

# INSULARITY AND ISLAND IDENTITY IN THE OASES BORDERING EGYPT'S GREAT SAND SEA

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*Offered to Kent Weeks with a great deal of fondness  
and with many thanks to him for being such an inspiring teacher and friend.*

In 2004, at a conference held on the island of Rhodes, Bernard Knapp delivered a fascinating paper entitled "Insularity and identity in the prehistoric Mediterranean" (published as KNAPP 2007). The paper was essentially a meditation on the degree to which the lived experience of inhabiting an island in prehistory matched up to the potent expectations set up by the metaphor of insularity that islands have engendered. Odysseus' epic journey homeward from the Trojan war—in which he moored at innumerable islands and found each possessed of its own character and particularized deviation from expected reality—has helped shape the Western romantic notion of islands as strange and unexpected places. But such a notion extends far further back in the human experience.

One Middle Kingdom papyrus, for instance, tells the tale of a sailor who, after a particularly violent storm, was cast ashore on an island rich in figs and grain, melons of all kinds, in fish and birds (PARKINSON 1997: 92-98). Inhabiting this island paradise was an awe-inspiring, gigantic serpent, who demanded to know of the sailor, "Who brought you? Who brought you, young man? Who brought you to this island of the sea, with water on all sides?" Upon learning that the sailor had been delivered to the island by a wave of the sea, the serpent reassured him, "Fear not, young man... Look, God has let you live, and has brought you to this island of the spirit; there is nothing which is not within it." The snake then informed him that he would be rescued after a space of four months and cautioned him that "once it happens that you have left this place, you will never see this land again, which will have become water." The tale of the shipwrecked sailor demonstrates that the Egyptians viewed islands as landscapes imbued with fantasy and intrigue more than a millennium before Homer composed *The Odyssey*.

Bernard Knapp's talk was, by his own admission, a meditation on what islandness might mean, and he was forced—somewhat reluctantly—to admit that in the Mediterranean at least, imagination and metaphor far eclipsed reality. In Aegean isles, the ease of marine transport, the proximity of other islands, and a wealth of natural resources, ensured that no island remained

an island unto itself, as it were. These islands, since the advent of boatbuilding, were defined as much by connectivity as they were by insularity. But what about oases? Might the isolated oases of Egypt's Western Desert actually constitute a richer more interesting subject of meditation for "island theorists" than Mediterranean islands?

The likening of oases to islands is certainly not a new idea, for Dakhleh and Kharga were known in Herodotus' writing as the "Islands of the Blessed" (Herodotus 3.26.1). Strabo too stated that "the Egyptians call the inhabited tracts, surrounded in a circle by great deserts, like islands in the sea, Auases" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 113). Olympiodorus, a native of Thebes, also employed this metaphor. Unlike his predecessors, however, he drew upon his first hand knowledge of the region's geology to mount the argument that the oases not only seemed like islands, but that they—at one time—actually had been islands! He writes: "The oyster and other marine shells found adhering to the stones of the mountain which divides it from the Thebaid, are evidences of its having been an island" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 34). Certainly, encountering fossilized seashells on a climb up Dakhleh's inimical desert scarp has never failed to excite wonder and temporal vertigo in myself and those with whom I have made the ascent.

Interestingly, scholars studying this region's deep prehistory have recently employed the metaphor of the island to describe Egypt's oases from a different perspective. So far as it can be reconstructed, at the point that humans were evolving in Africa and developing the paleolithic toolkits that allow us to track their travels, the ecology of the Sahara appears to have resembled that of the savannahs that now characterize countries such as Kenya and Zambia. As early as 400,000 years ago, hominids hunted, gathered, and then moved on, following herds of migrating animals and searching for new, edible plants to consume. In this manner, they traversed North Africa with ease. It was not until 44,000 years ago or so that the long process of increasing aridity and consequent desertification essentially restricted individuals to well watered regions such as the Nile Valley or marooned them on the desert islands that the oases then became. This process subsequently repeated itself after the rains of the Holocene caused the desert to briefly bloom and then again to turn to sand (THURSTON 2004: 63; McDONALD 1999: 127-129; for an image, see KUPER 2002: fig. 7).

So, if the oases of Egypt have been metaphorically viewed as desert islands, forming their own archipelago at the far eastern edge of the Great Sand Sea, to what extent should we take this analogy seriously—at least as a tool for thinking about recurrent themes and cultural patterns over the long durée? This essay is intended to serve as a meditation along the lines of the one Bernard Knapp offered in Rhodes. Here I'd like to consider the applicability of various cultural imaginings of "islandness" to Egypt's oases—especially to Dakhleh and Kharga, the Oasis Magna as anciently envisioned. These oases, I will argue, were in many ways more typical of our island imaginary than many "real" islands, such as those located in the Northern Mediterranean and other heavily frequented regions. By employing the metaphor of "insularity" and by taking it seriously, it is possible to identify a number of geographic realities and consequent cultural undercurrents that recur throughout the great sweep of oasis history and unite cultures separated by millennia.

**OASES AS "ISLANDS": Islands are remote and rarely visited**

Anyone who has ever taken the twelve-hour bus ride from Cairo to Dakhleh—and has, moreover, attempted to avoid using the absolutely atrocious restrooms found along the way—knows that this journey is a long one and filled with great discomfort. It has, however, within the last three decades, been made vastly, easier by the asphaltting of the traditional desert route that links Cairo, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhleh, and Kharga. Other oases located far to the southwest of Dakhleh and uncomfortably close to the borders of Sudan and Libya have not been subject to such improvements and are consequently visited rarely and at great personal risk due to the very real possibility of kidnapping and the potentially dire consequences of engine failure. Even with the new paved highway to Dakhleh, however, the length and bother of the trip means that only the most intrepid of tourists reaches it, and Nile Valley Egyptians—save those with familial ties or official business—tend to go there rarely, if at all.

