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Egypt and Libya: The excavations at Mut el-Kharab in Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis

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Abstract: In 2001, the Dakhleh Oasis Project commenced the excavation of the remains of one of Dakhleh Oasis’s ancient capitals at Mut el-Kharab. The site was known to have been occupied from the Old Kingdom until the Byzantine Period, and to have been the cult centre of the god Seth, Lord of the Oasis. The excavations have revealed traces of activity also during the Old Kingdom, and unearthed part of the temple of Seth and a variety of objects and inscriptions that enable its history to be better understood. The excavations are part of a larger project to investigate the interaction between Egypt and the ‘Libyan’ occupants of the Western Desert.

I: EGYPTIAN INTERACTION WITH THE WESTERN DESERT REGION OF DAKHLEH OASIS

In 1978 the on-going Dakhleh Oasis Project undertook its first season of survey in the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt’s Western Desert (FIGURE 1). This project, directed by Anthony J. Mills and sponsored by the Royal Ontario Museum and the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities, aims to document the history and nature of human settlement in the oasis, and to study humankind’s adaptation to life in a semi-arid environment (MILLS 1979, 163–4). From the inception of the project it was anticipated that considerable archaeological evidence for activity during the period coincident with the Egyptian New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE) to the Late Period (664–332 BCE) would be uncovered, as documentary and textual data from the Nile Valley, Dakhleh and the neighbouring Kharga Oasis from these periods implied consistent contact (GARDNER 1933; JANSSEN 1968; LIMME 1973; REDFORD 1977; PORTER and MOSS 1952,277-98; now also GIDDY 1987 and AUFRÈRE et al. 1994, 79–124). During these periods, the same sources and others indicated that the oases of the Western Desert became the domain of various groups that we now, for convenience, designate Libyans. They had a significant impact upon the pharaonic state during the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period (1069–664 BCE), first through repeatedly attacking its western border and penetrating into the Nile Valley itself, and then assuming the kingship during Dynasties XXII xxIV (950–circa 750 BCE). Their presence, it was thought, should be detectable also in the archaeological record of Dakhleh Oasis. Annual fieldwork subsequently however, mostly in the form of surveying of surface remains, has implied a rather different picture of human activity during the historic periods as reflected on the sites that have been examined (MILLS 1999; HOPE 1999). Little material datable to those periods was identified and nothing that could be definitely said to reflect Libyan material culture was found. The excavations at Mut el-Kharab (Mut the Ruined) commenced in 2001, aim to explore further the initial assumptions mentioned above through the detailed excavation of one of the oasis’s principal sites.

Before I discuss the results of that work, it might be beneficial for the readers of this journal if I review very briefly what is known of human activity in Dakhleh and specifically its contact with the Nile Valley from the mid Holocene onwards. McDonald (most recently 1998, 1999) has documented a series of cultural units (Bashendi Cultural Unit sub-phases) that were active in Dakhleh during the period 7600–5200 BP which may have influenced the development of Nile Valley culture (MCDONALD 1991; HOPE IN PRESS A). They were replaced by another more settled group, the Sheikh Muftah Cultural Unit, that maintained contacts with the valley but which also witnessed Egyptian expansion into
FIGURE 1: MAP OF EGYPT SHOWING THE LOCATION OF DAKHLA OASIS AND PRINCIPAL SITES IN DAKHLEH AND KHARGA OASES (COURTESY O.E. KAPER)
the oasis during the Old Kingdom (2686–2160 BCE), culminating in its annexation and incorporation into the Egyptian administrative network by Dynasty VI (2345–2181; MILLS 1999, 174–6). This may have been, in part, a response to problems the Egyptians were encountering with Nubian tribes who were blocking access to trading partners in the upper reaches of the Nile and that necessitated the use of an overland ‘Oasis route’ (SMITH AND GIDDY 1985). It may also have been to protect Egypt’s western border and her general territorial expansion. The archaeological record in Dakhleh implies that Egyptian material culture was adopted throughout the oasis and that the indigenous Sheikh Muftah traditions disappeared sometime during the late Old Kingdom. Whether the local population underwent this change willingly or forcibly, or whether numbers left the oasis under the threat of Egyptian occupation is unknown. Sites of what was termed ‘Saharan Culture’ in the desert near Armant in Upper Egypt (MOND AND MYERS 1937, 267–77) include cemeteries and settlements. These are datable by reference to Egyptian material to the Early Dynastic Period (c. 3000–2686 BCE) and Old Kingdom (KEMP 1983, 118) and contain material believed to derive from the Western Desert. Whether these represent traders from that region of migrants is uncertain.

