Abstract and Keywords

Egypt's Western Desert is located on the fringes of Egypt proper. Despite its remote location, the Western Desert inhabitants connected with people in the Nile Valley and more distant locations. These connections are visible in the form of trade, technology, and migration. In order to understand the impact of this connection with other regions upon local oases, this article offers a critique of current theories on migration and consumption before reviewing the evidence of such connections chronologically. The available evidence suggests that the Old Kingdom, the New Kingdom, the Perisan Period, and the Roman Period may have been particularly prominent periods of connectivity for the Western Desert. This evidence also suggests strong connections to Thebes throughout most of the history of the Western Desert. Since formal research in the Western Desert is relatively recent, it is anticipated that the current image of Western Desert connections will change in future years.

Keywords: trade, transportation, migration, Egypt, connectivity, Western Desert, oasis, social archaeology

Introduction

The movement of peoples, objects, and ideas is critical to our understanding of the flow and route of human history. Evidence of such movements is particularly abundant in Egypt. These movements—be they migratory, colonizing, or imperialistic—linked Egypt to the Mediterranean, Africa, western Asia, and regions further afield. Small-scale movements within Egypt itself also had a critical place in the formation of Egyptian identities. This article focuses upon migration and trade in Egypt's Western Desert, which is located on the fringes of Egypt proper. Despite its remote location, the Western Desert inhabitants connected with people in the Nile Valley and more distant locations. These connections are visible in the form of trade, technology, and migration. In order to understand the impact of this connection with other regions upon local oases, this article offers a critique of current theories on migration and consumption before reviewing the evidence of such connections chronologically.

The available evidence suggests that the Old Kingdom, the New Kingdom, the Perisan Period, and the Roman Period may have been particularly prominent periods of connectivity for the Western Desert. From at least the late Old Kingdom (ca. 2500 BC) the indigenous peoples of the Western Desert were subject to military occupation and potentially colonization from the Nile Valley. Walled towns populated with individuals recruited from the Nile Valley constituted the fabric of these occupying peoples. We have documentary sources mentioning the oases dating from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2649–2150 BC) and continuing for many thousands of years. Within these documentary sources, probable migration to the region is detectable, particularly during the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BC) and the Roman Period (ca. 30 BC–641 AD). For example, during the Roman Period, we know the location of Roman fortresses from the Notitia Dignitatum as well as the corresponding archaeological evidence of fortified areas and settlements (Boozer 2013). Yet, when we explore the individuals who lived in and around these areas over time, we
detect a mixture of influences and few overwhelming signs of migrant origins in the local populations.

There are two additional issues that complicate a study of connections between the Western Desert and external regions. First, peripheral areas often experience influxes of new goods and peoples in discrete phases rather than a steady stream. A steady stream of migrants is more typical of centralized and urban areas. The connections between the desert and the Nile Valley, as well as to areas further afield, waxed and waned throughout the history of the Western Desert. This intermittent connection can be traced through material culture and documentary sources. The somewhat episodic control Egypt had over the oases saw changing patterns of systemic encouragement of migration to the Western Desert. Meanwhile, Egypt “proper” went through its own transformations with periods of greater and lesser migrations of non-Egyptians to and from various regions, and particularly in the Nile Delta.

Second, the Western Desert peoples themselves were not homogeneous. Not only were the sedentary peoples subject to waves of migration over thousands of years, but they also shared their land with nomadic and seminomadic peoples. We also should consider the possibility of oasis peoples themselves (sedentary, seminomadic, and nomadic) moving elsewhere in the Nile Valley or beyond. In sum, the available evidence suggests considerable movement and shifting of a variety of peoples within the oases.

Although we cannot resolve these complexities at this stage of research, the following pages demonstrate that we can detect patterns in migration, trade, and technology. These patterns will help scholars to form hypotheses for testing questions of connectivity in future research in Egypt’s Western Desert.

**Theories about Migration**

In to engage with current debates in migration, it is worthwhile reviewing the history of migration studies. Migration has been a key component of archaeological studies since at least the first half of the twentieth century, when there was a particular focus on prehistory (Childe 1950). Scholars of the ancient Mediterranean have considered migration to be a key component to its development for a very long time, although early studies took migration as a given rather than analyzing migration in its own right (e.g., Rostovtzeff 1926–1928). After a hiatus of several decades, academic research resumed in the 1980s. These studies also emphasized prehistory (e.g., Rouse 1986). More recently, scholars have addressed migration asymptotically by employing concepts such as connectivity (e.g., Horden and Purcell 2000; van Dommelen and Knapp 2010) and colonialism (e.g., van Dommelen 2012) as well as more directly as mobility and migration (Van Dommelen 2014). The renewed theoretical interest in migration has focused primarily on prehistoric and post-Roman periods (c.f. Anthony 1990; Burmeister 2000; Frachetti 2011; Hackenbeck 2008; Härke 1998), but some exceptions do occur (see later discussion).

Migration is a present-day concern within many nations. As a result, contemporary views of recent migrations dominate academic discourse today and have made migration studies an emergent field in its own right (e.g., Eltis et al. 1999; Orser 1998; Wilkie 2004). Of late, scholars have recognized that it is important to break down disciplinary barriers between scientific and humanities-based research in order to attain a richer portrait of migration in the ancient world (see papers in Eckardt 2010). For example, there is great potential in combining demographic, epigraphic, stylistic, isotopic, and osteological data to bear on questions of mobility (e.g., Eckardt et al. 2010). Although new scientific approaches suggest tantalizing clues as to the origins of migrants, few regions have been subjected to these techniques systematically. The Western Desert is one region that awaits a suite of new approaches to physical human remains. As a result, the present study explores the nuances of ethnic affinity (see Derks and Roymans 2009; Jones 1997) less than identifying the source of incomers and their interactions with the local populations in the archaeological record.

The terms “ethnic affinity” and “culture” are not without their own pitfalls. Many early scholars of African American or Caribbean groups focused on the identification of “Africanisms,” “survivals,” or “retentions” of cultural traits that they thought could be traced to the group’s origins (Kahn 1994:246). Such approaches make assumptions about the static nature of culture, oversimplify the process of cultural interaction, and are devoid of cultural context (Jamieson 1995). Moreover, as Anthony states, “cultures don’t migrate; people do” (Anthony 1997). A more flexible reading of ethnic affinity is required in order to allow for individual agency as well as change over time among the group.
The Social Impact of Trade and Migration

More recent work increasingly explores the nature of cultural change and how this identity expression occurs along with processes of creolization, migration, and diaspora. Diaspora communities are characterized by an initial dispersal, which may be forced or voluntary, a distinction from the host society, and a continuous social or spiritual link to the homeland (Lilley 2004:291). While the African slave and the Jewish diasporas have dominated research, two additional areas of study, trade and colonial diasporas, has potential relevance for the present work. On the one hand, trade diasporas are “nations of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed, communities” whose members are distinct from both the societies in which they originated and those in which they live (Cohen 2008). Trade diasporas influence both the flow of human life and of trade goods. On the other hand, colonialism studies focus on the indigenous peoples who experience influxes of outsiders rather than just the migrants themselves. This change in focus is critical since local peoples also changed as a result of population movements.

In the action of movement and displacement, diasporic communities experience the process of creolization that occurs when different cultures interact. Although they may define themselves in terms of their connection with the homeland, the process of relocation and interaction renders migrants distinct from their real or imagined original society. Researchers are only just beginning to expand their discussion of diaspora to include the “homeland” and to explore how the forced or voluntary displacement of people affected both the home and diaspora communities (Kelly 2004).

Ethnicity and locality are not the only vectors to consider when examining migrants. Professions, status, and the impact of interactions (assimilation, integration, resistance) between immigrant and host communities are also critical (Eckardt et al. 2010:124). For example, a migrant’s military role, slave status, or origin may be more pronounced than his or her ethnic identity. Likewise, gender and age can be critical factors for examination, although women and children have been explored as potential migrants only recently (Cool 2010; Eckardt et al. 2010; Boozer forthcoming).

In ancient Egypt, research into migration has relied primarily upon documentary and pictorial sources (e.g., Baines 1996), although some scholars have discussed archaeological remains (e.g., Smith 1995, 2003, 2007; Stevenson 2008). In particular, “nomadic” groups have been explored with increasing nuance in recent years (see papers in: Barnard and Duistermaat 2012; Barnard and Wendrich 2008). Bader’s recent work (Bader 2012) shows renewed interest in migration during pharaonic Egypt, but she often fills data gaps with evidence from eras and regions far beyond the scope of the region and period examined. Stevenson’s recent work reanalyzing the Naqadan cultural site of el-Gerzeh urges that migration be demonstrated by analyzing both material goods and the ways in which people used these goods (Stevenson 2008). This approach combines archaeologies of materiality with consumption studies. This is the model employed in the present work.

