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THE EXCAVATIONS AT MUT EL-KHARAB

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Report to the Supreme Council of Antiquities
The Excavations at Mut el-Kharab,

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Excavations at Mut el-Kharab were carried out between 8/1/2008 and 31/1/2008, funded by Australians Studying Abroad and Monash University. I would like to thank the officials of the Dakhleh-Farafra Inspectorate and the SCA representative, Kamal Hussein es-Sayed Ammar, for facilitating this work. The aim of the excavations were to continue the exploration of the remains of the Temple of Seth in the centre of the site and its associated buildings on the west, and to study further the large mud-brick structures within the south-east corner of the temple temenos. The results of each of the excavation areas are summarized below; also provided are discussions of the newly-discovered monumental inscription from Mut el-Kharab and short reviews of the studies of artefacts from the previous excavations.

A: The 2008 Excavations

I: The Main Temple Area (Figure 1)

Trench 29 (excavator Dr Anna Stevens)

Trench 29 is situated north of a series of trenches (8, 15–17, 24 and 27) excavated in previous seasons in which remains of brick structures built over the destroyed temple of Seth were found, and adjacent to a large, square mud-brick structure yet to be examined. The earlier excavations also revealed the lower courses of a north-south, sandstone wall that may be the eastern wall of the temple, a large mud-brick platform built over a dump with large quantities of 25th Dynasty ceramics which forms the foundation for extensions to the temple, and, at a low level, strata with early Old Kingdom ceramics and possible remains of a mud-brick structure. The aim of the excavation was to explore further these features and to obtain more information on the destruction of the temple. It was only possible to remove surface deposits to the depth where the late structures were encountered. The late building has red mud-brick walls, plastered on the interior, and once had a stone paving (Plate 1). This indicates that it was of some importance; unfortunately, because of the disturbed nature of the deposits it is not yet possible to date the building precisely; ceramics from the fill are of late Roman through to Mamluk date. A substantial deposit of smashed sandstone was found in the western part of the trench in which traces of a mud-brick wall emerged; this awaits further excavation.

The team comprised Associate Professor Colin A. Hope (director), Doctors Anna Stevens and Gillian Bowen, Wendy Dolling, Emmeline Healey and James Milner (site supervisors), Bruce Parr and Jessica Weeraratne (draftspersons), Ahmed Abu Bakr (conservator) and James Gill (ceramicist).
Trench 32 (excavator James Milner)

Trench 32 is positioned approximately one metre south of Trench 4, excavated in 2001, and aligned along the eastern face of the mud-brick shrine, Trench 6, on the west of the temple (Figure 2). The excavation area of the trench is 7 metres north-south and 4 metres east-west; it had been extensively plundered. The main features revealed by the excavation are shown in the plan on Figure 3a.

Shortly after the commencement of excavation a roughly east-west, yellow mud-brick wall was revealed at the south edge of the trench (Context 8), aligned with the southern wall of the shrine to the west. The second feature to emerge was a small remnant of an in situ sandstone block pavement in the north-west corner (Context 20). This includes 13 blocks that have been smoothed to create a level surface (Plate 2). Further blocks, presumably from the same feature, were found throughout the area but were in disturbed positions. One block from this area is decorated with a relief of the head of a male fecundity figure coloured blue, and may possibly date to the 20th Dynasty (Plate 3). To the east of the stone pavement was an occupational surface sitting above a brick platform. The ceramics indicated that this floor could possibly date to the 4th century CE. The brick platform, or foundation, covers the majority of the trench. This structural feature is present across the temple area in Trenches 4, 16, 17, 24 and 27, but is often truncated by robbers’ pits. Similarly, there were four pits cut through the platform within this trench. Two of these pits were cut down to a depth of Old Kingdom occupation.

In one of these robbers’ pits, in the south-west corner, a truncated grey-brick wall (Context 22) emerged, which is possibly the oldest architectural feature revealed (Plate 4). Its bricks measure on average 47 x 19 x 9–11 cm, and are thus considerably larger than those in the higher walls, which are 36 x 22 x 10–12 cm. This wall is built directly upon a sandy deposit; ceramic evidence dates this strata to the Old Kingdom. The south wall in the trench (Context 8) is built over this wall. A small part of the early wall was also revealed below a second east-west, yellow mud-brick wall (Context 21) that occurs approximately in the middle of the trench. Possibly associated with this section of the early wall is a sandstone block (Plate 2). On its west the yellow brick wall (Context 21) underlies the upper part of the west wall of the Trench 6 shrine (Contexts 4 and 54 in Trench 32), which is built from red mud bricks. This yellow wall was also cut by a robbers’ pit, which revealed that it was built on a similar level to the Old Kingdom deposits to the south. Further excavation into this pit and through deposits of sandy loam with lenses of ash, produced a large stone hammer tool and a small amount of debitage from flint working. All ceramics from this context date to the Old Kingdom.