In antiquity, needless to say, the journey was far more arduous. If a caravan embarked from Oxyrhynchus, for example, it had to make careful preparation for the 190 km stretch of waterless desert that separated this polity from Bahariya; followed by the 120 km route from Bahariya to Farafra; and, finally, then the 170 km track that wended southward from Farafra to Dakhleh. Further, if the a traveller wished to leave Dakhleh to travel to Kharga, the Nile Valley, or to oases further south, many hundreds of kilometres more yet awaited him. Thus such a journey was indeed possible, but given the relative ease and comfort of river transport, there generally had to be a compelling reason to undertake it.

In the Second Intermediate Period, when the Hyksos king found himself under attack by the Theban ruler, Kamose, the besieged king had a particularly good incentive to send his messenger along the oasis route. The letter he dispatched was intended for his ally who occupied the throne in Kerma, and it bore the suggestion that the latter come northward to attack Thebes while the Theban army was otherwise occupied assaulting Avaris. According to Kamose, this plan was thwarted when his forces captured the Hyksos messenger in Bahariya, and the oasis was subsequently subdued such that no further sedition could pass through it (SIMPSON 2003: 349-350). Recently, however, a British Museum team working at el-Kab found a tomb inscription describing a Second Intermediate Period Kerma raid on the town, which strongly suggests that other Hyksos messengers had utilized the same route to better effect (DAVIES 2003).

It is undoubtedly significant that the other ancient testimony of a situation in which the oasis road was specifically chosen in preference to a riverine route is Harkhuf's journey, undertaken at a time when civil unrest in the Valley may also have been at issue. Harkhuf, as an agent who traded on behalf of the crown during the Sixth Dynasty, descended regularly to a polity called Yam to obtain southern trade goods—coveted exotica similar to that sought by the shipwrecked sailor on his own journey. The oasis road was not Harkhuf's preferred route for visiting Yam; he had made the journey twice before by boat. On his third trip, however, he departed the Nile Valley at Abydos and then travelled to Kharga (or perhaps to Dakhleh, as others have suggested) and southward to the Nubian region of Yam (SIMPSON 2003: 407-412; FÖRSTER 2007: 9).

The reason for this long, costly, and dangerous detour may have been that the three formerly independent polities of Wawat, Irtjet, and Setju were embroiled in internal strife, as the political reconfigurations that apparently occurred over the course of Harkhuf's three visits suggests. Certainly, while he did make the journey homeward by river, the ruler of Yam provided Harkhuf in this instance with a substantial military escort—suggesting, of course, that this was necessary. Alternatively, or perhaps, additionally, Harkhuf's motivation for taking the oasis road may have been to avoid paying impost to Nubian rulers on the luxury goods that he was transporting southward to trade with the ruler of Yam. If forced to surrender a portion of his cargo as toll at each change of political boundary, the profits Harkhuf could have expected to reap from his journey would have plummeted.

Given that the oases themselves—unlike the Mediterranean's islands, for example—offered few natural resources that were in and of themselves highly valuable or unique, inter-oasis travel seems to have been undertaken only rarely throughout much of Egyptian history. Primarily it occurred when the sponsoring party had a vested interest in avoiding the Nile Valley—perhaps for political reasons, perhaps because the region was embroiled in war, or perhaps because taxes were too high. In this regard, it should be noted that even today, smugglers are said to move cattle through Dakhleh and beyond in order to avoid imposts (Thurston 2004: 159).

### **OASES AS "ISLANDS": Islands are dangerous because of pirate raids**

Travelling to the oases was greatly facilitated in the sixth century BC by the widespread import and availability of the camel, and this new technology remained the predominant means of transport into the nineteenth century AD. Even the adoption of these sturdy ships of the desert, however, did not ensure a safe or easy passage, as Sir ARCHIBALD EDMONSTONE found when he travelled along the Darb el-Tawil (2004: 20-29). Edmonstone traversed this 250 km track—the shortest of all possible routes from the Nile Valley to Dakhleh—as fast as reasonably possible in order to ensure that it was he, and not M. Drovetti, who earned boasting rights to call himself the first European to visit Dakhleh. At this accelerated pace, he managed to make the journey in a little under a week. Along the way, however, he was beset by a great number of worries and hardships. Despite the twelve camels that he and his companion rented primarily in order to transport water for themselves, their guides and their horses, Edmonstone worried.

He worried about the great many camel bones that littered his path. He worried about perishing from the fatigue and ennui of his daily 13-hour march through a largely featureless desert terrain. And on day number five he began to worry about running out of water. In his journal he wrote: "We now began to experience serious inconvenience from the want of water. The perpetual shaking soon caused that we had brought with us to imbibe a rancid taste, from the goat-skins in which it was carried, but even this was nearly exhausted, and though we had more than once obtained a small supply from caravans we met, we had no longer any to give our horses, and scarce enough for ourselves. It was necessary on this account that we should make a forced march, in order that we might reach our first point of destination as soon as possible" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 27).