Theories about Consumption

Although we lack substantial written sources about the import and export of goods to the Western Desert, the archaeological record is rich with clues about trade and migration. Evidence of new types of food, technologies, crops, and imported goods combined with new forms of settlement patterns demonstrate that migration and trade played central roles in shaping life in the Western Desert.

The extent to which material culture can be linked to distinct populations or ethnic groups has been a subject of archaeological debate for a long time. For example, Hodder has argued that trade and exchange may be responsible for new types of material culture, rather than migration, unless other evidence can be brought to bear (Hodder 1978, 1982). Conversely, Fulford has argued that some ceramic “imports” may reflect the movement of potters into Roman Britain rather than the import of these goods (Fulford 2010). In the absence of making clear differentiations of peoples through chemical or DNA analysis of skeletal remains or determining ceramic imports through clay sourcing, it is difficult to resolve these debates with certainty.

Within the present work, I place an emphasis on usage rather than simply the goods themselves because the ways in which people used objects can be revealing. Consumption has emerged as a topic in archaeological studies that are associated with an increased interest in exploring the multifaceted role of objects (Meskell 2004; Pyburn 1998; see Mullins 2011 for a comprehensive overview of consumption studies in archaeology). Essentially, consumption entails the selection, adoption, and use of goods, as well as the know-how required for using these goods.

Consumption accounts for the drive found in both individuals and societies to have mediating materials for relating
to other people (Douglas and Isherwood 1996 [1979]:viii–xiv). This mediating role means that consumption is an integral component of migration and trade.

We can explore consumption both within the Western Desert and areas external to it. Material goods from the oasis region were distinctive throughout Egyptian history, which made some of these goods particularly prized. The majority of oasis goods appear to have been agricultural products, and the emphasis upon these goods fluctuated over time. For example, wine was a long-standing commodity, while cotton appeared under Roman rule. Unfortunately, it is also clear that not all oasis goods are recognizable to archaeologists. Archaeology in the oases is a recent development and so specialists had no comparanda for recognizing oasis wares within previously analyzed assemblages. As a result, it is likely that there are additional oasis goods that have been overlooked in the analyses of material beyond the oases.

Meanwhile, connections with the Nile Valley can be found in imports within the oases. It is also possible that craftspeople moved to the western desert and produced crafts commonly associated with various regions within Egypt “proper,” much as Fulford suggested for Roman Britain. Likewise, crops were introduced to the region that would have required the presence of individuals who knew how to grow, harvest, and use such crops. Cotton, most likely introduced from Sudan, is one such crop.

The importance of new, specialized knowledge about cultivation, preparation, and use of goods can be seen as an important index of connections between regions. The material objects as well as individual expertise provide clues about the people who made these connections possible.

Geography of the Western Desert

From the Pharaonic to Roman Periods, the basic geographic compass constituting Egypt was the Nile Valley, which terminates in the Delta, and the Fayum (Figure 1). In addition to this principal area were the Eastern Desert and the oases of the Western Desert as well as the fringes of Egypt, such as the Western Desert beyond the oases and Nubia. Egypt proper incorporated these marginal zones during times of prosperity but often lost control of them during periods of insecurity. The Western Desert comprises two-thirds of the land within the current boundaries of Egypt. The primary harbors from this harsh environment are the five oases: Siwa, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhleh, and Kharga. In Arabic, Dakhleh means the Inner Oasis and Kharga means the Outer Oasis (that is with respect to the desert, rather than the Nile). These two oases were grouped together as the Oasis Major (“the Great Oasis”) (Figure 2).
Climatic conditions in the Western Desert are unforgiving. The southern half of this desert is one of the driest regions on earth, with almost no rain. The presence of oases in the Western Desert makes sedentary life possible in this arid region, with the exception of the Qattara Depression because the subterranean water is too salty. The water that forms the oases derives from the Artesian-water sandstone underlying the oasis and the entire Western Desert (Schild and Wendorf 1977:10). As an emblem of their significance, wells have always been the real measure of wealth and importance in the oases (Giddy 1987; Mills 1998). Even today, well ownership is a complex and important issue. It is possible to own collective and/or individual shares of wells. Equally possible are individuals who own water but no land or land but no water (Beadnell 1909:10).

The sand-laden winds were a significant obstacle in antiquity. The wind shaves down crops, fills in houses, and deposits dunes over paved roads. Most scholars of antiquity are familiar with the famous story in Herodotus of Cambyses’ army, which was engulfed by these winds during a campaign across the desert to attack the Oracle at Siwa (Book III.26). The temperatures are also extreme. In the winter they range from 0º–2ºC just before sunrise to 20º–25ºC by midday. In the summer maximum temperatures reach above 40ºC for extended periods (Giddy 1987:3).

**Migration and Trade in the Western Desert: A Diachronic Perspective**

**Predynastic**

The oases have substantial quantities of prehistoric material (Table 1). The Dakhleh Oasis was clearly an important locale in the history of settlement in Egypt (McDonald 2001a; 2001b; Riemer 2006). Kharga also had an important role in prehistory (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1952; Wendorf and Schild 1980; Wiseman 1999). Recent research suggests that Kharga may have been an integral connection point between the predynastic cultures of the Nile Valley and Saharan pastoralists during a phase of increasing aridification of the desert (Briois et al. 2012). Sheep and goats, seemingly introduced from southwestern Asia, can be found in Dakhleh and Farafra from the fifth millennium BC onward (earlier than the Nile Valley) (Hassan 2002:201–203; Wendorf and Schild 2001:623–625, 634–635, 663). Although ceramic technology and cattle domestication (both ca. 7600 BC) were two additional early developments in the Western desert, the dates for these changes and the origins of these developments are not universally accepted (e.g., Grigson 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Oases</th>
<th>Site Names</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predynastic</td>
<td>5th millennium–2575 BC</td>
<td>Dakhleh,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sheep and goat (SW Asia), Ceramic technology and cattle domestication, petroglyphs, movement of Nile Valley Egyptians into Desert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kharga,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Farafra</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Old Kingdom 2575-2137 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kharga</td>
<td>ca. 2700 BC</td>
<td>W. of Tunadaba, Balat, Ain Asil, Qila el-Dabba, Mut el-Kharab, and additional satellite sites</td>
<td>Movement of desert patrols or trade expeditions through the oases; Ceramic imports to Dakhleh; Nile Valley Egyptian outposts in Dakhleh; Nile Valley Egyptian campsites in Kharga</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### First Intermediate Period ca. 2181-2055 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kharga</td>
<td>ca. 2181-2055 BC</td>
<td>Girga Road</td>
<td>Emerging of Thebes as an important locale for the Western Desert; importance of routes through the oases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Middle Kingdom ca. 2030-1640 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kharga, areas east of Kharga, Dakhleh, Bahariya</td>
<td>ca. 2030-1640 BC</td>
<td>Abu Ziyâr, Gebel Ghueita and Kom Hefaw, Tunadabia</td>
<td>Importance of oases for agricultural and trade security; oasis wine; foreign mercenaries (Nubian, Asiatic, Nile Valley Egyptian); supply depots; outposts and burial grounds; Thebes remains significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Second Intermediate Period ca. 1650-1550 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahariya</td>
<td>ca. 1650-1550 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Theban control over all oases except for possibly Bahariya, which was under Hyksos rule (?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### New Kingdom ca. 1550-1070 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kharga</td>
<td>ca. 1550-1070 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Theban control significant; tomb scenes; demand for oasis goods (olives, dates, wine, mats, fox hides) and oasis female dancers; outposts and patrol routes; employment of Libyans in oases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Third Intermediate Period ca. 1070-712 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dakhleh</td>
<td>ca. 1070-712 BC</td>
<td>Amheida, Mut el-Kharab</td>
<td>Amnesty given to oasis exiles; Shamin tribe/Libyans in control of Dakhleh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Late Period 714-332 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kharga, east of Kharga, Dakhleh</td>
<td>714-332 BC</td>
<td>Habis Temple, Qasr el-Ghuieta, Ayn Manawir, Dush, Trimithis</td>
<td>Theban dominance continues and clear Persian investment; foreign mercenaries working in Egyptian military (Greeks, Carians, Jews, Phoenicians, Shasu Bedouin?); graffiti; sigha pots; qanats; kegs; Persian workmen?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Ptolemaic Period 305-30 BC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dakhleh, Kharga</td>
<td>305-30 BC</td>
<td>Mut el-Kharab (among other sites), Ain Birbiya, Qasr Zaiyan</td>
<td>New archaeological evidence coming to light</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Roman 30 BC–