Egyptian expansion in the Western Desert may well have commenced during the period immediately preceding the formation of the Egyptian State at the end of the fourth millennium, though the evidence is not always easy to interpret with certainty. In the decoration of ceremonial palettes and other items, figures identified as Libyans are certainly depicted from the region of Tjehenu, one designation used for the area to the west of the Nile Valley, while the other side was thought to document an Egyptian attack upon a series of Tjehenu settlements. This has now been interpreted as a representation of a foundation ceremony (DOCHNIAK 1991). The most famous of all of the decorated ceremonial palettes, the palette of NARMER, first king of Dynasty I, is frequently thought to document, if only symbolically, the unification of Egypt under a single ruler. It has been suggested to record rather an Egyptian victory over Libya, the same event being commemorated by several Old Kingdom rulers also, and even by the Dynasty XXV King Taharqa (690–664) (SCHULMAN 1991/2). The commemoration of this victory over a considerable time span would indicate the importance attached to it within the context of sacred kingship in Egypt and the duty of the king to protect and extend the boundaries of his realm. Prior to the late Old Kingdom, comparatively little else is known of Egyptian campaigns in the region (TRIGGER 1983, 61; WILKINSON 1999, 162, 173–5).

Dakhleh Oasis was governed from the site of Ayn Asil in its west (FIGURE 1) from possibly as early as late Dynasty V and throughout the remainder of the Old Kingdom into the ensuing First Intermediate Period (c. 2160–2055). The same site has yielded evidence of occupation until the New Kingdom and it may have remained the capital until that period (AUFRÈRE and BALLET 1990; BAUD 1997; BAUD et al. 1999; GIDDY 1987, 174–25 1; MARCHAND and TALLET 1999; MINAULT-GOUT and DELEUZE 1992; SOUKIASSIAN et al. 1990A and B; VALLOGGIA 1986, 1988).

Throughout there were periods of independence terminated by repeated forceful annexation (GIDDY 1987, 51–98; REDFORD 1976/7), and a population level much reduced from that of the Old Kingdom has been posited (MILLS 1999, 176). During the Second Intermediate Period, the strategic importance of the oases of the Western Desert was realised as a route for communication between the Hyksos (Asiatic) rulers of the north of Egypt and the Nubian rulers of the Kingdom of Kush, bypassing the Egyptian rulers of Upper Egypt (SMITH AND SMITH 1976). During that period, remains in Dakhleh are more abundant than any time following the Old Kingdom until the Late Period (GIDDY 1987, 166–73; HOPE 1999, 225–9); Kharga has also yielded material of similar date.2

In the New Kingdom, commercial interest in the products of Dakhleh are attested, especially in its viniculture (HOPE et al. IN PRESS). This period however, witnessed a series of major conflicts between the Egyptians and the Libyans (KITCHEN C. 1990). These began in the reign of SETI I of Dynasty XIX (1294–1279) and continued under his successor RAMSES II (1279–1213); despite the erection of defensive fortresses along the western flank of the Nile Delta to el-Alamein, and policing of the high desert, Libyans continued raiding the Nile Valley. In year 5 of the next reign, that of MERENPTAH (1213–1203), matters escalated and there was an invasion by combined Libyan tribes, apparently driven by famine from their homelands, assisted by Sea Peoples from across the
Mediterranean. This was successfully defeated; a dominant group was the Libu, from whose name that of the modern region is derived. In years 5 and 11 of Ramesses III (1184–1153) of Dynasty XX, however, two further invasions occurred; again Egypt prevailed. Problems did not cease and bands of Libyans intermittently harassed Upper Egypt throughout the remainder of Dynasty XX (see also Haring 1992); under Ramesses III various settlements in Upper Egypt were fortified. It has been suggested that some of these groups originated in the southern oases of the Western Desert, where they had settled following the earlier conflicts (Kitchen c.1990, 21; Leahy c.1990, 163). Concurrently it seems that increasing numbers of Libyans, either taken as prisoners during military campaigns, employed as mercenaries or who came as migrants, were settled in the Delta. Their influence steadily increased until they proved powerful enough to control significant portions of the region and subsequently to ally themselves with the royal family of the XXIst Dynasty (1069–945); eventually various dominant families assumed the throne to form Dynasties XXII–XXIV (945-c.750). During this latter period Libyans were no longer represented in Egyptian texts and reliefs as foreigners, though their ethnicity can be identified from their distinctive names.

It is evident that they must have influenced Egyptian culture in a variety of ways, especially during the period when they dominated much of the country. This has been suggested in relation to the tendency to decentralize the administration and burial practices as exemplified by the royal necropolis at Tanis used during Dynasties XXI–XXII (Leahy 1985; Taylor 2000, 338–52). Unfortunately, most of our information is derived from Egyptian sources rather than from archaeological and documentary sources from Libyan regions, thus they are extremely biased. Indeed, there is no evidence for Libyan literacy during the periods discussed here. Extracts from two major Egyptian accounts of interaction with Libyan tribes will give an idea of the typical manner in which they are presented. The first is from the stela recording Merenptah’s victory and the second from Ramesses III’s year 11:

...the vile chief of the Libu who fled under cover of night alone without a feather on his head, his feet unshod, his wives seized before his very eyes, the meal for his food taken away, and without water in the water-skin to keep him alive; the faces of his brothers are savage to kill him, his captains fighting one against the other, their camps burnt and made into ashes... (After Gardiner 1964, 273, from the so-called Israel stela).

