research and restoration
season 2008
Report on research and restoration activities
Season 2008

- Research and excavation in al-Qasr.
- Conservation, restoration and reconstruction of private houses in al-Qasr.

More than in earlier seasons, the seventh season of the Qasr Dakhleh Project (QPD) has focussed specially on excavation. The restoration and reconstruction activities were seriously hampered by unexpected difficulties. The aim of this season had been to start work on the kitchen and bathrooms in separate units as originally proposed. However, in spite of the fact that we had heard no objections to this proposal during last season, we were informed at the beginning of the season that the responsible local SCA authority objected to this proposal and that the Permanent Committee for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities had withheld its approval. On the advice of and in cooperation with the local SCA authorities, new plans were prepared to put separate smaller units in each individual house in their natural and original places, i.e. the kitchen areas, in the same way as is found in other, still inhabited, mud brick houses in the historical centre of al-Qasr. On the basis of these plans, a revised proposal was formulated that was presented to the Permanent Committee on 29 January. The local SCA authorities sent their positive advice by fax. Unfortunately, the necessary measures to put the matter forward for the meeting of the Permanent Committee of 7 February were not been taken in time. However, with the approval of Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the SCA, the proposal was presented by courier to the members of the Permanent Committee. A positive decision was reached on 2 March. On 4 March an engineer was assigned to supervise the method of implementation. Unfortunately, he did not arrive before the end of he season on 12 March, so this part of the intended works could not be executed.

Further, there were no administrative delays and thus the rest of the work could start as planned on January 18th. The contributions of both the Netherlands Embassy in Cairo and the University of Groningen are gratefully acknowledged.
As usual, the activities of the 2008 season of the QDP were subdivided into the two distinct, but not completely separate parts of research and restoration/reconstruction.

**Research.**

The research activities of the 2008 season were twofold: Completion of the drawing of an accurate ground plan of the Shihabiyya quarter and research into the early history of al-Qasr by clearing, testing and excavation in the Shihabiyya quarter and its wider surroundings, especially in the neighbourhood of the old source and ruined old mosque.

1. **Completion of the ground plan of the Shihabiyya quarter.**

In the 2007 season Dr. Wolf Schijns had completed measuring and drawing the ground plan of the whole Shihabiyya quarter as well as the plan of the upper floors of the quarter. The official drawings have now been prepared and completed.

1. Completed plan of the Shihabiyya quarter in the old town of al-Qasr (ground floor).
2. Completed plan of the Shihabiyya quarter in the old town of al-Qasr (first floor).

3. Completed plan of the Shihabiyya quarter in the old town of al-Qasr (second floor).
2. Clearing, testing and excavation in the Shihabiyya quarter and its wider surroundings, especially in the neighbourhood of the old source and ruined old mosque.

a. In the Shihabiyya quarter.
While clearing out parts of the houses intended for restoration a few fragments of documents were yet again found, both in BQad 8 and BAYah 4. These were rehydrated and put between glass. They were of the usual types, in particular fragments of letters and a leaf of a manuscript.

b. In the neighbourhood of the old source and ruined old mosque.
In 2006, part of what appeared to be the southern wall of the Roman castrum, which is reputed to be the origin of the Islamic town of al-Qasr, was discovered. In 2007, part of what appeared to be the northwestern wall was excavated by the colleagues of the SCA in Dakhla. They, however, suggested it to be part of a Coptic building, perhaps a monastery. To gain more information about the possible layout of this structure with massive walls (app. 6 m. wide at the base) at first a visual inspection of the area around the old source and the ruined old mosque was made. During this inspection Paul Kucera

4. D08.005 recto, with a letter from Mohammed al-Mahidi to Ridwan Isma’il, dated 1252.

5. D08.002 verso, with fragment of leaf of manuscript probably on popular medicine.
discovered another large section of a Roman wall and some remnants of what appear
to be the eastern wall of a castrum. On the basis of these facts a more detailed survey
was executed and some trenches were excavated by Paul Kucera and Jakob Obrecht.
Their reports are as follows:

**Paul Kucera, Investigation of the “Roman wall” of Qasr**

The 2008 excavations began on 4/2/2008 and ended on 5/3/2008. The objective of this
fieldwork was to conduct further investigation of apparent “Roman wall” remains dis-
covered during the 2006 QDP season in the area of the old well and undertake excava-
tion in this same area. These remains are situated beneath the old mosque courtyard
and to the east of the old mosque itself; in this place preserved to at least 6m width and
5m height. It is possible that the walls are remnants of a Roman military structure.

In 2007, an SCA excavation located approximately 60m northwest from the old
mosque, revealed similar wall remains as found to the east of the mosque. During the
first few days of the QDP 2008 season, further significant wall remains were located to
the east of this SCA excavation. The remains are constructed of straw-free mud bricks
(34x17x9cm), which are consistent with those of the remains near the mosque and SCA
excavation. Up to 30m length and at least 2.3m width is traceable through later struc-
tures. The wall exhibits an inner taper and height of approximately 5m from the pre-
sent surface level. The later structures are abutted to and built on top of the remains
and all simply incorporate the wall into their own space with mud plastering observ-
able. It is presumed that these ‘northern wall’ remains relate to those that are situated
around the old mosque. Due to this important discovery, it was necessary to survey
and plan all of the known features and over the period of a week, this was undertaken.
Based on the survey, the remains around the old mosque constitute a highly probable
‘southern wall’ alignment and southeast corner (i.e. the remains to the east of the old
mosque). Hence, the mosque was built over part of the alignment. Importantly also,
between the northern and southern alignments a distance of 56-58m was obtained.
Traces of similar wall were noted in an area east of the position of the old well, in ap-
parent alignment with the southeast corner feature. In combination, these traces indi-
cate a probable square structure, perhaps of approximately 60m. The old well would
have once been central to this structure and this seems consistent with the account of
the Arab geographer al-Bakri who stated that Qasr in Dakhla had a fortress with a well
located in its centre.
Excavation began on the 14/2/08 in Area A, trench 1 (8x3.3x1.5m) which was positioned along sloping ground between the eastern wall of the mosque and the “Roman wall” remains. The aim of this was to clarify the alignment of this wall configuration. Further coursing of the wall was exposed during the excavation and it became
evident that large portions of it had been removed in the past. Furthermore, the trench clearly lay within the original dimension of the wall (see photo 7). Layers of modern rubbish, rubble and ash-effected soil lay upon and against the wall for approximately 1.5m, before sand and stone deposits were encountered and eventually gebel reached at 2.1m (1.5m at the south end) below surface level. Much ceramic material occurred throughout the layers and on the whole represented Islamic and modern eras. Few potential Roman diagnostics pieces do occur however, but it will be necessary that a detailed study of the ceramic material takes place before offering more definitive and reliable dates. An important consideration for the whole of Area A, trench 1 is that in nearly all deposits encountered, plastic and/or modern rubbish was found. The location of Area A, trench 1 certainly appears to have been a modern rubbish dump and it is therefore likely that the wall has been disturbed in relatively recent times. Whilst ancient stratigraphy does not seem to occur here, the excavation nonetheless revealed some important insights into the wall. A north-south alignment is clear and the wall itself was built directly upon the gebel in straw-free bricks measuring 34x17x9 cm. Its height is 6-7m above the gebel and the inner face of the wall is evident, which allows for a projected original wall width of approximately 4.5m. A header-stretcher bonding pattern was employed in the construction of the wall, but it is also noted that in few places a diagonally-laid course occurs and may have been for structural strengthening. This pattern is known from a number of other Roman period structures in Egypt. Two wooden beam holes can be observed in an upper part of wall, which are likely to relate the same. It is also noted that an upper portion of the north-south orientated wall segment has a secondary phase added to it.