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Key Events/Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dakhleh, Kharga</td>
<td>30 BC</td>
<td>Habis, Nadura, Qasr Gib, Qasr Zaiyan</td>
<td>Substantial Roman investment;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Subscriber: OUP-Reference Gratis Access; date: 22 December 2015
It seems that the desert and the Nile Valley were part of an integrated ecological and cultural system that requires further study in order to understand the attributes of this system (Usai 2005, 2008). Seasonal movements between the Nile Valley and the Western Desert in the eighth to seventh millennium BP should not be excluded. This lifestyle was centered upon wells and seasonal lakes (playa basins) in the oases. Petroglyphs mark many of the important routes, prominent outlooks, and water locations between these oases (Krzyzaniak 1990, 1991, 2004; Riemer 2009; Winkler 1938, 1939).

In these early phases, we do not have a clear sense of migration direction, but distinct groups can be identified in the material culture. For example, the Sheikh Mutafah peoples, usually understood as the indigenous Dakhlan, seem to have had a longer occupancy in the Dakhleh Oasis than most groups. These peoples can be distinguished in the ceramics assemblage by fine as well as crude quartz and shale wares, mostly consisting of large, deep bowls without decoration (McDonald 2001a).

With the dawn of the Protodynastic Period (Naqada IIIA-B, c. 3300–3100 BC), Nile Valley Egyptians seem to have moved through the region. It is also possible that there were periodic invasions by Libyan groups, although the nature of these interactions is debated. It is notable that the term “Libyan” is a catch-all term referring to peoples west of the Nile. On one hand, Wilkinson suggests that at least one Predynastic ruler may have mounted a raid against the Tjehenu-Libya area in the Western Desert (i.e., west of the oases) (Wilkinson 2001:162). On the other hand, Baines disagrees that there was conflict between Libya and Egypt. He argues that the “Libya” side of the Cities Palette in the Cairo Museum (CG14238), dating to approximately Naqada IIIB, does not represent control per se. Instead, the palette may be interpreted ideologically: it depicted the region to the west of Egypt as a void that held no threat to the settled peoples of the Nile Valley. The aim of the palette was to characterize Libya ethnographically in order to demark Egypt as separated from its neighbors (Baines 2003:29–34). Regardless of the degree of actual engagement between the Nile Valley and the areas west of it, it is clear that the Western Desert became an important element of Egyptian self-definition at this time.

### Old Kingdom

Historical documentation of contact between the Nile Valley and the oasis region first appears during the Old Kingdom (2575–2134 BC). Throughout the Pharaonic era, Nile Valley Egyptians refer to the oases as Wḥ3.t, which is associated with the word meaning “cauldron” (Sethe 1920). A formal study of the chronological developments of the various written forms and etymological associations with the word remain to be studied.

It is notable that the Nile Valley texts refer to routes through the oases, which were a key means of reaching Nubia, rather than describing the oases themselves (Giddy 1987:51–52). The oases provided natural points of access for trade with Nubia (when a water route was not usable) and the nomadic tribes of the Western Desert. One important route is the “Forty-Day Road,” which presumably led through the Kharga Oasis, south to Nubia. Egyptians procured valued goods from Nubia, such as gold, feathers, and particularly prized short-statured West Africans, commonly termed as ḏnb in the literature. The “Biography of Harkhuf” provides a rich account of acquiring these prized goods for pharaohs (Lichtheim 1975:25–27). These texts suggest that Egyptians viewed the oasis region as a distant land, which provided a watering hole on the path to Nubian exotica.

Archaeology provides another view of the oases. The Theban Desert Road Survey has recorded numerous Old Kingdom campsites between the Nile and the Kharga Oasis, and particularly west of Tundaba (Darnell 2007b:35). Some of the Old Kingdom officials involved in desert travel bore naval titles (Valloggia 1996), suggesting similar organization and perhaps personnel among exploratory expeditions (Darnell 2007b:788). During the reign of
Merenre (6th Dynasty), Egyptianized Nubians seem to have been employed for desert expeditions (Edel 1971), foreshadowing the exploitation of foreign groups for desert patrols that we find in later periods. It has been suggested that oasites were employed for desert expeditions from the 3rd Dynasty (Chevereau 1987:38–39).

Archaeological settlement data enhance this documentation of campsites considerably. The village of Balat is situated at the eastern edge of the Dakhleh Oasis at the junction of two caravan routes. The first of these two routes is the Darb el-Tawil, which comes from Manfalut to the north of Assyu and then connects to Darb el-Ghabari (Minault-Gout 1985). The second is a route that connects Dakhleh with Kharga and leads to the Darb el-Arbain (the previously mentioned “Forty-Day Road”), which took caravans south to Nubia. Desert scouts, usually stationed on hilltops, guarded the periphery of the oasis (Kaper and Willems 2002). The necessity of such scouts suggests potential contacts with peoples beyond the oases (see also Kuhlmann 2002; Pantalacci 2013; Riemer et al. 2005).

At the juncture of these two roads rests a large multiphase settlement at Ain Asil and a cemetery at Qila el-Dabba (Giddy 1979; Giddy and Grimal 1979a, b; Giddy and Jeffreys 1981; Minault-Gout and Deleuze 1992; Valloggia 1998; Valloggia 1986) (Figure 3). The dates of these sites range from the Old Kingdom (late 5th/early 6th Dynasties) to the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650–1550 BC), with a late reoccupation in the Roman Period. Ain Asil seems to have been the site of the Old Kingdom capital in Dakhleh. The settlement was once surrounded by a large mud-brick enclosure wall, which subsided toward the east in antiquity and was later built on top of. The interior of this urban complex was well built and planned. The funerary chapels of three governors of the oasis were located at this site. A stela was found in one of these buildings, which contains a copy of a royal decree of Pepi II. This stela mentions establishing a “dwelling of vital strength” (Pantalacci 1985). Initially, Ain Asil may have been an Egyptian outpost in a “foreign” territory, but it seems that the oasites and those manning the outpost integrated over time.

Additional, twenty or more potential Old Kingdom “satellite sites” in the Dakhleh Oasis attest to the increasing importance of the oasis from the Old Kingdom onward (Giddy and Grimal 1979b; Osing et al. 1982:14; Soukassian et al. 1990). Excavations at Mut el-Kharab have revealed ceramics and architectural features dating to the Old Kingdom. Some Sheikh Muftah handmade wares, taken as the work of indigenous Dakhleh inhabitants, were found alongside a smaller number of Nile Valley wares, including some identifiable carinated Meidum bowl fragments (Hope 2005:50–53). These Meidum bowl fragments were made of Nile Valley marl fabric and were certainly imported. Colin A. Hope suggests that these ceramics may date to Dynasties IV and V and therefore to the initial phases of Egyptian annexation and colonization of Dakhleh (Hope et al. 2009; see also Kuhlmann 2002).

The western portion of Dakhleh, near the village of el-Qasr, has revealed a larger cluster of Old Kingdom settlements. None of these sites is as fully excavated (if at all) and published as Ain Asil. Preliminary results from one of the western sites show intermixing between the “indigenous” Sheikh Muftah culture and migrant Nile Valley Egyptians (Mills 1998, 1999a). There is evidence of trade in lithic tools and ceramics as well as other small objects. The clay from some of the ceramics has been sourced to oasis locations, although the forms and technologies appear to be firmly Nile Valley imports. The presence of pottery kilns in this area suggests the movement of Nile
Valley Egyptians into the area to produce ceramics (Mills 1999a, 1999b). As mentioned earlier, Fulford has made a similar observation regarding ceramics production in Roman Britain, suggesting that the population movements of craftspeople may be overlooked because we often interpret an influx of regional ceramic forms to be trade items (Fulford 2010). If this influx of craftsmen occurred, it would be in contrast to what Hope and his team detected at Mut el-Kharab, where Nile Valley wares were definitely imported. Only sparse archaeological evidence exists for an Old Kingdom presence within Kharga (Wuttman et al. 2000:3; Wuttmann et al. 1998:427, 430).