On the final day of excavations a one square metre extension was dug from the north-west corner of Trench 32. The aim of this small extension was to define part of the doorway between the main temple area and the shrine to the west. Rubble fill was taken down to the level of the stone pavement. No stone was preserved here but traces of gypsum mortar suggest this area was once paved.
II: Area West of the Main Temple

Trench 30 (excavator Dr Gillian Bowen)

Trench 30 is located to the west of the structures on the immediate north of the Trench 6 shrine (Trenches 18, 21 and 25; Figure 2). This area was chosen for excavation in order to clarify the architectural development of these buildings and their relation to the shrine, and to try to establish their chronology and purpose. The trench begins 1 metre south of the north-west corner of Trench 6 and continues north for a further 12 metres; it communicates directly with Trench 25. Mud-brick structures, visible on the surface, mark the western boundary of Trench 25 and the eastern boundary of Trench 30. The area was covered by dense collapse from substantial walls that had fallen in a north-westerly direction. This collapse covered the entire trench but was more extensive in the south-east than in the north-west. Excavation was confined to two parts of the trench: one a 5.7 by 5.5 m area in the north and the other a 4.8 by 3.2 m area in the south (Figure 4).

South Excavation Area

The southern area was divided by a north-south wall (Context 18) that was visible just below surface scatter. Initially excavation was restricted to the area west of this wall. Dense mud-brick collapse filled the area to a depth of 1.5 metres. At the base of this collapse, two \( \frac{1}{4} \) sections from a sandstone column-base were encountered against the south baulk. The remaining half of the column base was visible in the baulk; this could well be in situ. The column-base is substantial with a diameter of 1.10 m and a height of 20 cm; from the pecking marks on the top of the two \( \frac{1}{4} \) sections it can be determined that the column would have had a diameter of 50 cm. The column-base sections were lying on a shallow deposit of rubble, just above a deposit of sand. This sand, which extended throughout the trench, contained potsherds of the Old Kingdom, as well as worked ostrich egg shell, and is the same context that was encountered beneath Trenches 6, 18, 21 and 25. There were no structures in this section of the test and the wall that divided the north test was shown to be only three courses high and 1.5 metres in length; it does, however, continue south beyond the end of the excavation. A lower grey mud-brick wall (Contexts 31 and 121) was observed in the east baulk at a depth of about 60 cm below the upper wall. It continues to both the north and south beyond the excavation area. The lower courses of this wall sit on the same general deposit as the half column-base and the two may be contemporary. This wall clearly represents a different occupational phase from the upper wall. It was decided to extend the excavation to the east of the upper wall in order to test the extent of the lower wall and determine whether any other structures from this occupational phase remained in situ.

Removal of the collapse revealed a series of structures built above and to the east of the lower wall (Plate 5). These comprised the northern half of a circular feature (Context 108), divided north-south by a narrow, single brick wall; the southern half lies beyond the excavation area. The structure has a laid-brick floor (Context 109) and an oil deposit covered the floor of the eastern section. This was possibly a grain silo. A robbers’ pit was cut to its north-east (Context 77). Two bonded walls (Contexts 79 and 80), one brick wide, and at a 90% angle to one another, are located to the north-east of this pit and represents one corner of a late structure. The southern wall (Context 79) appears to have been cut at its eastern end by a large robbers’ pit dug in this region. Other features are located to the west, but these require further
excavation before their extent, nature and function can be determined. The ceramics found within and around these structures comprise almost exclusively small offering bowls, which are dated provisionally to the Late Period. Three such caches were retrieved. The only other item found was a mud seal (6.4 x 2.9 x 2.8) preserving two oval impressions in which a winged sun’s disc surmounts what may be read as *nefer sutekh neb per* “Perfect is Seth, Lord of Heaven”.

The lower wall (31) was concealed by the features built above it and so it was not possible to determine its width or whether there were any contemporary structures within its vicinity. Excavation in this section of the trench revealed that the upper wall (Feature 18) was built on a layer of packing, which was laid above the possible silo. This represents a third occupational phase. It was also noted that the wall of the silo had been cut in antiquity the west wall of Room 2 in Trench 6 was constructed.

