research and restoration

season 2006
Report on research and restoration activities
Season 2006

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

The fifth season of the Qasr Dakhleh Project (QPD) has been interesting and successful. Administrative matters with the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) were fast and efficiently finalised and work could start immediately after al-`Id al-Kabir on January 14th. The progress of the reconstruction of Bayt al-Qurashi was much advanced by the permission to start the necessary production of mud bricks more than a month before the beginning of the reconstruction proper.

In the 2006 season the activities again consisted of two distinct, but not completely separate parts. The research activities, which included excavation, were mainly funded by the University of Groningen, and for the restoration and reconstruction activities a generous grant was received from the Netherlands Embassy in Cairo. Also from the contributions of Vodafone Egypt to QDP’s umbrella organisation, the Dakhleh Oasis Project, part of the costs of the QDP were paid. All these contributions are very gratefully acknowledged.

Research

The research activities consisted of three parts: completion of the study of Bayt al-Qurashi, continuation of the research into the material found in Bayt al-Qurashi and the study of the early history of the habitation of al-Qasr.
1. Completion of the clearing of Bayt al-Qurashi.

Even now, with only a little part left to be cleared out, Bayt al-Qurashi was good for another little surprise. At the beginning of the reconstruction of room BQur 8b (see fig. 1) it became clear that the wall which separated BQur 8b from the passage way to BQur 11 was not original. Moreover, when the space was cleared out the lower steps of stairs south of BQur 8b appeared (fig. 2). Further investigation led to the conclusion that the space which now is indicated by BQur 12 contained the staircase to the first floor of BQur 8b and to the built-in filing cabinet BQur 11'. This was indirectly confirmed by the find of a number of fragments of documents clearly belonging to the same collection as those which were found in previous seasons. Like the documents of previous seasons these fragments were rehydrated and put between glass by Vreni Leemhuis-Obrecht.

1. Plan and room numbering of the first floor of Bayt al-Qadi, Bayt al-Qurashi en Bayt Al ’Uthman.

2. Remnants of stair south of BQur 8b.
2. Continuation of the research into the material found in Bayt al-Qurashi.

Anetta Lyzwa-Piber and Szymon Maslak continued cataloguing and studying the pre-modern pottery which was found in Bayt al-Qurashi. A set of the best preserved specimens as well as pots and shards with red painted or grooved decoration was recorded: drawings, photographs and precise descriptions. The aim is to compile a catalogue which will present a typology of the common local domestic pre-modern pottery of al-Qasr. Provisionally this collection is dated from the end of the Ottoman period till the thirties of the twentieth century.

During a short visit Sandor Fodor continued the study of the magical documents.

The first results of the pottery research, the research into the magical documents and a new analysis of the lintels of al-Qasr have been presented at the fifth international conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project which was held in Cairo from 3 till 6 June 2006*.

Ruud Peters continued the study of the legal documents. Of the documents found in the 2003, 2004 and 2005 seasons about 170 complete or nearly complete ones have been identified as having legal or financial-legal contents. These documents consist mainly of contracts, often notarized in court, of receipts of payment of taxes, appointment of proxies and notes regarding debts or expenses. In addition a few waqfiyyas and fatwas were found. So far only one judicial sentence ending litigation was identified. The transcripts made already earlier from photographs were checked against the originals and a start was made with new ones. So far about seventy have been studied and transcribed. The documents studied so far clearly point to the fact that the Qurashi family, or at least that part of it that lived in the house, were mainly involved in agriculture. More than half of these documents are contracts relative to agricultural activities: lease or sale of land or water rights, sharecropping or payment of taxes on land or springs and wells. In addition there are some documents regarding the maintenance of springs and lists made by individual farmers of the persons they leased water rights from. So far no documents have been found indicating that they were engaged in cattle breeding, trade or artisanal production, nor documents related to the sale of the date harvest.

The first results of his research were presented by Ruud Peters in a paper* at the Conference "Customary Law in the Middle East and North Africa" held on 13

** "Sharia and customary law in the Dakhla Oasis (Egypt) during the Ottoman period"
and 14 May 2006 at Princeton University. On the basis of the double document D.04.291 (fig. 3 & 4) from 1206 AH/1791 AD, which contains a sharecropping contract concerning a piece of land in `Ayn al-Najjabin, south of al-Qasr and a follow-up of sixteen years later and other sharecropping contracts he stresses the importance of these documents which are called ja`ala contracts.