First Intermediate Period

After the death of Pepy II, Egypt was controlled by rulers with very brief reigns. Territorial administration fragmented among the ruling elite (Garcia 2013:209–211). The north was ruled from Heracleopolis, while the south was ruled predominately from Thebes. During the late First Intermediate Period (ca. 2181–2055 BC), Thebes emerges as an important locale for the Western Desert. A concentration of routes, which Thebes could control directly, linked this city to Kharga and Dakhleh (Darnell 2002a). An official agenda to develop this link first occurred in the early Middle Kingdom, when the Girga Road appears to have become the primary connection between the southern oases and the Nile (Darnell 2007b:36; see also papers in Förster and Riemer 2013). From this period onward, Thebes retained a multifaceted role in the fortunes of the Great Oasis (Dakhleh and Kharga).

Middle Kingdom

The Theban king Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II (ca. 2055–2004 BC) became king of a unified Egypt, inaugurating the Middle Kingdom. Evidence for relations between the Nile Valley and the Western oases during the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2030–1640 BC) can be traced through a larger corpus of written material than exists for the Old Kingdom. The reign of Mentuhotep II was critical for Egypt's broadening control over desert routes; a desert policy, complete with a bureaucratic system, was established (Darnell 2013a:791–792). Agricultural and trade security may have been the major reasons behind Mentuhotep's investment in the region, as we will see.

A Middle Kingdom royal inscription (Berkeley University Museum D136; Porter and Moss 1937:117), probably of Mentuhotep II, was found reused at one of the 18th Dynasty Deir el-Ballas palaces. This inscription suggests that the oasis regions had been brought under effective Egyptian control, and that the region was considered to be “foreign” territory (Fischer 1964). Lower Nubia and an oasis area were formally annexed to the Theban realm, which formalized the Thebes' long-standing dominance over the oases. Additional textual sources refer to military activity and management of the oases while indicating that the region was outside of Egypt “proper” (Giddy 1987:56–64).1 Criminals lingered in Kharga and Dakhleh, as is evident from texts mentioning the need to police and secure these areas (Anthes 1930a:pl. 7, lines 4–6; Boeser 1909:5 and pl. 10, lines 7–8; Freed 1996:304; Schäfer 1905). Criminals and bandits could have interfered with the easy transportation of trade goods to and from the oases.

In addition to commercial interests in the oasis trade route, we have growing evidence that Nile Valley Egyptians were interested in the economic value intrinsic to the oases themselves. The oases were unique in Egypt for their perennial water supply and boasted somewhat different agricultural opportunities as a result. References to oasis products first appear during the Middle Kingdom. The limestone stela of ḫnnw (MMA, Acc. No. 26.3.217) bears an autobiographical text of a steward and dates to the reign of Mentuhotep II (c.f. Fischer 1957). This stela refers to the administration and, particularly, the economic management of pastoral and agricultural produce from the oasis region. An early or middle 13th Dynasty text, Papyrus Bulaq 18 (Cairo Bulaq 18, XXXIII 6–7), describes the prized wine of the oases in the context of “a special record of expenses incurred by the court while on a trip away from its ordinary place of residence” (Giddy 1987:62–63; Scharff 1922). The location of the oases outside the arena of ordinary Egyptian space probably added a mystique to oasis wine.

Archaeological evidence securely dating to the Middle Kingdom is sorely lacking in the oases, leaving us with little material to compare with the visual and textual evidence. Dakhleh seems to have continued to oversee desert passes in and out of the oasis as well as serve as a seat of Pharaonic government (Baud et al. 1999:1–19; Osing 1986:81–82; Winkler 1938:12, pl. 8.1). Passage through Bahariya is also attested during the Middle Kingdom (Castel and Tallet 2001). Supply depots, such as Abu Ziyâr east of Kharga on the Girga Road (Darnell 2007b:38, fig. 3.4), suggest that we ought to expect more Middle Kingdom sites to emerge in Kharga and Dakhleh, potentially underneath later settlements.
Egyptian outposts also affirm that we should anticipate future evidence of a Middle Kingdom presence in the oases. Abu Ziyār appears to have been used extensively in the 12th Dynasty and was abandoned by the early 13th Dynasty (Darnell 2013b:256). Even so, Kharga appears to have remained somewhat less developed than Dakhleh. A major official presence along the Girga road diminishes by the 13th Dynasty (Darnell 2013b:222). Gebel Ghueita, in the Kharga Oasis, is one of the few sites with archaeological remains suggesting a sizable Middle Kingdom settlement (Darnell 2002a:172–173). Gebel Ghueita and its associated burial grounds at Kom Hefaw (currently under study by the Theban Desert Road Survey) appear to have developed as outposts such as Abu Ziyār fell out of use. Gebel Ghueita appears to have moved out of Theban influence early on in the 17th Dynasty, but a Theban influence resumes by the end of this same dynasty (Darnell 2013b:244). The site of Tunadaba, also an official outpost, was positioned between the wells of the Nile Valley and those of northeastern Kharga and was in use between the late 17th Dynasty through the early New Kingdom (Darnell 2013b:257).

The peoples who migrated to and between the oases appear to have been multicultural because they included foreign mercenaries, Egyptian officers and officials, and conscripts. Specialized, state-supplied Nubian patrolmen are well attested within the Thebaid and along routes within the Western Desert (Darnell 2002a; Darnell 2013a:797, 799–300; Scharff 1922; Spalinger 1986:222). Asiatics (aamu) were a critical component of Egyptian expeditions in the Sinai (Černý et al. 1952; Černý et al. 1955:19, 206). Given their desert expertise, these same Asiatics appear to have been reassigned to various desert platoons in the Western Desert as well (Darnell 2007b:40; Darnell 2013a:807–808).

**The Second Intermediate Period**

The Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650–1550 BC) saw Egypt dominated by foreign rulers for the first time. The Hyksos, who came from the Levant, ruled from their capital of Avara in the Nile Delta. Control over the Western Desert appears to have fragmented once again. Even Thebes does not appear to have maintained a significant presence along desert routes until the later 17th Dynasty (Darnell 2002a:132, 139–141), when they were also openly campaigning against the Hyksos. Bahariya alone may have had a Hyksos presence during much of the second intermediate period (Colin 2005), while the rest of the oases may have been under Theban control.

**New Kingdom**

During the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BC), the high point of the expansive Egyptian Empire, the presence of non-Egyptians in Egypt becomes more complex than in previous eras (Leahy 1994:232–233; Scheider 1992). Large-scale trade in consumable goods and prestige items with areas such as Syria-Palestine is widely attested (Bader 2012). Egyptian hegemony over Nubia, supported by the “Western Wall of Pharaoh,” a string of outposts and patrol routes, also strengthens at this time (Darnell 2004). Enormous caravanserais grew within the Thebaid in the New Kingdom (Darnell 2002b:138–139), attesting to a massive growth in traffic through the region. These broad population and trade movements created a far-reaching system of migration throughout Egypt, although individual local areas would have experienced these movements differently.

The New Kingdom brings a wealth of external written and visual sources on the oasis region in comparison to earlier periods. This material falls into four major groups: stelae from the early New Kingdom (Kamose to Amenophis I), tomb scenes (with inscriptions) from the mid-18th Dynasty (Het shedsut to Amenophis II), inscriptions and jar stoppers with seal impressions dating to the late 18th Dynasty (Amenophis III to Tutankamon), and references from papyri from the Ramesside Period (19th–21st Dynasties) (Giddy 1987:65). Most of this information derives from Thebes because, once again, Theban governors were Egyptian officials appointed with authority over the oases, during the reign of Thutmosis II (1492–1479 BC) and subsequently (Kaper 2008).

Three Theban tombs from the reign of Thutmosis III (1479–1425) have tribute scenes depicting oasis dwellers as quasi-foreign sources of exotica: the tombs of Puyemre, Rekmire, and Ineni.² Artists associated the oasis dwellers with distant foreigners, rendering them prostrate before Egyptian strength with offerings of exotic oasis goods (Giddy 1987:76; Gosline 1990:15–16). Images selectively depict oasis inhabitants in Egyptian dress and hair treatment but also in foreign clothing, such as loin cloths, which may have been unique to the oases (Newberry 1900:35). For example, Tomb 131 of User depicted an oasisite in a kilt made of animal skin, cut away from the front to reveal an extended white flap and with a long tail hanging down the back leg (Giddy 1980:124). Such
representations might suggest that some oasis dwellers retained local dress patterns, while others selectively adopted Nile Valley adornments. Alternatively, we can understand these representations as codified stereotypes employed for ideological purposes.