Over and above the question of whether he or his camels would die first from want of water, Edmonstone also feared for his own safety. For the first part of his journey, his main fear was that his guides would do him harm or rob him while he slept and melt off—together with the camels and the precious water supply—into the night. But by the time that he was only six hours from his destination, his fears had been redirected. As he descended a somewhat precipitous pass, Edmonstone observed his guides "lighting their matchlocks, and assuming an unusual degree of precaution" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 27). Just the previous year, as it turned out, members of their own tribe had been attacked at that very spot by a band of 400 Mograbin Bedouins and cut to pieces. It was to Edmonstone's professed "infinite joy" then, that he soon spied cultivation (2004: 28).

Lightning raids on oasis settlements are noted frequently in historical records and must have represented one of the accepted dangers of oasis life from time immemorial. The first Old Kingdom settlers who travelled to Dakhleh in the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties apparently felt the same unease as did Edmonstone and his guides. Surveys undertaken around the eastern borders of the oasis have discovered that in many instances the most prominent hill in an area was surmounted by one or more rock huts. These small structures apparently housed Egyptian soldiers, judging from the cultural remains and from the petroglyphs associated with them. The recurring sets of ticks, frequently etched into the stones of these stations, suggest that the soldiers counted the days of their two week—or 20 day—rotations in the same way as prisoners in cartoons carefully keep count of their own captivity. Like Nubian hilltop watch posts, many of these guard stations were in eyeshot or signalling distance of one another, particularly those that guarded the Darb el-Ghubari and the Wadi el-Battikh, where the desert plateau could be easily accessed. Southern routes into the oasis also seem to have been guarded, and the same may be true in the northwest of the oasis, near the Darb el-Farafra and the Old Kingdom towns at Amheida and Ein el-Gezaren, however, this area has yet to be thoroughly surveyed (KAPER and WILLEMS 2002).

In these early days of Old Kingdom involvement in the site, it appears that the main interest of the Egyptians was in protecting their expeditions, which were bravely soldiering hundreds of kilometres out into the far southwestern desert. The rock inscriptions on a large hill now known as "Djedefre's Water Mountain" mention two separate expeditions of 200 and 400 men each in order to produce mefaaf-powder from the "pigment of the desert" (*ss w khast*). Both expeditions also took *minw*, which are either thought to have been sacks or precious minerals, but the contents of the sacks or the identity of the minerals remain equally obscure (KUHLMANN 2002: 136). There may also have been an interest in developing a way to travel to the Gilf Kibir, which lies some 400 km or so to the southwest. In recent years explorers and archaeologists have found Egyptian and local pottery at various waystations extending in a straight line virtually all of the way on route to this oasis (RIEMER et al. 2005; Förster 2007). What the purpose of such an endeavour would have been, however, is again poorly understood, but for the purposes of this discussion, it matters most that these expeditions occurred and that they required a great deal of logistical preparation and security.

At the site of Abu Ballas, most famously, and at around twenty other sites as well, caches of storage jars have been found stashed at the base of large hills to facilitate the journeys of substantial cadres of men and beasts by provisioning them at regular intervals with food and water. Just maintaining this unwieldy infrastructure must have been almost as impressive an endeavour as the expeditions themselves, necessitating endless streams of donkey caravans that did little else but deliver supplies and perpetually partially consume them in the process (FÖRSTER 2007: 5-6). Such supply dumps, however, are a double-edged sword, for while they can be used for their intended purpose, they can also be co-opted (or imitated) by others. In the mid-nineteenth century AD, for instance, repeated raids into Dakhleh from the south were finally thwarted when the invaders were pursued and the oasis inhabitants discovered their hidden stores of water. These jars were promptly smashed to smithereens so as to prevent further incursions—and this strategy evidently succeeded, at least for a while (THURSTON 2004: 157).

Given that the material transported along the Abu Ballas trail needed to be guarded, and its procural necessitated a formidable infrastructure, it was not long before the fortified settlements of Ein el-Gezareen and Ain Aseel were erected. The thick walls that originally surrounded these settlements were apparently soon deemed superfluous, perhaps primarily because there is safety in numbers. As it was anciently expressed, "The Asiatic is a crocodile on its riverbank that snatches from a lonely road but cannot take from the quay of a populous town" (PARKINSON 1997: 224). Security appears to have been an issue that remained relatively constant during all periods of settlement in Dakhleh and Kharga (WAGNER 1987: 247; JACKSON 2002: 161, 166). During the Late Period, Ptolemaic, and Roman Periods, certainly, it is remarkable that temples were frequently sited—in a very unEgyptian manner—atop the highest point possible. Presumably, in their insecure environment, the Egyptians interpreted the linguistic metaphor of the temple (*mnnw*) as fortress (*mnnw*) quite literally (MORRIS 2005: 673).

In order to protect themselves, their investment in the oases, and the trade that passed through this region, the Roman administration also constructed numerous purpose-built fortresses in Kharga and stationed troops in Dakhleh. Significantly, the main period of fortress-building in Kharga was during the Tetrarchy, a time when hostile activity by the Blemmys and other desert tribes was on the rise (JACKSON 2002: 166). In the Islamic period, the fortification of villages, their establishment in easily defensible terrain, and their deliberately bewildering maze of covered streets betray a similar anxiety. Indeed, the increase and subsequent pervasiveness of hostile raids, such as the one that famously scorched the town of Hibis and resulted in the capture of Nestorius circa AD 434, is one reason given for the steep decline in the population and prosperity of the oases from the fifth century AD until the reestablishment of security under Muhammad Ali (HRDLICKA 1912: 11; VIVIAN 2000: 111; EDMONSTONE 2004: 55, 58).