*North Excavation Area*

The western half of this area was filled with extensive mud-brick collapse that lay directly upon sand; this had destroyed any structures that originally were located in this area. Removal of mud-brick collapse in the eastern part revealed the presence of three short sections of grey brick walls, oriented east-west (Contexts 3, 5 and 7), due south of two larger sections of walls, one in yellow brick (Context 20) and the other in red brick (Context 45). These larger walls abut a north-south red-brick wall on the east and which is the exterior wall of the complex located in trenches 18, 21 and 25 (Figure 2). To the west of the ends of the larger walls a brick pier emerged that appears to comprise several separate parts all in grey mud brick (Contexts 43–4). This pier and the southernmost short section of wall (Context 3) are built down to the same level and set upon sand that contained ceramics of the Old Kingdom, and upon which the collapse in the western part of the area lay. Between the pier and southern wall a mud-brick floor had been laid, again upon sand but at a higher level than the former features. Overlying this platform was brick rubble that also extended to the east of the pier and upon which the two other short sections of walls (Contexts 5 and 7) were built (Plate 6); they clearly post-date the pier and the southern wall and their exact function cannot yet be determined. Between the pier and the end of the red brick wall (Context 45), a rectangular recess or cupboard was located (Context 14) and there is another to its east between the larger walls (Context 46). The floors of these two features are at the same level, considerably lower than the laid brick floor; they were filled with brick rubble and may be contemporary with the pier and southern wall.

A large sandstone block had been laid at the entrance of the western recess (Context 45) and this served as a foundation for the pier. The block was removed; it is 1.10 m in height and is inscribed on three faces with a text commemorating the activity of a local administrator, *Sa-Igai* who records making additions in a shrine of the god Igai. The piece probably dates to the Middle Kingdom and probably attests the existence of a shrine to Igai at Mut el-Kharab; a discussion of the text by Professor O. E. Kaper is included with this report. Several demotic ostraka, a greywacke plate and numerous small ceramic vessels (many broken) were found in this cupboard. The pots and potsherds are mostly from small offering vessels; all are of Late Period date, and no doubt relate to the same occupational phase as those offering vessels found in the southern test. A large ovoid of worked sandstone with flat ends and some
incisions was found in collapse against the pier and a large, sandstone offering table was found lying in collapse in the north-west corner of the excavation.

In summary, the eastern half of the southern section of Trench 30 includes three occupational phases: the lower wall, which is built immediately above Old Kingdom material remains, and may be of that period; this was later covered by substantial collapse in the west. Flimsy structures with Late Period ceramic assemblage were then built; the south-eastern of these was cut into to insert the western wall of Trench 6 and, finally, a north-south wall was erected on rubble packing above the structures on the west. In the northern section of Trench 30 all of the structures post-date the complex on the east. There are two distinct, pre-collapse, phases here. The first might be contemporary with the earliest activity immediately to the south, and comprises the pier and southern wall, associated recesses on the north, and the red-brick and yellow-brick east-west walls. The area was then filled with brick rubble and later the two central short sections of wall were built on this rubble. The material immediately below all of the earliest buildings was sand in which Old Kingdom ceramics and ostrich egg shell was found. The erection of structures immediately above an Old Kingdom horizon is consistent with the pattern found in other trenches that have been excavated to the east of Trench 30: Trenches 6, 18, 21 and 25.

**Trench 33** (excavator Emmeline Healey)

Trench 33 was opened to the west of the shrine in Trench 6, approximately four metres south of Trench 30. The excavation area measured 3.1 x 4.1 m and was defined by the four red mud-brick walls of a room exposed by surface brushing (Contexts 2–5; Figure 3b). Trench 33 was aligned along a partially standing wall (Context 37) of a large structure built over the western wall of the trench that has further standing remains extending south. The southern and northern walls extend beyond the trench.

Excavation revealed yellow mud-brick walls against the pre-existing red mud-brick walls that define the room along the northern and eastern edges (Contexts 6–7). The room is thus similar to that found in Trench 18 and Trench 25 (Figure 2). It was entered by a door in the north-east corner, with the eastern yellow brick wall as the door sill. This door is now blocked with bricks. Further excavation revealed a layer of grey brick rubble above compact red-brown fill with many small ceramic sherds concentrated in the north-west quadrant of the room. In the southern section of the room eight incomplete worked stone blocks were removed, one of which had been used as a door pivot, and another had grooves from knife marks along the width of one side. Beneath these stone blocks was an ashy lens which lay above the lower horizon of the stone material. The ceramic record associated with these upper contexts includes New Kingdom bread moulds, one New Kingdom blue painted sherd and Nile Valley amphorae sherds from the New Kingdom, and material covering the Third Intermediate Period to Mamluk Period.

Excavation continued below the compact red-brown fill and two related, thick red mud-brick walls were found extending west-east across (Contexts 12 and 17), and continuing beyond, the trench. The fill between these parallel walls was largely grey brick rubble. In the north-west quadrant between the early walls a layer of compact brown-grey soil was removed down to a compact brown-grey surface that was possibly a floor. Two pits were located and removed in the south-west quadrant and the east section, and a band of grey brick rubble was
exposed against the north face of the south wall. The ceramics from between these early walls was of the Old Kingdom, and included a few possible Early Dynastic pieces. Excavation continued between the early walls in the east section only, where sandy contexts yielded little material. Excavation here was stopped when the bottom of the early walls were revealed (Plate 7).