Nile Valley inhabitants viewed oasites as a novelty, as illustrated by the importance of having oasis women as dancers for ceremonies (Fakhry 1943:483; Giddy 1987:80). Oasisite women can be found depicted in the tomb of Huyw, dating to the reign of Amunhotep III or IV (Fakhry 1943). They are shown wearing caps, necklaces, and double-layered skirts. Their chests are bare with the exception of the two straps that cross it and are tied at the waist. These representations are similar to those found in the depictions of Taneferbast and Bastetirdis in the tomb of Tjaty in Bahariya (Fakhry 1942:127, fig. 97, 130, fig. 101; Porter and Moss 1952:303).

Nile Valley Egyptians coveted specialized oasis crops in addition to the people themselves. Olives, dates, and wine were particularly prized, and cultivation was encouraged through improved irrigation techniques sponsored by the state (Caminos 1997:13; Kaper and Wendrich 1998). Wine was the most desired oasis product from at least the New Kingdom until the Roman Period (Redford 1977:3). During the reign of Tuthmosis III a number of tombs represent oasisites bearing tribute consisting of emblematic products from the oases, with special emphasis given to wine (Fakhry 2003 [1974]:59). For example, the tomb of Rekhmire (a vizier of Thutmose III) depicts oasis inhabitants carrying colored mats, fox hides, and a disproportionate amount of wine (Gosline 1990; Newberry 1900) (Figure 4). These goods represented the quintessential products of the region, and the prominent positioning of wine indicates that it was valued greatly by the Nile Valley population.

New Kingdom Egyptians also exhibited a good deal of anxiety toward their oasisite neighbors and the groups beyond the oases. Groups such as the nomadic Bedouin personified the fearful force of chaos. Haphazard attacks along the Nile Valley, particularly in the years around circa 1100 BC, suggest a prevalent concern about oasis peoples. Accounts from the latter reigns of the 20th Dynasty, preserved in the diary entries of the necropolis journals in Thebes, identify Meshwesh, Liby, and people known as desert dwellers (Černý 1975; Haring 1992). These accounts indicate that these invaders interrupted building activities in Theban tombs. Theban workers appear to have been warned of the danger of these groups (Haring 1992:73).

Such attacks necessitated the stationing of troops in the oases, which solidified the state paradigm in which the oasis region represented a buffer zone between order and chaos. By the reign of Ramses II, a series of fortresses was constructed in the northwestern desert against the Libyans (Habachi 1980; Snape 2003:98–105). At the same time, Egyptians made use of some specific Libyan groups as desert scouts against both Libyan and other nomadic groups (Caminos 1954:176–181). By the late New Kingdom, the southern oases had become Egyptianized sufficiently for Egyptians to use them for defense when dangerous Libyan groups threatened Egypt’s territories (Gosline 1990:11). It is worth noting that the identities of the nomadic groups are far from certain for all periods (c.f. Barnard 2005, 2007; Burstein 2008). We lack Libyan accounts of these same events since the ancient Libyans were not literate and our knowledge of the language is wholly dependent upon classical and Egyptian sources. It was Ramesside policy to force subjugated Libyans to learn the Egyptian language (Kitchen 1986:245; Kitchen 1990:21), which demonstrates the Egyptian intention to obliterate a distinct Libyan identity.

Within the oases themselves, little is known about New Kingdom occupation. This lacuna is largely because oasis sites were continuously occupied and the older remains are covered by subsequent occupation. A few blocks from
Kharga’s Hibis Temple indicate that there was once a New Kingdom temple in the same location, but nothing is known of its form (Cruz-Uribe 1999).

**The Third Intermediate Period**

At the death of Ramesses XI (reign ca. 1107–1078), the throne of Egypt passed to Smendes, who was a northern relative of the High Priest of Amun. The Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1070–712 BC) began with the inception of Smendes’ reign (ca. 1070–1044 BC). During the 21st Dynasty (ca. 1070–945 BC), Egypt was governed by pharaohs ruling from Tanis in the eastern Delta and by the High Priest of Amun ruling from Thebes. Within the Third Intermediate Period, beginning with the rule of Menkheperra (ca. 1045–992 BC), the Theban government again tried to incorporate the oases into the Nile Valley. Menkheperra gave general amnesty for oasis exiles (von Beckerath 1968) and constructed fortresses at the Nile Valley termini of Western Desert routes (Kitchen 1986:249, 269–270). In 945 BC, the Libyans became rulers of Egypt for two centuries (22nd Dynasty, ca. 945–712 BC), when the throne passed to a family of Libyan descent, ruling in the Eastern Delta. Further fragmentation and a new political center arose in the eastern Delta in the 23rd Dynasty (ca. 818–712 BC). Although the details of the Third Intermediate Period are not clear, stylistic, technical, and political innovations took place during this period, particularly within temples (Taylor 2000).

The most noteworthy written documents found in the Western Desert and dating to the Third Intermediate Period derive from Dakhleh: the Greater Dakhleh Stela (Gardiner 1933; Ritner 2009; Spiegelberg 1899), the Smaller Dakhleh Stela (Janssen 1968), and the Amheida Stela of Takelot III (Kaper and Demarée 2005). The Greater Dakhleh Stela provides a list of names and titles that probably relate to peoples of Libyan ethnicity or affinity (Gardiner 1933:21–22, nos. 1–3, 17; Ritner 2009:177, Ins 17–18). Both the Smaller Dakhleh Stela and the Amheida Stela of Takelot III reference a man named Esdhu, a chief of the Shamin tribe, who is Libyan. The Shamin are known only from sources found in Dakhleh, and Esdhu is depicted as a high-status Libyan, with a single upright feather upon his head (Kaper and Demarée 2005:35).

Although documentary and visual evidence make it certain that there was activity within the oases during the Third Intermediate Period, we are left with a highly fragmentary image of what this activity would have looked like archaeologically. For example, there is some ceramic and documentary evidence of the Third Intermediate Period from Mut el-Kharab (Hope 2004, 2005). Attempts to make general statements about the Third Intermediate Period in Dakhleh rely on evidence dating to many hundreds of years after the Third Intermediate Period (Hubschmann 2012).

**Late Period**

Between the New Kingdom and the Roman Period, a period characterized by a series of foreign rulers, information on the oases is relatively scanty (Bagnall and Rathbone 2004:249).

The Saite Dynasty (664–525 BC), founded by Psamtek I (664–610 BC), ended the sporadic Kushite-Assyrian power struggle. The stability of this period was founded on mercenaries who helped both to conquer and to consolidate the country. These mercenaries primarily consisted of Greeks and Carians, with fewer numbers of Jews, Phoenicians, and possibly even Shasu Bedouin. This influx of foreign troops created tensions with indigenous Egyptian military men, catalyzing mutinies by this group throughout the Saite period (Lloyd 2000a:366–367). The foreign troops employed by the Saite rulers helped, however, to strengthen foreign trade relations, especially with Greek cities, foreshadowing the importance that Greek culture experienced under subsequent foreign rule.

Under the Persians (525–402; 343–332 BC), the Western Desert seems to have become an important strategic area since there are growing signs of an imperial presence in the form of temples and waterworks. It is unclear why the Persians devoted such time and energy to this region, although it was clearly a valuable agricultural resource and prestige goods (agricultural or other) from the area may have been attractive. Over the course of the fifth century BC, activity along the roads connecting the Great Oasis to the Nile Valley increased, as attested by graffiti naming Darius I (Di Cerbo and Jasnow 1996) and by the presence of *sigha*-pots (a flask type), datable to the fifth century BC, which have been found along these same roads (Darnell 2000).
New technologies for water management through qanats also appear to have been developed during the Persian Period (Figure 5). *Qanat* (plural *qanatha, qanawat*; Anglicized as “qanat”) is an Arabic term for an underground gallery connecting a water source with a cistern some distance away from it. The characteristic shafts connecting the underground gallery with the surface allowed construction and maintenance to occur while also limiting substantial evaporation. This new technology, previously unknown in Egypt, was likely to be the product of Persian exploitation of the land for increased agricultural production (Newton et al. 2013). Given the extensive expertise required to design and build, it is likely that the transmission of this technology across the Persian empire came by means of skilled hydrological engineers (Stiros 2006). As it is known from the Persepolis Fortification Archive, the movement of workmen across the empire to aid imperial projects was not uncommon (Henkelman and Stolper 2009). Such cohorts of workmen recall the aforementioned trade diasporas, in which members of this group become different from both the areas they work in and the areas from which they originated.