**OASES AS "ISLANDS": Islands are dangerous for they are inhabited by "natives", serve as the lairs of pirates, and are frequented by fugitives.**

It is something of a puzzle that Kharga is filled with so many Roman fortresses, while such were not evidently deemed necessary in Dakhleh, outside perhaps of El Qasr. Dakhleh was the

more fertile of the two oases, and given its location further from the Valley, it was seemingly the more vulnerable. Perhaps the emphasis on Kharga during the Roman Period was because this oasis was more of a thoroughfare, especially where trade was concerned, and protecting the cargo that passed through trade routes was a clear imperial priority. Just as islands often suffer from pirates, however, these same land masses are also notorious for serving as hideouts and as launching points for their predatory expeditions. Thus, perhaps an additional reason fortresses clustered closest to the Nile Valley was that Roman authorities were especially anxious not to allow Kharga to serve such a function.

The predominant ethnicity of the oasis-dwellers was not always Egyptian. The indigenous inhabitants of Kharga and Dakhleh in the Old Kingdom were the Sheikh Muftah, who are poorly understood. Their lack of settlements, the sophistication of their flint industry, and their homemade pottery, however, strongly suggest that they may have been semi-nomadic (McDONALD 1999: 129). In Third Intermediate and Late Period sources, the names of oasis inhabitants are often Libyan. Merneptah reports that Farafra had been "cut off" by the Libyan invaders of his day, and it is likely that the infamous Libyan raids against Thebes from the Late New Kingdom onward may have originated in Kharga (GIDDY 1987: 48). Indeed, Colin Hope (2007a) has argued that the oases are likely to have been home to at least some of the perennially troublesome Tjehenu and Tjehemu-Libyans extending back to the time of Narmer. Libyans may have been less of a threat than Blemmys in the Roman Period, but much the same dynamics were undoubtedly at issue (BAGNALL 1996: 146-147).

Oases have the reputation for being difficult of access and, at certain times at least, filled with bandits and foreigners, but let us add one more bad lot to the mix. At periods when state investment in the oases had waned—particularly at times when Egypt was embroiled in civil war or was struggling with economic recession—the oases served as a destination for rebels, criminals, and perhaps even tax-evaders. In the late Eleventh Dynasty, after Mentuhotep II successfully reunited the country, mopping up operations included the oases, where numerous rebellious elements had fled. The king made claims to have annexed the oases to Egypt and to have driven out the rebellious Beteku (GIDDY 1987: 53). A recently discovered depiction of Mentuhotep II in Gebel Uweinat suggests that his forces pursued their enemies hundreds of kilometres into the desert southwest of Dakhleh, while perhaps simultaneously prospecting for valuable resources (DEGREEF 2009). Slightly later, after Amenemhet I usurped kingship from Mentuhotep's line, a nomarch's son describes how he reached the western oases, searched the roads, and carried off all of the fugitives that he found therein (GIDDY 1987: 57). He was aided in this effort by a steward, who bragged of employing a troop of young soldiers to "make firm" the land of the oasis dwellers and the boundaries of his majesty more generally (GIDDY 1987: 56). Clearly, then, securing the state meant eradicating the lairs frequented by those who opposed it.

If the oases have traditionally offered a refuge to political undesirables fleeing from persecution, the same would presumably be true for members of unorthodox religious faiths. At the Roman Period site of Kellis in Dakhleh, we appear to have evidence of this. Much to the



surprise of the site's excavators, they discovered at Kellis three of the oldest churches yet known in Egypt. The smallest appears to date from the late third or early fourth century AD and may represent the type of hidden "house" church where worshippers surreptitiously practiced their faith under emperors like Decius and Diocletian who actively persecuted Christians. Indeed, Gillian Bowen and Colin Hope suggest that the large basilica built just north of this hidden church may have been constructed after the Edict of Toleration that the emperor Constantine issued following his conversion to Christianity (BOWEN 2003 162, 164; HOPE 2007b: 51). Significantly, like an epidemic, conversion spread swiftly in the closed environment of the oasis. Within 25 years of this edict, pagan priests entirely disappear from the inscriptional record, and Kellis's local temple was transformed into a rubbish dump (HOPE 2007b: 51).

But it is well known that Egyptians took to Christianity quickly. What makes Kellis so odd is that a portion of its Christian community appears to have been Manichean, followers of an offshoot of Christianity that was mistrusted by its mainstream counterparts. Manicheans followed the teaching of the Persian prophet Mani, which creatively synthesized the wisdom of Christ, Zoroaster, and the Buddha. The faith, spread by missionaries to Egypt within Mani's own lifetime, reached Egypt by AD 260, flourished in the Fayum in AD 290 and is first attested in Dakhleh roughly half a century later. Indeed, based on the presence of Syriac texts at Kellis, it is thought that missionary activity may have taken place within the oasis proper (GARDNER 1997: 166)!

Mainstream Christians, who were invested—once persecutions ceased—in definitively delineating the tenets and practices of their own faith, tended to view Manicheans as a threat to the stability and coherency of their religion. Thus, in AD 381 Christians succeeded in lobbying the Roman emperor, Theodosius I, to deny Manicheans their civil rights and to issue death warrants for all remaining male and female Manichean monks (FREEMAN 2009). Thus, the Manichean community that thrived at Kellis may have felt most comfortable practicing their faith as far from Egypt's established religious and political centers as possible. For the members of this faith, then, any oasis from persecution would have been well worth the journey.

