an inscription of Djedptahieifankh, a governor of the oasis region, further indicating the administrative importance of the site at the time. It appears to have been significant enough also for one ruler during this period to have commemorated the celebration of an jubilee festival within the temple.

It is unfortunate that more does not survive of the cartouche found in Trench 6. Of the four possible identifications mentioned above, two are of particular interest. Activity under Piankhy of Dynasty XXV is
already attested at the site, and ceramics of that dynasty are found in abundance. The High Priest of Amun Menkheperre of Dynasty XXI is well documented to have displayed a great interest in controlling several of the points of access to the oases of the Western Desert from the valley. Amongst his building activities are forts at Gebelein and Sharufa whence routes departed for Kharga in the south and Bahariya in the north respectively (Kitchen 1986, 269–70). Furthermore, several stelae ascribed to the period of his pontificate have been found to the west of Thebes upon routes that connect with those leading to Kharga Oasis (Darnell 2002, 132–5), and in the so-called Banishment Stela he is recorded as first exiling opponents to the oases and then recalling them (Kitchen 1986, 261).

The religious and administrative significance of the site is reinforced by the text on the Smaller Dakhleh Stela (Janssen 1968). This commemorates a bread offering within the temple of Seth during the reign of Piye/Piankhy of Dynasty XXV; various officials are mentioned and also a great chief of a Libyan tribe, the Shamin, who takes the place of the king in a relief at the top of the stela. In addition to being one of the most conclusive pieces of evidence in a discussion of Libyan presence within Dakhleh, it provides the context in which the large quantities of ceramic material of the dynasty found at the site can be interpreted. Daily offerings of bread and beer and other commodities, incense and flowers, as depicted in the vignette at the top of the stela, required containers and stands. These would have been manufactured locally and, being easily broken, large quantities would have been necessary. This is illustrated in the magnitude of the dump of ceramics found in Trench 8, which must run into the tens of thousands of kilograms.

The flurry of building activity undertaken on the reunification of Egypt under Psamtek I of Dynasty XXVI (Arnold 1999, 70–4) affected the Mut temple also. It is clear from the relief bearing that king’s name from Trench 6 and other blocks of similar style, that a major phase of state-sponsored redecoration took place. Alongside Seth, the gods Amun-Re, Re-Horakhty and Atum are represented within this programme. It is possible that the temenos wall now surrounding the temple was built at this time. When exactly within his long reign this activity took place is not known. In years 10-11 he commemorated a victory over the Libyans with stelae on the road to the west from Dahshur in the valley (Spalinger 1982, 1166; James 1991, 713–4); their location implies that the conflict took place in the northern part of the Western Desert. It is not impossible, however, that Dakhleh with its Libyan presence was affected by the anti-Libyan activity, and the king’s building works may mark his dominance in the oases.

Further structural additions within the temenos took place under the Persian rulers of Dynasty XXVII and again under the Macedonian Ptolemaic Dynasty. By this time the site was surrounded by cemeteries, that to its immediate south possibly being reserved for temple personnel. Evidence from Roman Period temples in Dakhleh of the first to third centuries confirms that the cult of Seth continued to be celebrated there into that period (Kaper 1997b, 55– 65), though little has been found at Mut of that date. A probable cult of Thoth is, however, attested there (Kaper 1992, 130–2), which is of interest in light of the supplanting of Seth by Thoth in the valley from the Late Period onwards. Ceramics confirm activity in the late Roman Period when the oasis had adopted Christianity and when it is likely that the seat of a bishop mentioned in texts from Ismant el-Kharab (Bagnall 1997, 81) was located at Mut. A hiatus in occupation appears to have occurred from approximately the seventh century until the Mameluk Period, though the extent and nature of the Islamic activity is not well documented as yet, as most material derives from highly disturbed contexts. No post-Mameluk material has been identified, and it is possible that, following some four thousand years of occupation, the site was finally abandoned – until the encroachment in comparatively recent times of the modern town and cultivation.

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Acknowledgements

The excavations were made possible by a generous grant from Monash University’s Faculty of Arts research Innovation Fund, for which I am most grateful, which was supplemented by a student travel grant from Rosemary Cromby. The contribution of the following members of the team to the success of the season is duly acknowledged: G. E. Bowen, W. Dolling, A. Jamieson O. E. Kaper, R. Minos, B. Parr, B. Rowney, M. Rowney and J. Tsitouridis. I would like to thank the officials of the Dakhleh-Farafra Antiquities Inspectorate, Mohar el-Bashendi and Sayed Yemani, and the Supreme Council of Antiquities representative Imam ed-Din of the Minya Inspectorate, for their assistance in facilitating the work. Finally, I wish to thank Gillian E. Bowen, Olaf E. Kaper and the reviewers of this article for their valuable comments.

ENDNOTES


2 All dates are before the common era (BCE) unless otherwise indicated.

3 On the claim to kingship by Menkheperre see Kitchen 1986, 259–61, 571–2; Darnell 2002, 152 note 3.

4 Identification in the field of much of the inscribed material was undertaken by Olaf E. Kaper.

5 As the brick foundation platform, sandstone covering and sandstone wall blocks in Trench 10 were assumed on excavation to be part of the same construction phase and feature, they were all numbered Context 15, and subsequently distinguished by the addition of alphabetic designations.

6 A possibility is that it is part of a casemate foundation structure; numerous examples are attested from the Late Period within temple complexes, serving as the foundation for royal, religious or administrative buildings; for a summary see A. J. Spencer, Casemate Foundations Once Again, in M. A. Leahy and A. B. Lloyd, eds, Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honour of H. S. Smith, The Egypt Exploration Society, London, 1999, 295–300.

7 Only a selection of the material has been studied to date, and therefore what is said here may need modification when all of the material has been examined in detail.

8 Kindly identified by Sylvie Marchand.

9 These shelters have been found to date only in the west and south of the oasis; the ceramics discovered within them have been studied by members of the ceramics recording team under my supervision.

10 The detailed study of the ceramics from the excavations has now commenced under my supervision; mostly it can be ascribed to Dynasties V–VI, but there is some that appears earlier.

11 These discoveries were reported by Frank Förster and Stan Hendrickx at the Fourth International Dakhleh Oasis Project Conference held in Poznan, 19–21 July, 2003.


REFERENCES