Although the Kharga Oasis has some evidence for pharaonic activity, significantly more material survives from the Late Period onward. The Persians were active in the Kharga area when they controlled Egypt between 525 and 404 BC and the sites around Kharga rose in importance at this time (Cruz-Uribe 1999). During the Persian occupation of Egypt, at least four temples were constructed in the Oasis. This, along with an increased number of structures, attests to a growing population. The aforementioned qanats are particularly evident in the Kharga Oasis (Bouquet 1996; Chauveau 2001; Schacht 2003; Youssef 2012), which suggests the presence of some peoples of Persian origin.

The temple of Amun at Hibis, located just north of the modern town, Kharga city, is the best known of Kharga’s Persian temples. Temple construction began in the Saite Period, likely during the reign of Psametik II, with additions by Darius I, Hakor, Nectanebo I and II, and possibly Ptolemy IV (Cruz-Uribe 1988; Winlock 1941; Davies 1953; for an alternative dating interpretation, see Cruz-Uribe 1988). It is notable that the Hibis temple was dedicated to Amun, the main god of Thebes, and that the Theban Triad (Amun, Mut, Khonsu) received special attention. This temple may have been built to underscore the Persian investment in the aforementioned water technologies introduced in the region (Boozer 2000), as well as to advertise links with Thebes.

Qasr el-Ghuieta, 17 km south of Hibis, has a temple (ancient Perwesekh) that is approximately 19 x 10 m with some early portions that appear to date to the 25th or 26th Dynasties. It contains additional contributions by Darius I, and Ptolemies III, IV, and X. The Theban triad is depicted in relief decoration, suggesting connections with both Hibis and Thebes. This temple is surrounded by a fortress considered to be of Roman date, but this dating conjecture has not been verified (Cruz-Uribe 1999; Darnell 2007a, 2013a).

Ayn Manawir, in the southern reaches of the oasis, has an agricultural settlement on a small hill, which includes a mud-brick temple dedicated to Osiris, as well as two groups of houses (Grimal 1997:340–342; Wuttman et al. 1996:393–407). At least twenty-two qanats fed the agricultural fields below this site (Wuttman 2001; Wuttmann et al. 1998). Several hundred ostraka, written in Demotic, attest to the Persian period occupation of this site. These ostraka also provide details concerning water rights and land management (Chauveau 1996, 2001, 2005, 2008), pointing to the significance of agricultural products for exploitation.
French archaeologists working at Dush found a temple in the southernmost edge of the oasis dating to the Persian period. A settlement from that period had revealed the temple, some important documents written in Demotic script, and traces of the irrigation system dating to about 500 BC (Bousquet 1996:195-202). Statues and gold coins also have been recovered from this period. These archaeological finds have not been fully published yet, but the agricultural emphasis is clear once again.

The Dakhleh Oasis provides a patchy, but growing, corpus of data on Persian Period occupation in the Western Desert. The epigraphic material from Amheida’s temple in Dakhleh has provided an important collection of cartouches with Late Period names that indicate governmental investment in the oases. The recovered cartouches are highly fragmentary, given the destroyed state of the temple, and interpretations may change with time. At this stage, it seems that minor building took place under the Theban 23rd Dynasty (King Pedupast, ca. 800 BC) and the early 26th Dynasty (Nekau II, 610–595 BC and Psametik II, 595–589 BC). Major construction appears to have started under Amasis/Ahmose II (569–526 BC) and the Persian ruler Darius I (522–486 BC). We know that Dakhleh was ruled by an Egyptianized Libyan tribe called the Shamain during the Third Intermediate Period (see Kaper 2009; Kaper and Davoli 2006; Kaper and Demarée 2006). A cartouche of Darius I stamped onto a ceramic object was found on the site surface of Area 1 at Amheida in 2005, furthering suggestions of trade and incorporation during the Persian Period (Figure 6). Mut el-Kharab has revealed substantial quantities of Late Period ceramics in the vicinity of the Seth Temple, which require further study (Hope et al. 2009). The epigraphic material from Amheida, along with a growing corpus of ceramics, suggests that these Late Period dynasties incorporated this oasis much more thoroughly into their regional rule than has been suggested previously. This incorporation may have included agricultural intensification, as evinced in Kharga, but our current evidence is not clear in this respect.

Evidence suggests that Persian Period oasites adhered to traditional local practices at home, often representing themselves in their tombs wearing a distinctive dress more in line with Libyan traditions than those of the Nile Valley. Such idiosyncratic oasite dress can be found in the 26th Dynasty tombs of Ta-Nefert-Bastet and Zed-Amunef-ankh in Bahariya Oasis (Fakhry 2003 [1974]:130).

Despite substantial investments in the Western Desert, the Persians did not settle in Egypt and relied on hegemonic imperial practices rather than on territorial integration. The lack of substantial numbers of immigrants, combined with traditional Egyptian xenophobia, prevented integration between the two cultures. Indeed, local loyalties, at least along the Nile Valley, seem to have heightened during this period of foreign rule, rather than mixing or abating (Lloyd 2000a:383). It is entirely possible that the Persian occupation of the oases provides a different story, which only future excavations can reveal.

Ptolemaic Period
After many revolts by Egyptians and a discontinuous rule, the Persians lost Egypt to Alexander the Great in 332 BC. The eventual Ptolemaic Dynasty (305–30 BC) ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years and, unlike their Persian forerunners, focused largely on the development of Egypt, where it was based.

Until recently, evidence for Ptolemaic Period activity was thought to be limited in comparison to the Roman Period in the Western Desert. Recent research on Dakhlieh ceramics suggests that there were substantial settlement and agricultural activities in Dakhlieh during this period (Gill 2012a, 2012b). Although there are known Ptolemaic ruins from this period at Ain Bibiya and Mut, we can say little about trade and migration relating to these sites.

Once again, Kharga provides shadowy evidence. Qasr Zaiyan (ancient Tchonemuris), 27 km south of Habis, appears to date from the Ptolemaic era, although the only dated inscription is Roman and dates from the reign of Antoninus Pius (140 AD). Egyptian archaeologists working at the site cleared much of the temple precinct, exposing a substantial granary and associated administrative quarters (Cruz-Uribe 1999). These finds are unpublished, yet it is possible to hypothesize that the need for a granary and administration in the region suggest the export of agricultural goods.

**Roman Period**

Egypt once again became a province within a greater empire following the Roman conquest (30 BC–395 AD). Relatively few Romans immigrated to Egypt, in striking contrast to the many thousands of Greeks who settled in Egypt under Ptolemaic rule (Bagnall and Frier 1994:48). This distinction in the quantity of immigrants is partially a function of the Roman policy that hindered immigration to Egypt because the emperors feared that such settlers might use Egypt as a base for political opposition (Lewis 1983:16), given Egypt’s history as a locale where Romans could cultivate their own power base (i.e., Caesar, Antony, Pompey). Despite these limitations of immigrants to Egypt, there appear to have been population shifts within Egypt itself, due to Roman investment and control across the province that may have created new opportunities in different regions.

It is likely that the Romans established authority over the oases soon after they took control of Egypt in 30 BC. Control of trade routes and resource networks was of primary importance throughout the Roman Period, as is attested through the construction of forts along the oasis routes during or after the tetrarchy (293–312 AD), which monitored access through the caravan routes. These fortresses were multifunctional, serving as military, administrative, and even religious centers for the oasis settlements (Boozer 2013). The role of the army, in general, was multiplex since it not only served as defense but also controlled trade, travel, and the extraction of resources.

Evidence of these varied roles can be found in the fortresses in the Western Desert, where the movement of people was also a central concern to the Roman administration (Boozer 2013). This concern for monitoring these movements probably reflects a concern for banditry, which would have hindered the economic interests of the Roman Empire, and for collecting customs dues. For example, caravans carrying goods from the oases to the Nile Valley may have offered easy targets for bandits, particularly when these caravans were in more remote parts of their journey. This economic component of Roman rule converged upon agricultural production, mineral extraction, and trade networking (Peacock 2000:419). These economic interests shaped Roman investment in regions all over Egypt and, in particular, the Western Desert.