Area A, trench 2 was begun in an area just south of Area A, trench 1 in effort to ascertain a southern outer line of the wall. Excavation of this trench revealed only modern rubbish fill (60-90cm deep) situated directly upon gebel and no indication of wall or foundations. The trench was extended to meet part of the standing “Roman wall” feature, but this also exposed only modern rubbish upon gebel and showed the wall to be built directly on it. In order to further clarify the apparent outer wall edge revealed in Area A, trench 1, Area A, trench 3 (1.5x1m) was begun 1m north of the earlier trench at its northeastern corner. Area A, trench 3 proved successful in exposing a continuation of this outer wall edge below soft and hard compacted fills of between 70cm and 1m (see photo 8). As a policy to protect the exposed remains, clean sand was used to backfill the trenches with a top layer of removed soil to blend into the surrounding surfaces.
Note on ceramics from the surface area around and in the courtyard of the old mosque (Area B), and “Pottery Dump A” (refer J. Obrecht in this report):

A substantial amount of ceramic material was collected from these areas and a preliminary study of these reveals that early Roman, 4th century CE and 5th-8th century CE ceramics occur. Much Islamic period material is also apparent, including decorated bowls and qullahs, siqa’s and some glazed wares. It is expected that these finds will be examined more thoroughly in a following field season.

Jakob Obrecht, The wall of the Roman “castrum”

In the southwestern corner of the courtyard of the old mosque and on the outside of the southern wall of the courtyard remains of Roman mud brick wall structures are clearly visible. Especially noticeable is a place on the outside of the southern wall of the courtyard, where a piece of wall at a right angle to the “castrum wall” can be seen in the dark reddish gebel.
For this reason, a section from outside the southwestern corner of the wall of the courtyard to the southern entrance of the old mosque's courtyard was first excavated (Area B, trench 1). To this end, part of a relatively recent supporting wall, the former back wall of a stable, had to be removed.

The original Roman wall is hewn out trough-shaped along the wall of the courtyard. In its filling, a layer lying under the foundation of the wall, a pottery dump with a mass of potsherds from different periods was found (see note by Paul Kucera above). The same applies to the wedge-shaped filling behind the stable wall.

One of the outer alignments of the Roman wall is joined in a right angle by the remains of a wall, which is clearly separate. Its eastern side has not been excavated, as a result the width of the annex is not known. The rows of mud bricks in the core of the wall do not everywhere run parallel to the visible alignments. Some of the layers are slightly arched. It can be presumed that the remains of the walls originate from a semi-circular tower with right sides.

The tower was demolished together with the castle walls. Its foundation was then completely cleared up to the remains that exist to this day. Subsequently, a part of the cleared foundation pit was swiftly filled up with a mass consisting of fluid mortar and mud bricks (no refuse or drift sands). Later, the rock eroded in the wedge between the wall and the tower; the filling rises above the surface of the rock.
10. Area B, trenches 1 and 2.

In the courtyard between the southwestern corner of the old mosque and the western courtyard wall, a part of the inside alignment of the Roman wall was cleared (Area B, trench 2). Only a scant 4 m$^2$ is visible. About 2 m of the inner alignment is still preserved. Some of its remains are preserved only far below the present level of the courtyard. The courtyard had been hardened by means of a pavement of mud brick and a kind of fluid mortar (which was perforated without documenting it). Under it lay
the last remains of a wall, which ran more or less parallel to, respectively at a right angle to the castrum wall. The remains of a foundation, which consist of rocks, have the same alignment as the minaret, which is built on a slight angle to the old mosque. The uncovered walls belong probably to an older building (mosque or church?) which is not orientated towards Mecca, but in accordance with the construction from Roman times.

Before the building of the present mosque this building had been pulled down more or less to the level of the present surface. Some remains have only been preserved far under the present level of the courtyard. At the time of the construction of the courtyard wall all the layers of this phase had been perforated.