The Libu and Meshwesh were settled in Egypt and had seized the towns of the Western Tract from Hikuptah (Memphis) to Keroben, and had reached the Great River on its every side. They it was who had desolated the towns of Xois for many years when they were in Egypt. Behold, I destroyed them, slain at one stroke. I laid low the Meshwesh, Libu, Asbat, Kaikash, Shaytep, Hasa and Bakan, overthrown in their blood and made into heaps... I took of those whom my sword spared many captives, pinioned like birds before my horses, their women and their children in tens of thousands, and their cattle in number like hundreds of thousands. I settled their leaders in strongholds called by my name. I gave to them troop-commanders and chiefs of tribes, branded and made into slaves stamped with my name, their women and their children treated likewise... (After Gardiner 1964, 287).

Any reconstruction of Libyan society using this material must be extremely cautious. O’Connor (c.1990) in so doing has attempted to show that it was primarily one of semi-nomadic pastoralists who traded with surrounding regions, but who also possessed permanent settlements of some form. One such settlement and point of contact with the outside world was undoubtedly at Mersa Matruh on the Mediterranean (Figure 1). Here a small quantity of indigenous ‘Libyan’ material has been found and quantities of Cypriote and other ceramics indicating that the site was used by merchants engaged in trade around the Mediterranean region (White 1986, 1989, 1990; Hulin 1989). Clearly far more information from the regions occupied by the Libyans needs to be gathered and assessed before a comprehensive picture of this group of peoples can be formed.

II: THE EXCAVATIONS AT MUT EL-KHARAB

A two-week period of excavations was conducted at Mut el-Kharab (Figure 1) between 6/01/2001 and 17/01/2001 funded by Monash University. The aims were, briefly stated, to determine the potential of the site to yield well-stratified deposits related to architectural features and...
other cultural material that would enable a history of activity at the site to be determined. Surface evidence indicated that the site was occupied from the Old Kingdom to the Byzantine Period, though whether continuously was not known. The scale of the remaining structures indicates that it was a site of considerable

PLATE 1: AERIAL VIEW OF MUT, DAKHLEH OASIS, SHOWING THE LOCATION OF MUT EL-KHARAB AND NEIGHBOURING MOUNDS (COURTESY OF DAKHLEH OASIS PROJECT).
importance, undoubtedly the capital of Dakhleh at some stage. The temple enclosure is the largest in the region; it is known to have been dedicated to Seth and is the suggested find spot of the two so-called Dakhleh Stelae. It offers the potential to document the history of the oasis during many periods that are relatively obscure there, especially from the New Kingdom to the Ptolemaic Period. Furthermore, it is likely that the excavations will shed valuable light upon the Libyan presence in the oases from the late New Kingdom, if not earlier, into the Late Period.

In addition, it should be noted that the continued existence of many parts of the site is under threat from a variety of factors, but mostly human agency. It is evident that many sections have suffered considerably from passing traffic; this is not only in the form of pedestrians and animals (some are actually grazed upon the site), but animal-drawn carts and motor vehicles of various forms. Distinct pathways and tracks show that this activity has been under way for a long time and in places it has completely removed all trace of the ancient structures and sections of the thick enclosure wall. The modern town abuts the site on the north-east and a modern road runs within a few metres of the south-east corner of the wall, while fields completely surround the other sides. Also affecting the south-eastern part of the site is a long trench, probably once a canal, flanked by mounds of earth, that originates in a large depression that may be the remains of an intrusive well. Pits in the site are used for the dumping of garbage and dead animals; many are of recent date indicating the activity of locals searching for antiquities. During the course of the excavations our work was disturbed on a regular nightly basis. Thus, there is a very real urgency for exploring the site now and the development of some strategy for its preservation.

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE AND ITS ENVIRONS**

The site is located to the south-west of the modern town and occupies a large mound (PLATE 1).

The dominant feature is a substantial mud-brick enclosure measuring approximately 240 m N/S by 180 m E/W, with walls up to five metres in thickness. These are preserved to some eight metres in height at the western end of the south wall but are almost entirely absent on the north-east (PLATE 2). The wall, as is standard technique,
is built in sections and it appears from the different composition of the bricks and mortar that it incorporates different constructional phases.

On the south the enclosure is built onto a natural spring mound, and this may originally have determined the actual location of the site. In the south-western corner of the enclosure there is a large well, some 30 metres in diameter, that is surrounded by dredgate containing substantial quantities of potsherds. The foundations of the enclosure wall on the east of this well are set into trenches that were dug into the side of the well, indicating that it predates the construction of the enclosure wall.