The archaeological remains dating to the Roman period suggest a greater population density in the oasis region than ever before. It is unclear where these migrants came from, although I have suggested elsewhere that the move for many people may have been for positive reasons rather than coerced (Boozer 2011). Indeed, the Western Desert became quite wealthy during the Roman Period due to the increased demand for luxury goods produced in the region. In addition to economic and demographic changes, the oases experienced cultural and physical changes as well. As a result, the Roman Period brings us a wealth of archaeological data on daily life, the economy, religion, and other factors.

By the Roman Period, specialized oasis crops, such as olives, dates, and wine (Kaper and Wendrich 1998) were encouraged through improved irrigation techniques. It is also likely that the Romans were interested in alum, a mineral present in the oases (Giddy 1987:5). Cotton makes an appearance in the oases in the Roman Period (ca. 200 AD) (Bagnall 2008b; Gradel et al. 2012). This new crop, which derived from either Sudan or India (Wild 1997; Wild et al. 2008), suggests that there was a new concern for producing types of goods not previously consumed in...
Egypt. The oases were suitable for cultivating this summer crop, unlike the Nile Valley, due to the perennial presence of water. Migration to the oases (most likely from Sudan) might be linked to this new economic and agricultural venture since agricultural know-how would have streamlined the introduction of this new crop. The potential for slave labor, and possibly even slave trade, should not be overlooked. Slave labor was not uncommon in the empire and would have offered a significant economic advantage in the region.

Documentary sources suggest that Roman writers perceived local oasis people as different from the rest of Egyptians. For example, a document from AD 202 describes a slave “of the Oasis genos” (Wagner 1987:120), which suggests that this geographic designation was considered meaningful. Voyagers viewed travel to and from the oases with significant apprehension, since the scorching heat of the desert has always been feared in ancient Egypt. Roman Period texts contain anxious descriptions of the desert as a wasteland of heat, sandstorms, and general desiccation (Wagner 1987:117–118). Mixed in with this apprehension of the treacherous nature of the environment was a fear of the people (Boozer 2013), which potentially reflects the perennial fear of attacks by bandits, criminals, and nomadic groups.

Under Roman rule, Kharga experienced its greatest prosperity and took shape with new fortresses (Reddé 1999). The location of these forts suggests that Roman administrators were concerned with internal security as well as trade routes. It is uncertain if they represent a response to changing circumstances or were part of an overarching strategy, because dating remains uncertain (Morkot 1996:87). Most of these fortresses are not substantial and were probably designed to impress, intimidate, and control traffic rather than provide a defensive function. Furthermore, the character of the fortresses themselves signifies that they were primarily residential since the walls were not nearly wide enough to sustain an earnest attack (Ikram and Rossi 2004; Rossi 2000).

The northern part of Kharga provides some signs of increased population as well as fortresses. The location of the Hibis garrison has aroused much conjecture among scholars. Currently, it seems likely that Nadura, located approximately 2 km southeast of the Hibis temple, served as a military installation for Hibis (Bagnall 2001:6–7). Two Roman Period forts, at Qasr Gib and Qasr Sumeira, are also found in the north (Hodge 2007; Ikram 2005). This concentration of fortresses would have protected and monitored the movement of goods between the oases and the Nile Valley. Notably, the recent research at the site of el-Deir has revealed that cotton cultivation makes an appearance here during the Roman period, which emphasizes the significance of agriculture within the oasis (Gradel et al. 2012), as well as the significance of the oasis monitoring and protecting the movement of trade goods.

In southern Kharga, the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale has been excavating at Qasr Dush (ancient Kysis) from 1976 onward (Dunand et al. 1992, 2005; Harrison 2007; Reddé et al. 2004) (Figure 7). The towns of Kysis, Ain Manawir, and Mounesis (Shams el-Din) appear to have had populations engaged in trade and cultivation, both important practices on the trade route that the fortress guarded in this extreme southern fringe of the oasis (Wagner 1987:182–183).
The Dakhleh Oasis was profoundly impacted by Roman rule as evidenced by what seems to be a significant population and wealth increase at this time. The Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP), directed by Anthony J. Mills, involved a full archaeological survey of the oasis between 1977 and 1983 (Churcher and Mills 1995). Since 1986, Colin A. Hope of Monash University has conducted excavations at Kellis (Ismant el-Kharab), which appears to have been occupied during the first through fourth centuries AD. This site has produced clear signs of agricultural intensification as well as connections to regions beyond the Western Desert. Of particular interest are economic and literary texts that place Kellis within a thriving regional agricultural economy during the fourth century AD (c.f. Bagnall 1997, 2008a). Cotton and weaving appear to be integral parts of this economy as well.

In addition to agricultural indicators of trade goods, Hope’s excavations have revealed architectural and decorative motifs, as well as portable objects, that suggest Roman Mediterranean influences and interaction (Hope and Whitehouse 2006; Kaper 2012). In particular, a glass gladiator jug suggests the long-distance connections and Roman activities experienced by the inhabitants (Hope and Whitehouse 2004). Two monumental, classical style tombs dating to the third century AD were found in the north of Kellis. These tombs find parallels only in Libya; they also resemble depictions of buildings on coins from North Africa (first century BC) and Alexandria (second century AD), signaling potential connections to these regions (Hope 1999).

Excavations at Trimithis (Amheida) since 2004, led by Roger S. Bagnall, have contributed valuable information on Roman Dakhleh. A demolished temple, built upon the same location as the aforementioned Late Period one, experienced new construction in the Roman Period under Titus (AD 79–81) and Domitian (81–96) (Kaper and Davoli 2006). A third-century house (Boozer In press) and a decorated house (Boozer 2010; Leahy 1980) provide new fine-grained data on the social, economic, and civic life of this city (Bagnall and Ruffini 2004, 2012). Wells, which were essential for maintaining life as well as agricultural production, appear in a substantial number of the ostraka found at Trimithis (Bagnall and Ruffini 2012).

Like Kellis, the extant domestic material from Trimithis reflects multicultural affinities between Roman Mediterranean, Egyptian, and local oasis traditions (Boozer 2010, 2011, 2012). Although both a wealthy house (B1) and a more modest house (B2) display this intermixing, gender, age, and status level appear to have been critical factors influencing how individuals aligned their cultural affinities. Women and the less wealthy individuals of B2 appear to have transitioned more slowly to au courant Roman Mediterranean consumption practices than those who occupied B1, relying upon traditional oasis crops for cooking. It is possible that there were crops produced primarily for the wealthy and exportation, while other crops were produced for local consumption. We know from the Notitia Dignitatum that there was a fortress at Trimithis, which appears to have been located at al-Qasr nearby. This fortress, like those in Kharga, may have served to protect and monitor the transport of goods.

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Figure 8 “A detail of the painting inside the tomb of Petosiris, depicting the deceased on a funerary bed, presided over by Anubis, Isis, and Nephthys” (el-Muzawwaqa, Dakhleh Oasis) (Roman Period) (Ancient World Image Bank: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 2009–2012). Cotton and weaving appear to be integral parts of this economy as well.

The tombs of el-Muzawwaqa, which presumably belonged to Trimithis, have been explored as well (Osing et al. 1982). These tombs confirm the multicultural influences that we see in the houses, although the decorative emphasis swings more emphatically toward an Egyptian rather than a Classical influence, unlike the domestic wall paintings from Trimithis (Riggs 2008 [2005]:161–162; Whitehouse 1998) (Figure 8). This multicultural range found
at Kellis, Trimithis, and el-Muzawwaqa reflects the changed social conditions in Dakhleh as well as the potentially complex ethnic makeup of the inhabitants.

Deir el-Hagar, the signature monument of Dakhleh, can also be associated with Trimithis and may have been a festival temple that was potentially built under Nero (64–67 AD) and decorated under Vespasian (69–79 AD), Titus (79–81 AD), and Domitian (81–96 AD). The temple was dedicated to the Theban triad through Seth (Kaper 1997), signaling the continued significance of Theban connections with the oases during the Roman period as well as the investment in local cults provided by Roman emperors.

Documentary sources substantiate the suggestion that oasites were strongly connected with the Nile Valley through trade, familial connections, religious ties, and political relationships. Some oasis families even held property in Upper Egyptian districts (e.g., P.Kell., I G 32.3n). The growing corpus of personal names known in Dakhleh adds to this impression. Most names at Trimithis derive from Nile Valley cults, particularly the Theban triad, Horus, and local gods, such as Tutu and Shai. There are also Greek names, Hebrew names from the Old Testament, a few Christian names, and other names (Semitic, Thracian, Iranian, unidentified origins). Names that appear to be common locally also occur and usually have Greek or Egyptian origins (Bagnall 2012:42–43; Bagnall and Ruffini 2012; Ruffini forthcoming).