### **OASES AS "ISLANDS": Devil's islands.**

Islands and oases, by virtue of their remoteness, offer the perfect place to hide from a state, but if pacified and placed under strong state control, these very same attributes could be played to a different advantage. Oases then became not where one fled if one had angered the central authority, but where one was banished as punishment. The fate of Egypt's worst offenders in the pharaonic period, shipped off (often noseless or earless) to forced labour in the mines of Nubia or the frontier fortresses of the northern Sinai, is much discussed. The role of the oases as an alternative destination for criminals is lesser known, although given that Dakhleh and Kharga likewise qualified as the far margins of the state, it comes as no surprise.

This practice is attested in the Maunier Stele, which records the efforts made by Menkheperre, a High Priest of Amun in the 21st Dynasty, to convince his god to affect a change in political policy (BREASTED 1988: 317-320). Following the civil unrest that marked the end of the New



Kingdom, this priest had been summoned by Amun to "come to the South in might and victory, in order to make satisfied the heart of the land, and to expel his enemies." As part of his general project of pacification, individuals that Menkheppere deemed rebels were banished to the oases. Gaining their loyalty by recalling them home and granting them amnesty, however, may in the long run have been deemed the wisest course of all. So in the Maunier stele, Menkheperre publicizes his efforts to lobby the god on the behalf of those banished. Gaining an audience with Amun in Karnak, he briefs the god on the subject matter at hand, stating that it is a matter "of these servants, against whom thou art wroth, who are in the oasis, whither they are banished." He then goes on to request that the god rescind his former orders and allow the individuals to return and further to "make a great decree in thy name, that no people of the land shall be [banished] to the distant region of the oases."

From roughly the same period, we have a letter purportedly written by an individual whose political misfortune it was to fall afoul of important personages. Their active ill-will led to his having been banished from his city, his property confiscated, and to a long journey that ended at Dakhleh. Although it is not clear that the protagonist, a priest of Re from Heliopolis named Wermai, had been officially banished to the oasis, it is clear that because of opposition against him he ended up there, and that he was extremely desirous of being allowed to return. His time in Dakhleh, by his account, had been miserable. He states, "Mark you, I am sick at heart; for a month I have been kept away from grain. I and those who are with me ache with hunger. I know of no grain, nor do they know of it: people don't have it. The people among whom I am, their well-to-do are few; the Nile is stopped, and their land in darkness. They cannot escape from dire affliction" (CAMINOS 1977).

To add to the grain shortage in the oasis, Wermai reports that there was widespread corruption, for the local lord and landowner routinely employed false grain measures when collecting taxes and beat any farmers who protested. Because of this, tenant farmers were leaving the land in droves, apparently expressing the same sentiment as Wermai: "let the sparrows do away with the remnant of the grain, and let me be rid of the tax and the staff, which inflicts suffering to excess. His tax has been burdensome to me more than can be imagined." The last straw for Wermai seems to have been when the lord who had collected grain from his land as tax returned from a visit to the Nile Valley. According to Wermai, "he had been a whole month on his journey and was blackened like dried up flesh abandoned on the desert edge, or like tanned bull-hide." This weathered lord, angry that Wermai had been given grain in his absence, threatened legal action. It was at this point that Wermai wrote a scribal acquaintance in the royal court, presumably as a plea to be allowed to return to civilization—to the Valley where law and order still reigned.

The etymology of the Egyptian word "wehat," from whence the word "oasis" is likely derived, seems to be in the word for "cauldron" or "cookpot" (GIDDY 1987: 38). This description aptly sums up virtually everything that there is not to like about the oasis. It can be used to describe the shape of the oasis, which constituted a 300 meter dip downward from the desert scarp—making the place difficult to enter, even when one had already suffered the discomfort of getting there in

the first place. It describes the summer heat, which at its worst reaches 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, and it characterizes the sole water source—sulphurous hot springs. Edmonstone writes about the heat and the water with an outsider's distaste, "...during the summer when the heat is intense, fevers and agues are very general, which the sheikh attributed to the immoderate use of dates. This may be one of the causes, but what I should imagine conduces also to the insalubrity of that season is, that the springs are all strongly impregnated with iron and sulphur, and hot at their sources; nor indeed can the water be used until it has been left to cool in an earthen jar, when it becomes more palatable" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 53).

Like a devil's island, then, the oases were difficult to escape, about as far from civilization as it was possible to get (at least in popular conception), and enjoyed a dreadful reputation, which made them perfect as a place of exile. The poet Juvenal was banished to Kharga for having offended Domitian in the first century AD, and the oases continued to be used for this purpose, designated under Roman rule as "receptacles for state delinquents" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 137-138). Saint Athanasius, for example, endured one of his many banishments from Alexandria in Kharga and complained that his enemies had exceeded imperial orders "in exiling old men and bishops to places unfrequented and inspiring horror," namely Kharga and Siwa oases (EDMONSTONE 2004: 31). Likewise, Julian the Apostate in AD 362 banished two priests to Kharga, purportedly "because this region carries illness, mainly due to the devastating winds which sweep it; as a result, not a single one of those who were sent there has ever survived more than one year; on the contrary, they all died very quickly over there, succumbing to serious illnesses" (JACKSON 2002: 164). Significantly, these two priests are stated by a different ancient source to have both died within 40 days of reaching the oasis.