11. Area B showing the various building phases.

**Sequence of the constructions**

1) Construction of the Roman castrum wall
2) Partial demolition of the castrum wall (to obtain construction material)
3) Construction of a first building (church or mosque with a tower or minaret)
4) Demolition of the first building except for the tower/minaret.
5) Construction of the old mosque and its courtyard wall.
6). Laying of a pavement of mud bricks and fluid mortar in the courtyard.
Also in the case of the exposed remains of area B, clean sand was used to backfill the trenches with a top layer of removed soil to blend into the surrounding surfaces and the modern support wall, removed during the excavations, was reconstructed.

Documents and ostraca found by the SCA colleagues during the 2007 excavations.

Some of the legal documents, which were found by the colleagues of the SCA in Dakhla in 2007 during their excavation of the northwestern part of what now is identified as a castrum, were rehydrated and put between glass for conservation. These paper documents date back to the beginning of the 13th century AH (early 19th century CE).

A photograph of one of the ostraca, which were also discovered during the same excavation, was on their request sent to Prof Dr Iain Garner of the University of Sydney for a first reading. The text of this Coptic ostracoon appeared to be quite interesting in that it mentions the castrum. Prof Gardner’s provisional reading is as follows:

† Paham of Kuph- writes to the headmen of the imperial fort [kastron]: Whenever these men plant a garden, one part (belongs) to this boy, one to his brother, one to Papnoute; which are third (shares each). Should they sow a field, again it is the very same. But the donkey (belongs to) my boy. †

As such this would appear to be the oldest reference in writing to al-Qasr.

The stone lintel of the old mosque.

During a visual inspection of the ruined old mosque a patch of missing plaster above the northern entrance was discovered. After removal of some more plaster, part a stone lintel became visible. This was then entirely cleared and cleaned. This for al-Qasr unique stone lintel has an inscription, which is nearly entirely legible. It has two lines. The first line begins with the basmala and a quotation from Surat al-Tawba (9) verse 18. The second line mentions that the mosque was renovated in 1129 AH by the amir ’Ali Jurbaji the son of Muhammad al-Qurashi and another amir whose name is illegible, the son of Abu Bakr al-Qurashi.
Restoration and reconstruction.

The following parts of the ongoing restoration and reconstruction were executed:

a. Continuation of the restoration and reconstruction of the Bayt Abu Yahya.
The last of the rubble was cleared out and a beginning was made with the reconstruc-
tion of the two walls northeast of and adjacent to Bayt al-Qurashi. In the removed
rubble nothing of interest was found, except some fragments of paper documents of
the now familiar types

b. Continuation of the restoration and reconstruction of the partially collapsed annex to Bayt
al-Qurashi.
The severely damaged northeastern part of the wall of the annex to Bayt al-Qurashi
was restored, the southern wall was buttressed and the southeastern roof was com-
pleted with its parapet. A beginning was made with the plastering of the inside and
outside of this building.

13. Repair of the northern wall of the annex to Bayt al-Qurashi.

c. Preparation and partial reconstruction of the kitchen and bathroom areas.
The kitchen and bathroom areas (red tiled areas on the plan below) of the restored
and/or reconstructed houses were cleared out and prepared for the reuse of their
functions. Some of the walls and doorways had to be reconstructed (red boxes on the
plan below).
15. Situation of kitchens etc.

d. Preparation of a wooden lintel to replace the stolen lintel of Bayt al-Qurashi.

In order to complete the reconstruction of Bayt al-Qurashi, a replacement copy of the original wooden lintel was made. This lintel had been stolen some ten year ago. However, the text was recorded and published by Christian Décobert and Denis Grill (Linteaux à épigraphes de l’oasis de Dakhla, Le Caire 1981). Moreover, a local artisan, Mr. Badr Mahmud, had made a sketch drawing of its layout. On the basis of this, a lintel was made according to the old style from a large single log of acacia wood in which the recorded original text was carved by Mr. Badr Mahmud who masters this kind of carving in acacia wood. In accordance with article 12 of the Venice Charter which states “Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.” A line was added in the same original style which in accordance with the local custom states the names of those who executed the reconstruction of Bayt al-Qurashi together with the Hijri Date of the completion of the reconstruction, i.e. 1427 AH.