The Siwa Oasis was far removed from the rest of the oases in the Western Desert. It seems that Siwa may have been more connected to Libya than to Egypt prior to the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. The Siwa Oasis remains a mystery in the Roman Period, although markedly less so than in earlier periods. Tombs in Siwa suggest a moderate resident population in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Although these tombs have been scavenged over the years, it is clear that they follow mortuary patterns common to the Nile Valley (Fakhry 1990:173–174), suggesting that connections developed between Siwa and Egypt during these periods.

Siwan settlement sites, such as Ain el-Qurayshat and Abu Shuruf, have been explored. Ain el-Qurayshat has many olive oil presses concentrated together, an adjacent residential zone, and a temple. Olive oil was an important commodity during the Roman Period and the crop was introduced across North Africa, and particularly Libya, at this time. The introduction of olive oil production may indicate migrants who initiated this crop and familiarized the locals with the production of olive oil as well as managed its export. The houses are mud-brick and built around large courtyards, reflecting a more Romanized plan than traditional Egyptian practices (Kuhlmann 1998), again signaling connections to the Roman Mediterranean.4

Bahariya Oasis shows signs of occupation throughout antiquity, particularly in the Roman Period (Gosline 1990). In the al-Hayz area of Bahariya there are approximately eleven settlements of uncertain date. There are at least nine settlements in the northern portion of this oasis (Dospěl and Suková 2013:6–7). Recently, excavation has begun at a late Roman settlement known as Bir el-Showish (Verner and Benesovska 2008:54). Oil and wine presses have been found elsewhere at el-Haiz (Hawass 2000:148–167), again attesting to the introduction of crops prized by the Roman Empire. Among the most spectacular finds of the Roman Period are the remains of “golden mummies” from Bahariya (Hawass 2000). These mummies derive from a necropolis associated with the unexcavated capital of Bahariya and give some indication as to the wealth and importance of this oasis during the Roman Period, likely due to the agricultural wealth of the region. Indeed, irrigation seems to have been invested in at some stage to promote agricultural intensification (Dospěl and Suková 2013:271–285). Two fortresses, located at al-Hayz in the south and Qasr Muharib in the north, point toward the need to monitor and protect trade items.

By the fifth century a significant reduction in the occupation of several major sites took place at major sites such as Dush (ancient Kysis) in Kharga (Wagner 1986) and Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis) in Dakhleh (Marlow and Mills 2001). Amheida (ancient Trimithis) in Dakhleh, with its lack of clear evidence of any fifth-century activity, likely shared the same destiny. This local collapse is reminiscent of a broader Roman imperial collapse that is theorized (but rightly queried) for this time period (Jones 1964:1025–1068; Liebeschuetz 2000:29–32). It is unclear what factors catalyzed the collapse in the Western Desert and to what extent we can connect it (if at all) to broader changes in the Roman Empire. Potential explanations may include environmental changes that negatively impacted agricultural production, increased attacks on caravans carrying trade goods, or simply a change in trade routes that negatively impacted the oases.

**Conclusion**
This overview of migration and trade in the Western Desert from Pharaonic to Roman times brings several patterns of social impacts to light.

First, agricultural trade goods were the primary goods desired from within the oases. Wine, oil, and cotton seem to be the primary crops. Because agricultural goods were the primary source of wealth concentration in the ancient world, this conclusion is not surprising. It is notable that societies that developed long-distance trade networks had to establish and maintain information conduits between agents (Anthony 1990:902). In particular, the long-term association between the oases and wine is notable because it lasted from at least the Middle Kingdom through the Roman Period. The long-term cultivation, preparation, and marketing of this product certainly created enduring connections between peoples of the Western Desert and the Nile Valley. Olive cultivation also appears to have increased in the Western Desert during the Roman Period, most notably in Siwa, which may have been linked with Roman investments in olive production in Libya.

Cotton was a Roman Period introduction to the Western Desert. Given the proximity of the oases to Sudan, it is the most likely origin for this crop. In addition to the seeds themselves, technical knowledge about sowing, cultivating, picking, preparing, and weaving cotton likely derived from Sudan as well. For example, cotton cloth was dominant at sites such as Qasr Ibrim (Wild and Wild 2009) before it slowly moved into Egypt. Connections between knowledgeable experts (cultivators, weavers) in the Western Desert and Sudan seem logical, even if we cannot suggest the long-term movement of peoples between these regions.

Second, qanats are tied to the agricultural intensification found in the region. These qanats would have required substantial technological exchanges in order to construct them. This specialized know-how derived from the Near East and appears to have been introduced by the Persians when they developed the Great Oasis. Substantial and complex construction projects such as these necessitated skilled individuals to direct and organize the work for long periods of time. Once again, it is unclear who these people were and how long they stayed, but connections with the Near East would be logical.

Third, long-term connections with Thebes can be seen in the documentary sources as well as the religious landscape within the Great Oasis. Thebes governed this region, and connections between those involved in civic and economic life are clear. It would also be logical to suggest that social connections and movement back and forth between the Western Desert and Thebes were common. It is possible that there was a chain migration between Thebes (and its environs) and Dakhleh because the connections between these two areas figure from approximately the end of the Old Kingdom through the Roman Period.

Fourth, some groups seem to reappear over time in the Western Desert. Libyans, the catch-all term for peoples west of the Nile, reappear in both oasite and Nile Valley texts. It remains difficult to make distinctions within this undifferentiated western “other” of Pharaonic Egyptian and Graeco-Roman literature. Moreover, it seems likely that this literature confused “Libyans” with nomadic and seminomadic people coming from the oases and south of Egypt. These enigmatic groups appear in waves over time and were usually labeled as Blennymes or “Libyans.” In reality, they were probably different groups of peoples with shifting identities and compositions (c.f. Hope 2007). Equally mysterious are the many criminals, taxation escapees, and bandits who necessitated the positioning of military footholds in the region. Peoples from north Sudan were less perplexing and appear to have been used as conscripts in the military and in desert patrols. Likewise, Asians, who were employed in the Sinai, appear to have been sent to the Western Desert due to their familiarity with the environmental conditions.

Finally, despite long-term waves of migration and trade between the oases and the Nile Valley (as well as areas further afield), the oases maintained distinctive identities. The influx of new peoples and goods appears to have been integrated in locally significant ways, often highlighting the individual personalities of each area. The endurance of the Western Desert as a unique locale in Egypt throughout the periods examined here can be seen as indicative of the intertwining between old and new traditions over a long period of time.

As is evident from the earlier survey, we are sorely lacking in a fine-grained understanding of diachronic developments within the Western Desert. This lack appears to be due to the tell formation of settlements, which obscure earlier time periods and leave us with Roman ruins dominating the site surface. Without fuller access to prior periods, the oasites themselves remain shrouded in anonymity. Despite this lacuna, it is clear that the Western Desert experienced many waves of migration and connection to locales in Egypt, Sudan, Libya, the Mediterranean, and Western Asia over many thousands of years. The “oasites” were not a stable people, but
rather a mosaic of these different layers of influence and connection to the Nile Valley as well as further afield. Despite the mutable nature of the oases themselves, the inhabitants of Egypt's Western Desert retained specific local identities and practices throughout their occupation. This distinctive quality remains the case today, even as the oases experience waves of migration once again from the Nile Valley.

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References


**Notes:**

(1) See the stela of Dd-jkw (Berlin 1999), which may derive from Abydos (Schäfer 1905); the stela of K3y (Berlin 2820), which may derive from Qamula (Anthes 1930b); the stela of S3-Hthr (B.M.569 D12), which may derive from Abydos (Fischer 1957:228–229); and the stela of ‘Inw (University of Pennsylvania Museum no. 54-33-1), which may derive from Abydos (ibid.:223–224). Although the provenance of these stelae is questionable, the focus upon Abydos is significant.

(2) Additional Theban private tombs of the New Kingdom include Senemirh, Intef, Menkheperreseneb, and Usir (Giddy:1980, Giddy 1987:70).

(3) On hegemonic and territorial empires, see Luttwak 1976, Hassig 1985:101.

(4) Egyptian houses typically had a courtyard off to one side or behind houses.

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