Slightly to the north-east of the centre of the enclosure there is a large depression with a scatter of sandstone covering approximately 80 m N/S and 20 m E/W, indicating the location of what can be identified as the site of a temple, now poorly preserved (PLATE 2). Adjacent to this are the remains of mud-brick structures that may represent parts of the temple, and others, some quite sizeable, appear to fill the enclosure. The nature of these buildings cannot be identified from surface remains, though they probably represent administrative and storage facilities, and possibly accommodation for temple personnel.

On the mound to the south of the enclosure are several Islamic tombs now falling into disrepair; however, there are traces of other structures here, which predate the existence of those monuments. There are no visible remains from other elements of the ancient settlement adjacent to the temple enclosure. To the north of the enclosure are two large mounds (PLATE 1), one is Ayn Marqula, and elsewhere within the area of the modern town there are others of smaller size, including Ayn Hammam, Ayn Marduma, Ayn Sadira, Kom el-Kharab and Humiyat B. These all appear to contain cemeteries relating to the settlement and indicate that it was occupied for a considerable duration. Humiyat B is currently under excavation by the Dakhleh Inspectorate and contains mud-brick tombs with both pottery and stone coffins that, on the basis of associated ceramics, can be ascribed to the Late Period. Ayn Marquila, excavated by the Inspectorate some years ago, yielded material of the XXVIth-XXVIIth Dynasties (FOR CERAMICS, HOPE et al. 2000, 192, 200–1, FIGURES 4j, 6A) and tombs of a similar date and others of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods have been found in the other mounds. To the north-west of the site there is a cemetery with mud-brick mausolea over burials (MILLS 1981, 183, SITE 31/405-F9-I) that resemble those of the early Roman Period examined at Ismant el-Kharab (HOPE 2000, 60-2; IN PRESS B). During the course of study of these mausolea in 2001, a decorated stone block undoubtedly from the temple at Mut el-Kharab was found on the surface. The clustering of number of sites around Mut el-Kharab indicates its ancient significance (MILLS 1981, PLATE VI).

REVIEW OF CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING MUT EL-KHARAB PRIOR TO RECENT WORK

Whilst several early travellers to Dakhleh during the 19th and early 20th century visited Mut and must have viewed the remains, it is clear that the site had already suffered much damage, and their reports are of little use (WINLOCK 1936, 40). In 1894, however, Captain Henry Lyons purchased two hieratic stelae in Mut that were said to come from ruins to the south-west of the government offices; they were presented to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The larger of the two (ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM 1894.107A), contains a decree concerning water rights in a district named s3-wh3t by Wayheset, a member of the Libyan royal family, in year 5 of a King Shoshenq, that was confirmed by an oracular pronouncement by Seth; it was witnessed by various personnel from the Temple of Seth (GARDINER 1933). The Shoshenq in question was originally identified as the first with that name (GARDINER 1933, 23) and later as the third or fourth (REDFORD 1977, 7), though as the existence of the latter is doubted (LEAHY c1990, 183), it has been ascribed to Shoshenq III of Dynasty XXII, thus 820 BCE. More recently the original ascription proposed by Gardiner has been revived (KAPER IN PRESS). The other stela (ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM 1894. 107B; JANSSEN 1968) contains a record of offerings in the Temple of Seth in year 24 (723 BCE) of King Piye (Piankhy) of Dynasty XXV and mentions a Libyan tribe called the Sham as resident in the region. It also attests a cult of Amun in the temple.

These two documents thus indicate the existence of a cult and temple of Seth at Mut during the Third Intermediate Period and later; however, his role as god of Libyans and the Oases is documented from the Old Kingdom onwards (TE VELDE 1977, 110–119). The cult continued to be celebrated into the Roman Period and Seth figures in reliefs and inscriptions in other Dakhleh temples into the 2nd century CE, most notably in Shrine I of the Temple of Tutu at Ismant el-Kharab.
(KAPER 1997A, 55–65). This is of particular interest as, in general, from the Dynasty XXV onwards in the Nile Valley it would appear that there were concerted efforts to suppress his veneration, a process that may have commenced after Dynasty XX, from which time it has been suggested no new temples to the god were built (KAPER 1997A, 64; TEVELDE 1977, 138–51; SOKIASSIAN 1981).