16. The new lintel of Bayt al-Qurashi with the original text.

After this lintel was mounted above the door of Bayt al-Qurashi, the general director for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of the SCA in Dakhla stopped the work of the QDP
and ordered the lintel to be removed. Discussion about the appropriateness of the replacement of this missing part of Bayt al-Qurashi as being in accordance with the permission of the Permanent Committee for "restoration and reconstruction" were of no avail. Apparently, this decision was upheld by his hierarchical directors. To be able to continue the work the lintel was again removed. To resolve the matter the whole issue has now been presented to the Permanent Committee.

e. Preparation of a new drawing of the western facades of the Shihabiyya quarter. As an additional record of the restoration a new technical drawing of the western facades of the Shihabiyya quarter was prepared by Miss Eman Salim.

17. Western facades of the Shihabiyya quarter. Above in 2004 (drawing by Wolf Schijns) and below in 2008 (drawing by Eman Salim).

Due to the difficulties encountered, a large part of the intended works on conservation, restoration and reconstruction of the Shihabiyya quarter and surroundings were not executed during this season.
In the 2008 season which lasted from 18 January till 12 March the QDP-team consisted of Paul Kucera MA (3 February – 5 March), Prof Dr Frederik Leemhuis (18 January – 12 March), Mrs. Verena Leemhuis-Obrecht (21 February – 12 March) and J. Jakob Obrecht Dipl. Ing. (21 February – 5 March) and was completed by the Egyptian colleagues, the restorer, Mr. Rizq AbdelHay Ahmad (18 January - 12 March) and the draughtswoman Miss Eman Ahmad Salim (3 February - 12 March). The activities with respect to restoration, reconstruction and excavation were executed in close cooperation with the local collaborators of the QDP-team. These local collaborators consisted in 2008 of about 45 workmen from al-Qasr and surroundings. Many of those have worked with the project for four or more seasons and have become very experienced. Their restoration and reconstruction work was executed under supervision of and in cooperation with the master craftsmen Mr. Ahmad Salih Mohammed, Mr. Subhi `Abdallah Sanusi, Mr. `Abd-al-Ghaffar Mohammed, Mr. Mus`ad Faris Mohammed, Mr. Ahmad `Ali Mahdi who all have worked on the project before. Apart from the fact that the collaboration and the experience of these masters is crucial with regard to the complex matter of the construction of high-rise buildings in mud brick, they also have guaranteed the transmission of their traditional expertise over the last years.

As usual, the above mentioned very skilful, experienced and indispensable Mr. Rizq Abdalhay Ahmad, chief restorer for Islamic Antiquities of the SCA in Dakhla was charged with the day-to-day management and coordination of the restoration and reconstruction. His knowledge of traditional expertise and its local availability continues to be invaluable to the project.

The supervision on behalf of the SCA was entrusted to the supervising inspector Mr Mohammed Rifa`y Mitwally. The encouragement and assistance of Mr. Hamdi `Uthman, director for Coptic and Islamic Antiquities of the SCA for West Dakhla, is gratefully acknowledged, as is the support of Mr. Kamil Bayyumi, director for Coptic and Islamic Antiquities of the SCA for East Dakhla and Mr. Magdi Mohammed `Abdallah, inspector for al-Qasr of the SCA. As always, the interest and involvement of the general director for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of the SCA in the New Valley, Mr. Ahmad Salim has to be mentioned also.

The QDP owes much gratitude to the various above-mentioned people. Their dedication, especially of the local collaborators of the team, has made that the work of this season, as always, has been such an interesting and enjoyable experience.

Groningen, 7 June 2008

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