The fill between the southern wall of the trench and the southern early wall was then removed in several contexts until the bottom of the early wall was revealed. The upper contexts were of red-grey packing mixed with small rubble, while the lower contexts contained more sand than rubble. The pottery from this section of the trench was mixed, including sherds of Old Kingdom, Late New Kingdom, Third Intermediate Period and Late Period date, and a large number of sherds from straw tempered vessels, some with red slips. Other finds of note from Trench 33 were a small fragment with a sculpted cobra within a frame in Pharaonic style, and four ostraka from the surface fill.

**III: Southeast Corner of the Temenos** (excavator Wendy Dolling)

During previous seasons excavation of a series of trenches in the south-east corner of the Temenos had identified several phases of occupation. Of particular interest are a substantial mud-brick rectangular structure, probably dating to the Roman Period, and a series of earlier mud brick walls that had been cut through for the construction of this building. A large amount of ceramic dating to the Late Period and Early Ptolemaic Period was recovered during these excavations though the significant degree of destruction both ancient, during ongoing building activity, and more recent, in the form of intrusive cuts through archaeological deposits, meant that much of this ceramic was recovered from disturbed contexts. A series of eroding mud-brick walls were visible at surface level approximately 75 metres to the west of these excavation areas, having the appearance of a substantial building or buildings. Given the predominance of Roman and Ptolemaic activity represented in the archaeological material from the south-east corner of the temenos, it was hoped that investigation of this structure could clarify the nature of this activity and potentially reveal *in situ* Roman and/or Ptolemaic material. During the 2008 excavation season two trenches were laid out in this area. Trench 28 covers a 12 x 13 m area that included the surface mud-brick walls, and Trench 31 a narrow 2 x 9 m strip trench linking Trench 28 to the southern temenos wall (Plate 8).

**Trench 28**

The limits of this trench were determined by the extent of the structural remains visible at surface level so that an initial area of *circa* 12 x 13 m area was delineated. Later some additional surface clearance was undertaken to the east and west of this space so that a total area of 25 m east-west by 13 m north-south was incorporated into Trench 28 (Figure 5).

The upper surface sand and loose scattered rubble covering the trench were of a minimal depth so that the apparent base of the walls became evident relatively quickly. The preserved walls of a yellow/brown mud-brick structure (Building 1) as revealed by the 2008 excavations are not easily interpreted as a meaningful structure at this stage. Large mud-brick walls in the east and south (Contexts 6, 10 and 58–9) have been exposed that seem to be the outer walls of the building; however, the western and northern limits of the structure remain uncertain. There were several distinct intrusive cuts within this building, in particular a large cut that had
truncated abutting walls in the south-east corner of the trench and a large number of smaller intrusive pitted areas occur across much of the structure. A single pot emplacement containing a base fragment of a Roman cooking pot set within a compacted surface is the only undisturbed floor deposit so far associated with the building (Context 50). The foundation level of all of the walls revealed so far were found to be set down into, and built over, a thick layer of clay and fragmentary mud-brick packing. A relatively small area of this packing was excavated and found to overlie a horizon of crushed but mostly complete ceramic vessels, preliminarily identified as belonging to the Ptolemaic Period, as well as brick walls or possible floor levels that presumably date to the Ptolemaic period or potentially earlier. The ceramic material recovered from the structural packing requires further investigation but at present the majority seem to date to the Ptolemaic Period with a minor amount of earlier and later sherds. This suggests that the partially-investigated building constructed with this packing (Building 1) was constructed during the early Roman Period. Time constraints prevented further investigation of the earlier building phase revealed beneath the clay packing; at this stage the nature of the structure and a more precise date can not established.

Clearance of surface sand and rubble to the east of Building 1 exposed an abutting wall of a different colour and possibly a different date to this building. There appears to be a large amount of structural collapse to the east of this wall as well as possible in situ structural elements. This area will require further investigation in forthcoming seasons.

**Trench 31**

This trench measured 9 m (north-south) x 2 m (east-west) and extends directly from the south-eastern corner of Trench 28 to the inner face of the southern temenos wall. Time constraints prevented complete clearance of this area, however a number of structures have been revealed. In the southern end of the trench abutting the face of the temenos wall is a red/brown mud-brick wall or possible floor level that extends to the north for a distance of 3.7 metres. A large intrusive cut was found truncating archaeological deposits in much of the central trench area. Clearance of rubble fill from this cut exposed several mud brick walls. Two abutting east-west aligned walls were found and seem to pass beneath the later brick structure, and a north-south section of slumped wall was exposed along the western trench baulk. The exact relationship of these walls cannot as yet be determined. At the northern end of the trench butting the outer wall of Building 1 in Trench 28, there is a compacted surface. Although this surface is severally eroded and partially pitted, it does seem to be original; it is truncated by the intrusive cut in the centre of the trench. Given that most of the deposits so far cleared from this trench were disturbed rubble fill it is not possible to date the structures that have been revealed. The majority of the ceramics date from the Late Period to the Roman period so that there is a high probability of these structures being constructed within this time frame. An expansion of the excavation area and further clearance will be required to clarify the nature of the structures revealed in this trench.