A similar scenario unfolded thirty years later, when Theodosius I banished a general named Timasius to Kharga. According to one account, Timasius was "sent there in custody of public guards who accompanied him. This place was very arid and those who were sent there could not escape because the surrounding area is sandy, perfectly deserted and uninhabited. Thus we do not know anything further about those who leave for the oasis, since the wind covers tracks with sand and there are no plants or buildings which could serve as landmarks for the travellers" (JACKSON 2002: 165). Yet another writer, however, did claim to know of the general's fate, reporting "He died near the border between Egypt and Libya, while escaping the sentence to which he had been condemned; moreover, he died in the sands, as the whole area through which he was fleeing lacked water and was uninhabited" (JACKSON 2002: 165).

Other imperial governments, such as the British, have in more modern times revived this hallowed tradition. In 1909 the Relegation Law gave the government the power to banish those they deemed rebels to penal colonies in Kharga, and the region today houses what is reputed to be Egypt's most feared prison, filled to the brim with the state's most ardent enemies (THURSTON 2004: 329). Given that I currently direct a semester abroad program in Dakhleh, however, and given that I am extremely fond of this oasis, I have a vested interest now in switching the metaphor, from Devil's Isle back to the Isle of the Blessed.

**OASES AS "ISLANDS": island paradises**

We have so far focussed on islands as places to escape to in order to avoid certain death and also islands as places to escape from—because being there is worse than death. There is yet another perhaps more prevalent view of islands in our modern world, however, namely that of islands as the ideal get-away, the destination of choice to escape all of one's problems and worldly cares. Island paradises are the object of much longing and fantasy, and, despite all that I have related thus far, Egypt's oases did get some good press. Herbert Winlock, who visited Kharga by camel in the early part of the last century, for instance, reports having a certain geographic feature identified for him by a local mayor as the prophet Muhammad's footprint. When Winlock asked his companion for proof that this was so the mayor stated, "Have you not noticed how in all the wide world man must raise the water to his fields by his own labour or by that of beasts? How otherwise, then, can you explain God's infinite mercy to the oases, where the water flows naturally onto the land, except by believing that they were blessed by the veritable footsteps of the prophet himself" (WINLOCK 1936: 38).

Agriculture was indeed possible in Dakhleh year round, as opposed to the Nile Valley, where the inundation rendered farmers and fields idle for nearly a third of the year. This made this region very attractive during periods when the Egyptians were suffering from repeated low floods—such as in the late Old Kingdom, a point at which Dakhleh's population of immigrants from the Nile Valley skyrocketed (MILLS 1999: 174). Further, certain highly valued cash crops—such as dates, olives, and vineyard grapes—grew in the oasis very well, whereas they languished in the Valley due to the inundation. This taste benefit was recognized by (among others) New Kingdom pharaohs (who loved the wine), by the Romans (who may have consumed a million or so tons of olive oil annually), and by the Arabs (who especially adored the dates). So, at various times in oasis history, there seems to have been a small fortune to be made by producing and transporting comparatively low bulk, high value goods to the Nile Valley.

It is remarkable, certainly, how economically well off many of the oases inhabitants seem to have been at different points in their history. Moving back to Kellis for a moment, Colin Hope has searched in vain for the city's slums, or even for a "relatively poor" area. So far, despite decades of work, he has yet to find any such thing. Instead, what he finds are middle class houses and great quantities of villas. These grand dwellings are by and large lavishly painted and possessed of numerous statues, columns, gardens, and other noble amenities (Hope 2002; 2007b). Indeed, given the number of retired Nile Valley magistrates appearing in papyri found in the city, the papyrologist Klaus Worp is reputed to have joked, half seriously, that perhaps Kellis served a retirement community for the legal set (R. BAGNALL, pers. comm.)!

New York University's Excavations at Amheida, under the directorship of Roger Bagnall and Paola Davoli, have also produced evidence of a thriving local elite. The only villa yet excavated in one particularly upscale neighborhood produced a series of mythological paintings, as yet unrivalled in a private house outside Italy. Further, the standardized layout of these villas suggests that they had been centrally planned as domiciles for the town's elite. In addition to ornamenting their walls with classical deities, the pretensions of Amheida's upper

crust extended to tutoring their offspring in Homer and other classical authors, to burying themselves under enormous mudbrick pyramids, and to reserving elaborate seating in the precinct of Deir el-Hagar, the festival temple located just outside the town. At such "courtside" tables, a well-heeled family could enjoy a sumptuous repast in style at the most prestigious of local affairs. Further, excavations underneath Amheida's villa have determined that the area had been a magnet for the wealthy from relatively early in the Roman Period, when the city possessed an extremely large bath system of a type well known from Rome itself. Such civic luxury betrays the presence of very rich patrons indeed (BAGNALL ET AL. 2006).

### **OASES AS "ISLANDS": islands are bizarre hothouses**

We will conclude with one final island analogy—that of islands as hothouses, rife with bizarre natural trajectories. The recently discovered, diminutive early hominid, dubbed "the Hobbit" by the media, for example, inhabited an island. On this island lived exceptionally short people, like himself, gigantic rats, and miniature elephants (CASEY 2010). The dwarf hippos of ancient Cyprus are well-known, and even schoolchildren recognize how unusual the animals of Australia are. But what of the oases? The genetic effects of oasis life on local fauna is a subject that I am not qualified to discuss, however they appear to have been most impressive in imagination and analogy. Edmonstone, for instance, wrote with some disappointment that "Lions and tigers (hyaenas?) are not uncommon in this district, but there are no ostriches; neither could we gain any information respecting the serpent of incredible magnitude, called Toghan, which Edrissi affirms is only found in El Ouahat" (EDMONSTONE 2004: 55-56). Edrissi's gigantic oasis snake, of course, reminds one of the tale spun by the shipwrecked sailor.