This kind of a ja`ala contract is interesting because its use for sharecropping is questionable under Shafi`i shari`a law, which was adhered to in the Dakhla Oasis during Ottoman times. The person who drafted this document apparently was well aware of this. At the end of the document it is therefore explicitly mentioned that consent has legal effects and custom and customary practice as well. The Koran is
quoted to underpin this: “Hold to forgiveness; Command what is right [the word `urf which is used here can also mean "custom"] But turn away from the ignorant.” [Surat al-A`raf (7):199].***

These documents – as well as most others found in al-Qasr – show that there was a high level of legal expertise and sophistication. We do not know where the `ulama’ from al-Qasr studied, but at the madrasa in the town no doubt Islamic jurisprudence was taught.

3. Research into the early history of al-Qasr.

During the continuation of the survey of the northern part of Harat al-Shihabiyya Wolf Schijns came across a mud brick wall extending downward from the present floor level for about three meters (fig. 5). This wall, quite clearly, is part of a pre-Ottoman building phase. Its stone foundation is approximately at the same level as the lowest level of the trial trench which was dug in 2004 in front of Bayt al-Qadi en Bayt al-Qurashi and which corresponded with the Fatimid period.

To find out more about the earliest history of al-Qasr two trial trenches were excavated directly west of the old well, `Ayn al-Hamiya, on a lower level than the foundations of the adjacent ruins of the probably late mediaeval or early Ottoman houses. None of these two trenches produced any clear results. In none of them even a rough stratigraphy could be discerned. The provisional analysis of the found ceramic shards indicates that in both cases we are dealing with a very disturbed area. Consequently we can only conclude that apparently since Mamluk times this area has been turned over at least once, probably in connection with building activities.

Closer visual inspection during these excavation activities, however, made it clear that important data relevant for the determination of the earliest history of al-Qasr had simply been overlooked in the previous years. Near to the now dilapidated old mosque the clearly visible remnants of a six meter wide mud brick wall were discovered (fig. 6 - 8). This wall is situated below the foundation level of what later has become the Islamic town of al-Qasr.

*** See also: pp. 36-37 of the catalogue Treasures of the Dakhleh Oasis. An exhibition on the occasion of the Fifth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, Cairo 2006.
The situation of this wall (underneath the foundation of the Islamic houses), the thickness of the wall (6 m.) and the measurements of the mud bricks (± 8 x 16 x 33 cm.) make it highly likely that it are the remnants of a Roman defensive wall, most probably of a *castra*. The still standing remnants (to a height of at least six meters) to the east of the old mosque, which are built with mud bricks of the same size may well be the remnants of a gate building or a bastion (fig. 9). However, further investigation is needed to more precisely determine the extent and the period of these remains.

On old aerial photographs from the sixties the probable remains of a wall parallel to the course of the discovered wall are visible further to the north, just outside
the built-up area (fig. 10). It is conceivable that these were the remnants of the northern wall of the *castra*. This, however, could not be checked, because exactly in this area new houses have been built since these photographs were taken.

8. Roman wall, detail.

9. Remnants of gate building or bastion?

10. Old aerial photograph of al-Qasr.
Restoration and reconstruction.

Already prior to the start of the season, from mid December 2005, the production of mud bricks needed for the reconstruction of Bayt al-Qurashi could be started. Thus the reconstruction and further restoration could proceed as efficiently as possible.

1. Bayt al-Qadi.

The replastering of Bayt al-Qadi was completed with room BQad 1 on the ground floor (fig. 11). At a later stage in the season, after the completion of the façade of Bayt al-Qurashi both the façades of Bayt al-Qurashi and Bayt al-Qadi were entirely replastered from top to bottom.

2. Bayt al-Qurashi.

During the 2006 season by far the largest part of the activities were connected with the continuation and completion of the reconstruction of Bayt al-Qurashi.

The reconstruction of the ground floor of Bayt al-Qurashi was continued with the reconstruction and roofing of rooms BQur 8b and BQur 10a (fig. 12). During the reconstruction of BQur 8b and the necessary clearing out of the adjacent part it became
clear that this part, now designated as BQur 12, at some stage had become part of Bayt al-Qurashi providing the stairs to the first floor of BQur 8b and to the built-in filing cabinet BQur 11 also on the first floor. These stairs were reconstructed.

Because of the necessary sequence of the reconstruction activities we could start only relatively late in the season with the reconstruction of the stairs in BQur 12 and so not enough time was left for the last stage but one of these stairs to dry. That meant that the last stage of these stairs and the first floor of BQur 8b and BQur 1 could not be completed (fig. 13).