Two votive statues of the Third Intermediate Period are known that probably originated from this temple, one discovered at Deir el-Hagar in Dakhleh and the other seen in a private collection (JACQUET-GORDON 1991). The Deir el-Hagar statue has been dated to the Dynasty XXI and mentions a high priest of Seth named Penbast (KAPER 1997B), implying that the temple was in existence by that date; the other is of a similar date. Some confirmation of this comes from a fragmentary inscription found near Mut by Ahmed Fakhry that mentions a Governor of the Oasis, probably of Dynasty XXI or thereafter (OSING 1982, 38 NO. 44). More importantly, this inscription is cut upon a reused block, and the remaining part of the original inscription may contain the name Thutmose, raising the possibility of an XVIIIth Dynasty date, if not a reference to one of the kings with that name (MARCHAND AND TALLET 1999, 309 no. 19). That the oases of the Western Desert were under Egyptian control from the beginning of the XVIIIth Dynasty is indicated by a variety of textual sources (GIDDY 1987, 66–77). Mut itself has yielded fragments of New Kingdom bread moulds of the type used in the baking of offerings and locally-manufactured amphorae (HOPE 1999, 226; HOPE et al. IN PRESS). The larger of the two stela purchased by Lyons mentions the region of s3-wh3t (KAPER 1992, 124–9; MARCHAND AND TALLET 1999, 312–3) in which there were vineyards, and wine from that location is mentioned in a docket from Amarna, datable to the reign of the Dynasty XVIII King Akhenaten (1352–1336). Wines of the oases were imported into the Nile Valley throughout the New Kingdom and their distinctive containers, large ceramic amphorae, have been found at numerous sites from Buhen to Qantir, and they are now well attested in Dakhleh and Kharga (HOPE et al. IN PRESS). Oasis wine is mentioned in inscriptions from the Nile Valley until the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods.

Mut el-Kharab was probably occupied continuously into late antiquity as is indicated by the ceramic finds. During the 4th century, and possibly longer, it was the capital of a separate administrative district (nome); this situation may have come about in either 297 CE or 307/8 CE (BAGNALL 1997,73). The city was then named Mothis, later City of the Mothites (WAGNER 1987, 189) and the nome the ‘Nome of the Mothites’. This latter piece of information has been yielded by papyri found at Ismant el-Kharab (BAGNALL 1997, 73; WORP 1995,243). The origin of this name probably lies in the ancient Egyptian Mt found first upon one of the votive statues of the Third Intermediate Period mentioned above (JACQUET-GORDON 1991; KAPER 1992, 130–132 and 1997A, 60). The documentary material from Ismant el-Kharab also informs us that Christianity in a variety of forms flourished in Dakhleh (BAGNALL 1997, 80-4; GARDNER et al. 1999, 72-83) and that there was a bishop (BAGNALL 1997, 81), presumably resident at Mut. Several fragments from stone columns could be seen on the surface of the site that, together with half of a lintel bearing part of a Greek inscription (MILLS 1981, 188; WAGNER 1987,80), probably derive from a major Roman Period monument. In 368/9 CE the taxation levied from Mothis amounted to 44,671 denarii while that on the capital of the neighbouring Kharga Oasis, Hibis, was 43,661 and upon Dakhleh’s second most important settlement, Trimithis (modern Amheida), it was 31,910 (WAGNER 1987, 191). These data indicate either the relative sizes of the three sites or their relative agricultural productivity. Ceramic data attest activity into the 5th–6th centuries with many imported pieces from Aswan; glazed sherds indicate some activity during much later periods. It is possible that from some stage in the 4th century Mothis was eclipsed in importance by Trimithis, when the latter may have risen in status from a village (kome) to a city (polis), though whether it became the actual capital is unknown (WAGNER 1987, 191). In the Notitia Dignitatum of the late 4th to early 5th centuries CE, the defence of Dakhleh is listed as being a cohort (500–1000 foot soldiers) at Mothis but an Ala (500–1000 troops mounted upon either horses or camels) at Trimithis, perhaps there even from the early 4th century (WAGNER 1987, 375–7). This distribution of forces would indicate that threats to the security of Dakhleh came from the west and south, and certainly that is the direction from which many incursions into the northern half of the Nile Valley by a variety of aggressive tribes came from the second half of the 5th century onwards (WAGNER 1987, 394–400).
In 1978, some preliminary surveying of the site was undertaken during the first season of work conducted by the Dakhleh Oasis Project, and further work was undertaken in 1980 (Mills 1981, 180–1, 187–8).

Three test trenches (TT1-3) excavated then, showed the temple to have been destroyed almost to foundation level, though some decorated and architectural fragments survived (Plate 3), revealed some Old Kingdom material in deposits under the temple, and produced a wide variety of ceramic material, In the mid-1990s, the Dakhleh Inspectorate undertook some excavation at the south-east corner of the site where the modern road runs close to the temenos wall. This revealed the existence of what may be an earlier inner temenos built upon a similar scale to the outer one.

**THE 2001 EXCAVATIONS (FIGURE 2)**

Three test trenches were excavated in the area where the temple was located:

TT4: against the exterior of a two-roomed mud-brick structure that forms part of a group of mud-brick buildings lying on the west of the depression with stone scatter; dimensions 10 x 3 metres, with long side east-west.

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**PLATE 3: FRAGMENT FROM A SANDSTONE FROM TT2 AT MUT EL-KHARAB DISCOVERED IN 1980, PRESERVING PART OF A ROYAL FIGURE WEARING THE WHITE CROWN; THE INSCRIPTION READS “GIVEN LIFE LIKE RE” (PHOTO C.A. HOPE, 1980).**

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**FIGURE 2: SCHEMATIC PLAN SHOWING THE LOCATIONS OF THE 2001 EXCAVATION UNITS AT MUT EL-KHARAB (D.TUCK).**
TT5: against the west face of a large mud-brick structure on the east of the same depression and slightly to the north of TT4 – TT2 excavated in 1980 lies to its immediate west; dimensions 7.5 x 4 metres, with long side running east-west.