With regard to humans, physical anthropologists examining Dakhleh's cemeteries at the sites of Ein Tirghi and Kellis have discovered a certain prevalence of genetic disorders, such as spinal bifida, which appears to be the result of inbreeding (MOLTO 2001: 88-90), and it would be fascinating in future years for geneticists to look, during specific periods, for evidence of the founder effect in the local populations. I must admit, however, that as fascinating as biological studies of oasis life may turn out to be, my primary interest in this analogy lies in the realm of social science—or perhaps the schlock science of reality TV shows such as *Survivor*—namely, in asking the question of what peculiar phenomena might occur when people are placed together in such a small and circumscribed environment and left to their own devices.

Let me return, then, to the Amheida villa for one scenario—one I might playfully term "hypertrophic cosmopolitanism." As the numerous ostraca discovered in the villa attest, it was owned by a man named Serenus, who seems to have been an estate manager (which again hints at the potential riches to have been reaped in Dakhleh by owners and managers alike). Serenus's name was Roman, yet we have no idea whether this is indicative of his ethnicity or of his desire to identify with the ruling culture of the day. What is abundantly clear, however, is that Serenus strongly identified himself with the Hellenistic heritage vaunted by all sophisticated Romans. Not only did he live in a perfectly planned, quintessentially Roman house, eat off of quintessentially Roman fineware, school his children in Greek rhetoric, and depict himself and

his family on the walls of his house as true Romans, but he also surrounded himself and his guests in the most prestigious room in his abode with paintings drawn from classical mythology (BOOZER 2007: 122-190; CRIBIORE et al. 2008).

The room depicts Perseus grasping the hideous head of Medusa, while rescuing Andromeda from the serpent. Orpheus charms the animals with his lyre, and one spies also Europa and her bull. Among the scenes are two perhaps specially picked by Serenus to remind his wife to behave herself during his extended absences to the Nile Valley. Perhaps presenting the ideal, one scene depicted Odysseus returning home after an absence of two decades—unbeknownst to his perfectly chaste wife—being recognized by his former nurse. Hephaistos's wrathful discovery of his wife, Aphrodite, in the arms of Ares—on the other hand, offered an alternative scenario. In it an assembly of gods—Poseidon, Dionysus, Apollo, Heracles, and Helios—gather behind the cuckolded husband to gawk at Aphrodite and bear witness to her shame. But my point here is not to discuss jealous husbands or absence and what it does to the heart, but rather to think about these paintings and the fact that they are unrivalled anywhere in the Nile Valley (BAGNALL ET AL. 2006: 27). Perhaps this is not an accident of preservation but an artifact of a wish on the part of an elite oasis-dweller to dissuade himself from the notion that he lived in the most remote cultural backwater of the empire, practically as far from Rome as it was possible to get. Indeed, the fact that atriums and Doric columns were anachronistically resurrected in architecture at Kellis, long after they'd been abandoned elsewhere in the classical world, may further support the idea that it was precisely those at the greatest distance from the centre who felt the most pressure to present themselves as sophisticates.

Akin to this phenomenon is the big-fish-in-a-small-pond syndrome. In the 1970's, Robert Carneiro came up with a theory of state formation called the circumscription theory, which basically held that leaders were more likely to be able to succeed in their efforts to dominate their own society and that of others if they lived in an environment that was circumscribed (CARNEIRO 1970). In areas where there is plenty of land of more or less equal quality, people who do not wish to be dominated may simply move to avoid such a fate. In mountain valleys or areas bounded by sea or desert, however, escape from oppression might be much more difficult, given that the alternative to staying put would likely be far worse than submitting.

In the oases, we do not have an example of primary state formation, obviously, but we do have Wermai's scathing testimony of the systematic abuses committed by the landlord and his staff. Interestingly, we also have as case studies in the hothouse growth of local power the governors of Ayn Asil in the late Sixth Dynasty, who materialized their own political muscle by building mastabas that dwarfed all but a handful of contemporary tombs in all of Egypt (VALLOGIA 1999: 217-218). These men, who were living far beyond the reach of the ailing court at Memphis, may have found themselves in a position where Pepi II needed them more than they needed him. Certainly, we see in the late Sixth Dynasty that the kings spent a great deal of effort trying to court certain key provincial elite by forming diplomatic marriages and issuing tax-exemptions—an age old political strategy!

The perk dangled before Dakhleh's governors seems to have been permission to build their own soul chapels (*hwt-k3*), temple-like buildings in which their statues could be tended to and supplicated in much the same way as the cult statues of deities (STRUDWICK 2005: 115). Such entities were normally the prerogative of kings and royal relatives. It is fascinating then that although the most prestigious district of Ayn Asil has been excavated, archaeologists have yet to find a temple. Instead, we have a line of absolutely massive mastabas, a sumptuous palace, and four soul-chapels, where the inhabitants of the town cared for the souls of the dead governors in return for their expected otherworldly intervention. So here, perhaps, Dakhleh's isolation and the blessings bestowed by its year-round agriculture allowed its rulers to grow far more powerful as potentates of their own island kingdom than would have been possible had they lived along the Nile Valley in easy reach of all the king's men.