**Concluding Remarks**

Whilst previous excavations have documented early Old Kingdom and possibly Early Dynastic Period activity at the site, in 2008 the first in situ remains of structures that are datable to the Old Kingdom were found in Trenches 32 and 33, and further deposits of Old Kingdom pottery were located in Trench 30. This confirms the existence of a settlement of
this date at Mut el-Kharab, and the scale of the walls in Trench 32 imply that some of the structures were quite sizable.

Of particular interest is the information provided by the inscription of Sa-Igai. The god Igai is known from sources in the Nile Valley from the 3rd Dynasty into the Third Intermediate Period, from a variety of sources. From the area of the Dakhleh Oasis the earliest evidence, together with the only local image of the god, comes from a site in the desert to the west that is being investigated by a German team. At this site, so-called Khufu Hill or Djedefre’s Water Mountain, from the time of these two rulers, there is a rock drawing of the god in human form with the two sceptres of his name on the head. From this site also comes a possible writing of the name of the god upon a small ceramic stand. Later in the Old Kingdom Igai is mentioned in inscriptions from the capital of Dakhleh at the settlement of ‘Ain Aseel (Balat), as the recipient of a cult. Clay tablets from the palace of the governor refer to a temple domain of Igai and the raising of cattle for the cult of the god. L. Pantalacci has observed that the god Igai was venerated in Balat, together with an obscure deity whose name is read something like “Taut”. The god Igai had the title Lord of the Oasis.

The cult of Igai is known to have continued in Dakhleh into the Third Intermediate Period. A hieratic stela from Mut el-Kharab mentions ‘the scribe and priest of Seth, Khai, of the temple domain of Igai’. The god Seth was venerated in Dakhleh from the Old Kingdom, and his cult may already have been connected to that of Igai. By the Third Intermediate Period the cult of Seth had supplanted that of Igai, and he became the principal god of Dakhleh venerated at Mut el-Kharab.

The inscription provides welcome evidence for activity at the site during the Middle Kingdom, a period so far poorly-attested in Dakhleh. The only other items possibly of this date from Mut el-Kharab are two small figures of hippopotamuses in carnelian, likely votive gifts at the temple.

B: The Studies

I: Conservation Report (Ahmed Abu-Baker)

During the 2008 season condition assessment and cleaning of archaeological objects from Mut el-Kharab and Ismant el-Kharab was undertaken. These objects included those of metals and metal alloys (iron and bronze) and fragments of glass, stone and wall paintings. With each type of material the aims of the conservation process were:

- **Metal and metal alloys**: cleaning of the objects from sand, surface incrustations and the external corrosion products to reveal the original surface features of the objects. This helps in restoring the aesthetic and archaeological value of the objects, interpreting their use and dating the layers from which they were obtained.

- **Fragments of glass**: cleaning of surface deposits and joining the fragments that match to help in estimating the shape of the object and its use.

- **Inscribed stone fragments**: removal of soil, sand and calcareous deposits to reveal the decoration or inscriptions on the surface of the stone.

- **Fragments of wall paintings**: cleaning of surface deposits to reveal the painted layer on the surface.
The work also included condition assessment and cleaning of coins from previous work stored in Abdel Hameed Ahmad Yousef Storage Museum near Ismant el-Kharab. The collection includes 74 coins that originate from several sites. Surface incrustations and corrosion products were cleaned to reveal the inscriptions on the coins where it was possible. The inscriptions helped in the dating of the layers from where the coins were excavated.

Finally, the work of this season included an evaluation of the storage room at Ismant el-Kharab (Kellis) archaeological site. The room was assessed in terms of its physical structure and internal environmental conditions (i.e., humidity and temperature) and their effect on the preservation state of the stored materials. Condition assessment was also carried out for the stored materials in which wall painting fragments form the major part. The evaluation showed that there is a need to repair some cracks and openings in the walls of the room and around the sky lights in the roof to maintain the physical integrity of the room and prevent the entrance of dust and exchange of humidity and temperature between the internal and external environments. The archaeological wall painting fragments are in a relatively stable condition. Although damage due to physical stress resulting in cracks, losses and detachment of layers, at this stage from the range of fragments able to be examined, there is no substantial evidence of ongoing mechanisms of deterioration driven by environmental or chemical processes such as salts, pollutants and moisture.