TT6: within the outer (eastern) room of the two-roomed building against which TT4 is located; the stratigraphy and features of TT4 and TT6, therefore, can be related to each other.

A: TT4 AND TT6: (FIGURES 3-4)
Both trenches revealed the existence of in situ deposits of sandy loam beneath the main structural features. Within this matrix there were deposits of ash; the artefacts comprised potsherds, chipped-stone tools and debitage, and there were fragments of burnt and broken animal bones. Many of the stone tools, debitage and potsherds have been exposed to heat. The ceramic includes locally manufactured deep bowls and spouted forms in a shale-tempered fabric that are a regular feature of the

![Figure 3: South section in TT4 at Mut el-Kharab (D. Tuck).](image)

![Figure 4: Plan of two-roomed mud-brick shrine, YY6 at Mut el-Kharab (D. Tuck).](image)
Sheikh Muftah and Old Kingdom assemblages in Dakhleh. Stone tool types and technology are of the same date. Importantly for dating, amongst the ceramics are fragments of carinated bowls, the so-called Meydum bowl, made in a fine marl fabric, that are of types predating Dynasty VI. Absent from the assemblage are examples of the late Old Kingdom, red-slipped and burnished, carinated bowls made in silt fabrics that occur ubiquitously in late Old Kingdom contexts in Dakhleh and the Nile Valley. Although no structures or other features were identified within these deposits, it would seem that we have good evidence for mid-Old Kingdom activity of a domestic nature, and possibly also tool manufacture, and once again material attesting the interaction of the local and Nile Valley cultural traditions. The depth of these deposits could not be ascertained; the lowest was traced to a depth of 1.3 metres without reaching basal clay, and above this deposit others are preserved to a height of one metre. They were exposed most clearly in TT4 (PLATE 4 AND FIGURE 3).

TT4 showed that the temple building sat directly upon the Old Kingdom deposits in places but also cut into them. Within the centre of TT4, running north-south, a two-metre-wide trench had been cut to a depth of one metre into the Old Kingdom strata, and a bed of yellow sand laid across its base. On its western side this trench was reinforced with a 0.25 m wide brick wall, surviving to a height of 0.9 m. It is possible that the trench once contained a stone wall, but all trace of this has been removed; the fill of the trench above the sand comprised disturbed deposits filling robbers’ trenches, with much smashed sandstone (PLATE 4). Robbers’ pits and deposits of smashed sandstone occurred across the full length of TT4.

Sitting atop the brick wall within the trench and extending the distance of 4.0 m to the west to abut the outer wall of the two-roomed building, was a floor of mud and mud brick, up to 0.5 m in thickness (FIGURE 3). Upon this some sandstone blocks were found against the exterior of the building that may indicate that it served as a support for stone paving. Also upon this floor were several inscribed blocks that may come from a doorway. One contained a reference to a high priest, part of another contained the word for oasis (wh3t), while another preserved the name of Seth. This piece is of great importance as the writing of the god’s name has been changed; it was originally spelled out phonetically and followed by a drawing of the god in the zoomorphic form (COMPARE PLATE 10), a determinative (picture sign). The representation of the so-called Seth animal, the identity of which is uncertain, was changed to that of the figure of a seated male deity (KAPER IN PRESS). This must have occurred during the period when opposition to the veneration of Seth was growing; I will return to the significance of this later. A small piece probably from a stela preserved the words ‘Seth [Lord of] the Oasis’.

The entrance into the two-roomed building, TT 6 (FIGURE 4), was located within the centre of the east wall due west from TT4. The outer room measures 3.87–3.92 m east-west and 3.82–3.90 north-south; the mud-brick walls are between 1.0 and 1.40 m in width. The east door is 1.76 m wide and the door into the inner room on the west is 1.58 m wide; the inner room is 7.5 m east-west by 3.90 m north-south. The excavated area within this building included all of the outer room but only that part of the inner one adjacent to the connecting door. The outer room was originally paved with sandstone blocks, set upon a mud layer over a layer of smashed sandstone, and supported upon mud-brick ledges against the walls of the room (PLATE 5). These ledges sat upon a compacted earth surface that originally extended across the entire room but had been dug into, probably when the paving was removed. The area below the paving and between the ledges was filled with earth rubble that contained large quantities of ceramic and other artefacts (PLATE 5). Amongst the latter are several of New Kingdom date: a pair of calcite ear studs.
PLATE 5: TT6 at Mut el-Kharab, north-west corner of outer room, showing the sandstone paving overlying fill with Dynasty XXV to early Dynasty XXVI ceramics (photo C.A. Hope, 2001).