But what about divine personages? What happened to them in the isolated environment of the oases? In Dakhleh, at least, we see a number of interesting mutations. For instance, the oasis seems originally to have been the home of the minor desert god Igay during the Old and Middle Kingdoms (KAPER and HOPE 2008: 59). By the New Kingdom, however, Igay was absorbed into Seth, which is perhaps not surprising as Seth was the quintessential god of deserts, foreigners, and all things frightening and marginal. What is interesting, however, is that Seth's cult at Dakhleh persisted even after this god had been effectively declared an outright demon and divine persona non grata due to his murder of the god Osiris. Yet despite this persecution elsewhere in Egypt during the Late Period, and later, Seth maintained a priesthood and a cult center in the main city of Mut in Dakhleh as well as subsidiary cults throughout this oasis and in Kharga. Indeed, the only accommodation made by the oasisites was to alter his iconography to that of a falcon-headed deity, a variation of an authorized aspect of Seth that had existed already for millennia (KAPER 1997: 235).

That the priesthood of Seth was especially strong, even at the height of his damnation elsewhere, is demonstrated by a stele dedicated in the temple of Seth at Mut during the reign of the pharaoh Sheshonq I (GARDINER 1933). The stele records an oracle of Seth in which the god decides a lawsuit in favor of his own high priest. Not only was this man awarded control of a well that he claimed had once belonged to his mother, but he was awarded control of all of the wells in the general area of the far west of the oasis. The ability of Seth to maintain his power far longer than he should have, and the ability of his high priests to wield it so effectively may have been products of the oases' isolation, which allowed species—extinct elsewhere—to thrive and even to mutate. Seth's mutation not only spawned the oasisite falcon-headed version of himself, but also an iconographically similar separate god, created—Olaf Kaper suspects—by priests eager to offer Seth-worshippers an acceptable alternative. This deity, named Amun-Nakht, flourished at Dakhleh in a Roman temple now known as Ein Birbiyeh but is unattested elsewhere in Egypt (KAPER 1987; THURSTON 2004: 229).

Finally, we have Dakhleh's own equivalent to the hobbit's giant rat in the sphinx-god Tutu. A little known son of the goddess Neith, Tutu was the "Master of the Demons" and always a subsidiary deity in the Nile Valley. This minor god appears to have grown out of all proportion

in the oasis environment, however, for he became the patron deity of Kellis and the owner of its substantial temple complex (Kaper 2003). Perhaps, according to the logic of sympathetic magic and medicine, the people who occupied the oasis—surrounded as it was by the hostile, lifeless desert—felt the need to harness the power of the fierce demons of the desert for their own ends as protectors. As the environs of the oasis dwellers set them a world apart from their contemporaries in the Nile Valley, and far from the reach of central authorities, both gods and men were able to ascend to positions of authority unachievable on the "mainland."

### **OASES AS "ISLANDS"**

Island studies is now its own subdiscipline, complete with an *Island Studies Journal*, dedicated to promoting and supporting the interdisciplinary and pluri-disciplinary study of islands on their own terms. The field is an outgrowth of the increased interest in the social sciences generally in exploring the phenomenology of landscape—how it feels, subjectively, to inhabit a specific space. Certain landscapes, it is argued, have affordances or properties that affect the way that humans react to them (GIBSON 1977). While every person is an individual, it is undeniable that cultural reactions to particularly dramatic or unusual places can be remarkably similar through time and space. Mountain peaks and the depths of caves are often coded as special—realms where it is perhaps easier to commune with spirits dwelling in the sky or in the depths of the earth. Great chasms such as the Grand Canyon exert a fascination that has rendered the area sacred to native peoples and one of the single biggest touristic draws in the United States. The response is sacred for one culture and secular for another. What is shared between them, however, is a powerful feeling of awe.

Islands too are special places given their relative remoteness and isolation. Historically, the dangers of a journey to an island were many, for errors in navigation could leave one lost on the high seas to die of thirst, and a storm or unexpected outcrop might easily dash a boat to pieces. Because they require such a journey, unknown islands have always provoked curiosity. Naturalists wonder what strange flora and fauna would be found therein. More fertile imaginations, on the other hand, envision a gigantic snake or another animal grown to fantastic proportions—à la King Kong—whose presence would inspire fear and fascination in natives and visitors alike. Other travellers focus more on the inhabitants. Would they be friendly or hostile? Is the island the haunt of pirates, of cannibals, or conversely of innocent, sybaritic lotus-eaters (as early explorers coded Polynesian Islanders)? Are there truly islands that time forgot? Yet even after such mysteries are dispelled by the initial exploration and conquest of an island, governments typically formulate other questions, now concerning the use of such a place. Is it good for the establishment of plantations? Is it a perfect, nature-built prison? Or was its acquisition even worth the bother?

Suggesting a separate field of oases studies is without question indulgent. I would argue, however, that inasmuch as oases share many of the same essential properties as islands, they can be easily enfolded into this existing field of research. A comparison with oases not only widens and deepens our understanding of island dynamics, but it also brings to the study of Egypt's



oases an appreciation for cultural continuities across time. A contribution of island studies to oasis studies, then, is that it reintroduces the subject of place into prehistory and history alike, providing a literal and metaphorical common ground. The Old Kingdom Egyptians and the inhabitants of Kellis both lived in an environment scorched by the summer sun, buffeted by sandstorms, and rimmed by a steep desert scarp. The raw materials for metallurgy—the ancient world’s most advanced technology—had to be imported from the Nile Valley, and journeys there would take many days, during which time men and beasts alike might easily perish. What did it mean to inhabit an environment of that nature? What are the rhythms of life and cultural patterns that it encouraged? These questions invite further thought, and the oases remain, as ever, worthy subjects of exploration.

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