II: Study of Ceramics from Mut el-Kharab (James Gill)

The aim of this season was to record the pottery from Ptolemaic contexts at Mut el-Kharab, in an attempt to broaden our understanding of the forms and fabrics which are typical of this period at the site.

Work commenced with Trench 22 as this is known to have produced Ptolemaic pottery and had not been fully recorded. The first group of contexts had been identified by the excavator as disturbed and this was reflected in the mixed nature of the assemblage. The pottery belonged mainly to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, with some Late Period and Islamic sherds. Due to time constraints, the study focused upon undisturbed contexts, the material from which consisted of only Ptolemaic forms, including such diagnostics as carinated bowls with cream slip and red/black decoration, cooking pots with horizontal handles and large cream-slipped collared jars. Another diagnostic form from sealed deposits is the cream-slipped and painted jar, with floral and geometric decoration in red and black. This corpus should enable a detailed corpus of Ptolemaic pottery to be established for Mut el-Kharab. In addition to material from Trench 22, ceramics from Trenches 4, 6, 11 and 20 was recorded. Material from the latter included some parallels to that from Trench 22 but with the addition of a number of forms that may represent an early Ptolemaic or Late Period horizon.

III: The Lithics (Michal Kobusiewicz)

The collection amounts to several hundred pieces of chipped stone. The prevailing type of raw material is tabular chert (circa 70%). Judging from the high frequency of this chert the source should be somewhere not far from Mut. The second most frequent material is nodular chert (circa 30%). Numerous nodules of this raw material, eroded from Palaeocene limestones, are known from the foot of the scarp bordering the oasis. Only a few pieces of worked quartzitic sandstone also occur.
Description

Cores: two small multi-platform, unpatterned cores for flakes on nodular chert much used; no platform preparation. Two initially struck and discarded cores for flakes.

Debitage: irregular flakes mainly of nodular chert and some of tabular chert occur; no single blades. Chips are numerous, the result of screening; circa 70 % are of tabular chert, the remainder of nodular chert. Chunks are also numerous, mostly fragments of chert tablettes, but also of nodular chert. Two irregular small flakes of quartzitic sandstone.

Retouched Tools: Sixteen retouched tools or tool fragments were found. By far the most numerous are retouched flakes: eight specimens; five are on tabular and three on nodular chert. Two others are flakes with one edge retouched by flat retouch, and six others are irregular flakes with short sections more or less flat retouched.
One flat scraper on tabular chert crushed in pieces and heavily burnt.
One broken flat scraper of tabular chert with alternate retouch.
Two fragments probably of scrapers.
One denticulate on thick flake of tabular chert.
One small groover made on a thin flake of nodular chert.
One lamellar sickle blade retouched along one edge with well-pronounced sickle sheen, heavily burnt.

Technology

The applied technology was very simple. Nodules of nodular chert were struck, sometimes by hard, sometimes by a soft hammer, practically without any former core preparation. The process began from striking one single striking platform, but in further stages of elaboration, according to needs, the direction of blows changed. The products were more-or-less irregular flakes, sometimes but rarely, used for production of smaller retouched tools. Objects of tabular chert were produced by flaking the chosen piece of chert tablet to achieve a desired shape. In this way the larger tools were obtained. No bifacially-retouched tools were found in the assemblage under discussion, but it is obvious that the bifacial type of retouch must have been applied here, proved by numerous biface trimming flakes. In spite of the abundance of raw materials, sometimes Middle Palaeolithic chert artefacts were collected and brought to the site, most probably to be used; the phenomenon is well known from the other Old Kingdom sites in Dakhleh. The assemblage in question contains quite numerous heavily burnt specimens. Generally the collection has the same features as the material from Mut el-Kharab studied a few years ago. It also fits well with the typological as well as the technological point of view with other Old Kingdom chipped stone assemblages known from Dakhleh oasis, such as ‘Ain el-Gazzareen, ‘Ain Aseel and even from the watch posts surrounding the area.

IV: An inscription from a Middle Kingdom Temple for Igai at Mut el-Kharab (Olaf E. Kaper)

The inscription is cut into a block of reddish sandstone, which has been broken at the top and bottom. Its remaining height is 118 cm; the width is lightly tapering from 37 cm at the remaining base to 34 cm at the remaining top; its thickness is circa 25 cm. The front of the stone is badly damaged through secondary use of the stone in later constructions. The upper half of the front face has suffered much from its use as a paving stone.
The Text

The text may be described as an autobiography of a governor of the oasis, whose name was Sa-Igai, written in four separate columns of hieroglyphs over three sides of the stone (Figure 6). There does not seem to be much missing from the top of the inscription, as all four columns start with the name and titles of the governor or of the god Igai to whom the block is dedicated. I will translate and comment each of the text columns separately.