PLATE 8: Carnelian figures of hippopotamuses from TT6 at Mut el-Kharab (photo C.A. Hope, 2001).

PLATE 9: Copper-alloy figure of a hippopotamus from TT6 at Mut el-Kharab (photo C.A. Hope, 2001).

PLATE 10: A copper-alloy figure of the Seth animal from TT6 at Mut el-Kharab (photo C.A. Hope, 2001).

(PLATE 6), a fragment from a large faience w3s-sceptre, a symbol of the Seth cult (Gordon and Schwabe 1995; te Velde 1977, 89–91) and the head from a small sandstone statue of a male wearing a wig with lappets falling over the shoulders at the front (PLATE 7). Items of possibly greater interest comprise: a pair of small carnelian hippopotamus figures (PLATE 8), a bronze hippopotamus (PLATE 9), a bronze figure of the Seth animal (PLATE 10), and the upper part of a small wooden figure of a king or god wearing a lappet wig and the white crown. They may belong to the New Kingdom or immediately thereafter, and many of these pieces may be votive in nature, dedi-
cated within the temple to Seth. The hippopotamus was sacred to Seth. Numerous demotic ostraka were also found; they are currently being studied by Professor John Tait. One ostrakon from the surface of the site is in hieratic and mentions Seth. From within the same deposits as the objects just mentioned were numerous complete and fragmentary ostrich eggshell beads; fragments from such were also found within the Old Kingdom strata. The use of this material for beads has been documented upon mid-Holocene sites within Dakhleh, whilst at Marsa Matruh fragments of this material have been found on Bates’ Island and related to local, that is Libyan, activity (WHITE C1990, 10–11).

The ceramic material from the fill contains numerous slender stands, piriform jars, large open bowls, smaller bowls and other forms all of which seem characteristic of the Late Period in general, and more specifically of Dynasties XXV — early XXVI (FIGURE 5).

The probability that the two-roomed structure and the remains of the temple building found in TT4 can be ascribed to the early Dynasty XXVI is raised by the discovery of a decorated and inscribed sandstone slab, measuring 0.90 x 1.02 x 0.17–0.22 m, within the north-east corner of the outer room (PLATE 11; KAPER IN PRESS).

It preserves the figure of Psamtek I (664-6 10 BCE) making offering to Ra-Horakhty and Atum seated within a shrine. Several other fragmentary blocks decorated in the same incised style were found within the room. It would appear that either the entire room was lined with such blocks, or that the blocks derive from a cult relief set against the rear wall of the inner room. As mentioned above, blocks from a stone doorway were found above the floor adjacent to the exterior of the structure; the northern jamb of its external doorway preserves stone blocks in situ. One inscribed block predates this phase, namely the one upon which the orthography of the name of Seth was changed; in its original form it may belong to the Third Intermediate Period. The discovery of this inscribed material and the information it provides on the history of the Seth temple confirm that the original location of the two stelae purchased by Lyons was indeed the temple at Mut-el-Khara.

B: TT5 (FIGURE 6)

This test trench lies a short distance to the north-east of TT4 and abuts the south end of the western face of a mud-brick structure approximately 15.0 m square (FIGURE 2). This feature appears to contain various rooms and its walls are composite, indicating that it may
be the result of several structural phases. Mud-brick walls extend to the north and south from the structure. To the north of the two-roomed structure in which TT6 is located there are other brick buildings, but none seems to parallel this feature. TT5 was located against this feature to determine its date and function; no trench could be situated within the feature because of the short duration of the work and the extant size of its walls.

The trench was situated to include the south face of a brick wall projecting to the west from the large feature. With the removal of surface sand and brick collapse, it was discovered that this projecting wall was in fact two walls: one abutting the main feature and projecting to the west for about 1.60 m (feature 8A), while the Western section (feature 8B) actually represents the southern extant end of a wall that runs to the north parallel to the west face of the square structure. This section of wall represents the oldest architectural feature revealed within the trench; it is 2.15 m wide and extends 0.41 m into the test area. This substantial wall has been cut back on its east face to form two distinct steps (PLATE 12). The lowest courses of the wall are set back from the west face and there is compacted sand against them; it was not determined whether the base of this wall had been reached when excavation terminated, by which time it had been revealed to a height of 1.80 m. Immediately to the east of the lowest part of this wall two sandstone blocks were revealed set upon their edges and 0.23 m apart; they are 0.13–0.145 m thick and 0.40–0.41 m wide. They were also set into compacted sand that filled the space between them; under this material was a compacted earth surface that may also extend under the wall. Surrounding the stone feature and sand were deposits of compacted earth that abutted the south end of the brick wall and extended south across the test area. These contained large quantities of ceramics, predominantly from thin-walled, ribbed jars with flat bases, many of which are perforated; rim sherds show the form to be restricted. They are to be identified as offering jars (so-called beer jars); associated with them were fragments of a few bread moulds of the type used in the baking of bread offered in temples. These date to Dynasty XXV or early XXVI (747–610 BCE). A few fragments of Old Kingdom ceramic were found in these deposits.
These earth deposits had been cut through by a trench running north-south at the eastern edge of the test area and into which the foundation courses of the west wall of the square brick structure were set (PLATE 12). The base of this trench cuts into the earth surface that may extend under the earlier brick wall described above. It is probable that the cutting back of the east face of the earlier wall was contemporary with the cutting of the foundation trench. When the foundations were inserted into the trench an earth layer was laid that concealed the stone feature and lowest part of the early wall. Other earth deposits were laid and eventually a stone paving, parts of which were preserved in situ on the west of the upper section of the early brick wall; whether any paving was laid on the east of that wall and adjacent to the large brick structure is unknown.

The section of wall that projects west from the face of this structure (feature 8A) represents a third structural phase (PLATE 12). Its base is 0.75 m above the top of the foundation trench for the large structure and it sits upon a layer of compacted brown sand that is on a deposit of smashed sandstone. Traces of the latter material were found elsewhere within brick collapse that fills most of the western part of the test area and overlies the earth foundations for the stone paving. This may indicate that the wall stump (feature 8A) is a relatively late feature belonging to the period after the temple had been destroyed.

C: SOUTH TOMBS

Although no excavation was conducted within the cemetery immediately to the south of the temenos, it may be noted that it appears to comprise between 20 and 30 tombs. They have the remains of mud-brick superstructures and at least one has stone-lined subterranean chambers and sarcophagi. This tomb had been dug into fairly recently to expose the sarcophagus; bones were scattered around the mouth of the pit. This tomb was filled in to protect it, and during this process fragments from numerous small faience ushabti figures were found. Features of this structure recall the Late Period burials in Tell Marqula, and some surface ceramics might indicate that it is of a similar date.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be seen that the site of Mut el-Kharab has the potential to yield valuable information on various phases of the history of Dakhleh, and evidence from periods as yet little known therein. There are deposits with material from the earliest phase of dynastic Egyptian intervention in the oasis, predating the massive expansion of activity in the Dynasty VI. Associated with this is ceramic and lithic material of the indigenous Sheikh Muftah Cultural Unit that may, depending upon definition of the term, be called ‘Libyan’, in that it derives from an area where later Libyans were known to inhabit. The lack of data until the New Kingdom, when a temple to Seth was constructed, though exactly when is as yet uncertain, may be rectified by future work. During the period covered by the late Old Kingdom to sometime within the New Kingdom the focus of Egyptian activity was undoubtedly at Ayn Asil. By the Third Intermediate Period, Mut was the capital of Dakhleh; its temple was certainly elaborated at the beginning of Dynasty XXVI, during which dynasty temples elsewhere in the oases of the Western Desert were also begun. As the cult centre of Seth, Lord of the Oasis region (wh3l), it withstood the assault upon the status of its god, effected in the Nile Valley. The date of the erection of this temple has yet to be determined, but the newly-excavated block upon which the writing of the name of the god has been changed, suggests that it was in existence before the proscription of the use of the Seth animal as a determinative in such writings. This was underway apparently by the Late Period (KAPER 1997A, 64; TE VE 1977, 14), and thus the structure from which it originates may be ascribed to the preceding Third Intermediate Period or earlier. If the temple was erected during the Third Intermediate Period, and if the larger of the two Dakhleh Stela can be ascribed to Shoshenq I, then a date within Dynasty XXI is possible. In this case at least one temple to Seth was built after the New Kingdom (contrary to te VE 1977, 138); it is quite possible however, that the structure was of New Kingdom date. The newly discovered demotic ostraka may shed valuable light upon the functioning of the temple. It is uncertain how many of the surviving remains owe their origin to the building programme of Psamtek I, but it is not impossible that he made quite significant additions in light of the extent of his activity within the Nile Valley (LLOYD 2000, 369–81; ARNOLD 1999, 70–4). Although Kharga had become the administrative capital of the region by the Ptolemaic Period, Mut was undoubtedly the local centre and recent finds of amphorae and tableware from around the Mediterranean attest continued affluence. Although no
undisturbed deposits of material from late antiquity were found, such may well be forthcoming. It is possible, therefore, to study almost three thousand years of activity at this site, a spectrum not known at any other locality within the region.

The finds are predominantly of relevance to our understanding of Egyptian Dakhleh. Whilst only early material of local origin was discovered, there is every possibility that in future seasons evidence of the illusive Libyan presence will be forthcoming.

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**Endnotes**

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2 I am indebted to Sylvie Marchand for this information.

3 I am grateful to Mohair el-Bashendi of the Dakhleh-Farafra Inspectorate, for showing to me the finds from his excavations at the site.

4 Sayed el-Yemani, the excavator of this cemetery, kindly showed to me the object register book in which the finds are recorded.

5 I am grateful to Dr Mary McDonald for comments upon this material.