Right side:
“(Words spoken by) the chief of the priests: I am one who returns, whom his city loves, after I have inscribed my name upon the stone that was brought by the army, a ruler who is loyal (…)”
This first line of the inscription describes the governor, who is only given the title Chief of the Priests, as he returns to the community having completed the building works commemorated by this inscription. His relationship with his town, presumably Mut, is emphasized, as is the origin of the stone that was quarried and brought by an army. Instead of a military force, the word army may also specifically indicate a quarrying expedition, so we cannot know for certain which is intended here.

Front face, right column:
“(Words spoken by) Igai (Lord of) Mut (Mrt?) of the Oasis (… he has given) strength (…)”
This column is badly damaged, so that only fragments of the inscription can be reconstructed and read. The only part that is beyond doubt is the name of the god Igai at the top. This column of the inscription seems to focus exclusively on the god of the temple, Igai. The god’s name is followed by titles and further qualifications that are unfortunately all but lost. I have reconstructed the usual title of the god, Lord of the Oasis, which is attested on several other monuments (see the commentary below). Following this, there are traces of a word that is possibly to be read as the place name Mut. Even during later times, we do not yet know the Egyptian name of this town for certain, so this reconstruction is extremely speculative.

Front face, left column:
“(Words spoken by) the leader of nobility, mayor, chief of the priests: I have erected a monument in the temple of my lord Igai, so that (my name lives …)”
In this column, the governor declares his purpose in simple terms. The text first provides his full official titulary and then states that he has carried out building works in the temple of his god Igai. This column comes close to what would be a dedication inscription in a royal monument, except that the text is phrased in direct speech.

Left side:
“(Words spoken by) the leader of nobility, mayor, chief of the priests Sa-Igai, beloved of Nebeh (another deity?), who does what is praised by his god: I have erected monuments for (…)”
In this column, finally the name of the governor Sa-Igai is given, following his full titulary. There is no clear solution for the signs following the name. I have chosen here to read the sequence of signs n+b+h as the name of a deity, because of the verb ‘beloved’ following it. Unfortunately, this is highly tentative as this divine name is unknown. It is not impossible,
however, to encounter various local gods in the oasis. The text continues with a phrase known from autobiographical inscriptions, in which Sa-Igai expresses his servitude towards his god.

The Date of the Inscription

The governor Sa-Igai is not yet known from other texts, and this is the first attestation of the name anywhere in Egypt. The inscription is not dated by the mention of a king, so that the date has to be arrived at by reasoning and by close comparison with similar inscriptions and historical facts. First I will look at the name and titles of the governor. The name Sa-Igai (‘Son of the god Igai’) is of a type first attested in the Middle Kingdom. Likewise, the combination of titles ‘mayor and overseer of priests’ was first introduced at the start of the Middle Kingdom under Mentuhotep II, and it would remain in use until the middle of the 13th dynasty. Previously, during the 6th Dynasty, the governor of the Dakhleh Oasis carried the title ‘ruler of the oasis’, which differed from the titles of the contemporary governors in the Nile Valley. In the Middle Kingdom, the titles of the administration were apparently made identical to those in the Nile Valley.

In his autobiographical inscription, Sa-Igai records having commissioned building works at the temple of the local god Igai. The expression ‘to make monuments’ is nearly always used of actions of the king only. It occurs in a few private dedication inscriptions from the 11th Dynasty onwards, but it is used mainly with reference to funerary monuments, not to temples. Private dedications to deities are extremely rare in the Middle Kingdom, and only very few parallels for this practice may be cited from the time of Mentuhotep II to the middle of the 13th Dynasty. In fact, the closest comparable material dates from the time of the late 11th and early 12th Dynasty.

The first inscription in which a governor claims to have added buildings to a local temple is found in the Beni Hasan tomb of Baqet II (no. 33), from the 11th Dynasty, in which we read: “who made a monument for eternity in the temple of Khnum of Baqet”. At Deir el-Bersheh, in the tomb of the nomarch and vizier Ahanakht I, there is a long biographical inscription at the entrance, which starts as follows: “I made great monuments in the temple of (my) lord Thoth”. And later he says: (“… the temple, which) I built anew (?) to my lord Thoth, I inscribed my name (upon it) … in order to make my name live upon the monuments that I made”. These phrases are nearly identical to the ones used by Sa-Igai. The dating of the tomb of Ahanakht should be placed in the reign of Mentuhotep II, after the reunification of the country.

The date of these two inscriptions from the start of the Middle Kingdom suggests a similar date for the inscription from Mut el-Kharab. During the 12th Dynasty, it was perhaps no longer possible for the provincial governors to erect temples on their own accord, at least in the Nile Valley. In the Dakhleh Oasis, the relative autonomy of the governors may have been greater, as it was already in the Old Kingdom, so that a date for our stone in the early years of the 12th Dynasty may not be ruled out.

Even though the stone resembles a doorjamb in shape, this is not its original function, because it has slightly tapering sides. The closest parallel for this shape, in fact the only parallel, is found in the pilasters around the courtyard of the temple for the goddess Satet that was built under Mentuhotep II at Elephantine. A similar court with pilasters should be reconstructed for
the temple at Mut el-Kharab, with the autobiographical inscription of the governor who erected the monument inscribed on one of these. Other stones of similar dimensions have, in fact, been found in the excavations, but these were uninscribed. One other pilaster from the same structure was found inscribed, but this was with a hymn to Seth from the Ramesside period. The architectural type from the reign of Mentuhotep II again points at a date for our inscription in the early years of the Middle Kingdom. The inscription brings us precious historical information about the situation in the Dakhleh Oasis at that time, of which nothing was known previously.

V: Note on the Recent Discoveries of Ostraka at Mut el-Kharab (Günter Vittmann)

During this season 103 ostraka were discovered, written in Hieratic, Demotic, Greek and Coptic. I have examined the photographs of some 40 of these, almost all of them being inscribed in Demotic.

Hieratic Ostraka

Among the rare non-Demotic material, a sherd with the beginnings of three lines in a nice Hieratic hand from Trench 32, presumably early 1st millennium BCE, is interesting because it can be joined with another sherd found earlier in this area and yields a list of priests:

1. god’s father of Seth, Pa[...
2. god’s father of Seth, Pa[...
3. god’s father of <Seth> Nespa[...

(Alternatively, it may be read: (1) god’s father {of} Sethpa[...], (2) god’s father {of} Sethpa[...], (3) god’s father {of} Nespa[ ...].)

Another ostrakon which obviously belongs to the first half of the 1st millennium BCE is from Trench 31. The damaged and faded text in late Hieratic script on both sides has not yet been deciphered, but it seems possible that it is a letter.

Demotic Ostraka

Most of the material is in a rather bad state of preservation and consequently hard to decipher. Quite often is not even possible to determine the general contents of the texts because the writing is almost completely faded or abraded, and it would also be useful to clean some objects to obtain better results. Among those items that can be read or at least classified, the following may be mentioned, all from the latter half of the Ptolemaic Period, for palaeographical reasons:

- four fragments preserving a report or a letter. Someone is speaking about things he is going to do but due to damage and loss of text, the identity of the speaker and the contents are unclear. There is a day date (line 8), and according to line 3 something happens ‘before Amun’.
- a text completely preserved in three lines; it is an informal letter containing an order of payment:
  1. Imuthes greets Harmais.
  2. May they give the fifth (part) of(?) …
  3. (to?) Pachrates …
- one of the largest items, with the heading “The account of Sisois”. This lengthy account is arranged in two columns according to days of a month. There is mention of several individuals, but we do not recognize what is accounted for.
fragments of letter are presumably on two sherds; one is a small fragment referring to two (or more) persons:
(1) ] and we [
(2) ] and we do not [
(3) ] and you shall do for us the matt[er
(4) ] we being behind (i.a. having a claim against) ..[

- a text dated, according to the verso, to ‘year 16’ of an unnamed ruler; it concerns payment of the heter-tax.
- a sherd inscribed on both sides and contains a payment order issued by Harsiesis, son of Petemestus; details are unclear but the last line preserves the proper name Inaros. On the verso, there is the indication

(1) Written by Es...
(2) (son of) Peteyris, year 7(?),
(3) third month of the ...-season, day 21.

An isolated Coptic fragment is 30-037 containing the ends of four lines.
Figure 1: Plan of Mut el-Kharab showing location of all excavated trenches.
Figure 2: Plan of Trenches 6, 18, 21, 25, 30 and 32.
Figure 3: (top) Plan of Trench 32 and (bottom) Trench 33.
Figure 4: Plan of Trench 30.
Figure 5: Plan of Building 1 in Trench 28.

Figure 6: Inscribed block from Trench 30.
Plate 1: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 29 looking north-east showing late pavement

Plate 2: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 32 looking north showing pavement on brick foundation and stone block possibly associated with Old Kingdom wall (lower left).
Plate 3: Mut el-Kharab Trench 32, block decorated with fecundity figures.

Plate 4: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 32 looking south showing early wall.
Plate 5: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 30 South looking north-east showing late structures over earlier wall.

Plate 6: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 30 North looking east showing reused Middle Kingdom block.
Plate 7: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 33 looking south-east showing Old Kingdom walls below later structure.

Plate 8: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trenches 31 (foreground) and 28 (upper left) looking north.
Plate 9: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 30 face of the inscribed Middle Kingdom block.
Plate 10: Mut el-Kharab 2008 Trench 30, sides of the inscribed Middle Kingdom block.