In the front part of the house the first floor* of room BQur 7b including, of course, its part of the façade was reconstructed and covered with the flooring of the

* In this case, it is actually the second floor, because in the case of BQur 7 a&b there is a mezzanine between this floor and the ground floor, which does not exist in the rest of Bayt al-Qurashi. Apart from this mezzanine the rest of the floors of BQur7 a&b is on the same level as those of the rest of Bayt al-Qurashi.
second floor (fig. 14). The decision where to put the window in the façade wall of this room was entirely left to the judgment of the master builders, because no clues could be found from the existing remains of the building. In the back part of the house the first floor of rooms BQur 3, BQur 4 and BQur 10a were reconstructed and covered with the flooring of the second floor. On the masters’ recommendation BQur 3 and 4 were joined together to form one room.


On the second floor the front part with rooms BQur 1, BQur 7a and BQur 7b was reconstructed. At the same time the stairs adjacent to BQur 1 and leading to the top floor were completed. The reconstruction of the three rooms on this floor required also the partial or total reconstruction of the respective parts of the façade wall. In BQur 1 the most southern one of its three large windows was reconstructed, the other two were reopened. The windows in the reconstructed façade wall of BQur 7a and BQur 7b were placed in accordance with those of the floor below. These three rooms were roofed and covered with the flooring of the third and top floor. In the back part the joined rooms BQur 3 and 4 as well as BQur 10a were reconstructed, roofed and covered with the flooring of their third and top floor.

The stair well of the back part of the house which begins on the ground floor at the eastern side of BQur 6 was built up stage by stage in connection with the reconstruction of the successive floors. At the end of the season not enough time was left for the last stage but one of these stairs to dry. That meant that the last stage of the reconstruction of this stair well was not executed.

On the top floors of both the front part and the back part the roof terraces above BQur 1, BQur 7a and BQur 7b and above BQur 3, BQur 4 and BQur 10a respectively were provided with protective walls. The highest point of the building was reached on the first of February (fig. 18) and was celebrated appropriately.
After having dried sufficiently the inside of the reconstructed rooms in Bayt al-Qurashi were plastered in the same way as was done in Bayt al-Qadi. The preserved fragments of a late nineteenth century band of inscriptions in red on a layer of whitewash in the entrance hall BQur 1 on the ground floor were secured and conserved and subsequently plastered over. This was considered the best way to preserve these by itself not very special inscriptions for the future in case further study would be desirable. In view of the sort of the here and there remaining fragments of older layers of plaster it is probable that in this way the intended reconstruction of the probable situation of the beginning of the nineteenth century will be best approximated*.

* See the report of 2004, p. 9.
22. 2nd floor of the front part after plastering.

Not all parts of the house had dried sufficiently or were not entirely completed and so were not yet plastered: BQur 2a, BQur7b, BQur 8, BQur 10 and BQur 12 on the ground floor and the open room BQur 6 together with the adjacent stair well and also some parts of the roof terraces on the third floor above BQur 3&4 and BQur 10a. In all appropriate doorways either fitting old doors or new doors (figs. 24 & 25) manufactured according to the traditional pattern were placed.

23. Stairs to the 3rd floor.

The combined façade walls of Bayt al-Qadi and Bayt al-Qurashi were entirely (re)plastered (figs. 26 & 27) and likewise the lower roof terrace above BQur 2 and BQur 5. The rear side of Bayt al-Qurashi could not yet be plastered, because the upper part was not sufficiently dry.

24. Making doors.

25. Completed doors.
26. Beginning of plastering the façades. 27. Plastering of façades completed.

Now that the reconstruction of Bayt al-Qurashi is nearly completed, it still remains unclear if the space which provisionally is indicated as BQur 9 was part of Bayt al-Qurashi and how the connection with Bayt al-Qurashi and the house south of it, especially on the first floor, has been.


The reconstruction of room BAIUth 3 including its covering was completed. A beginning was made with the reconstruction of the stairs in BAIUth 1 (fig. 28).

4. Survey and drawing of Harat al-Shihabiyya.

After the survey and drawing of the immediate surroundings of Bayt al-Qadi and Bayt al-Qurashi which Wolf Schijns completed last year (figs. 29 & 30) he continued in this season with the detailed survey of the rest of the Harat al-Shihabiyya.
This survey is approaching completion; only the north-western part remains to be done. Finished drawings are expected to be completed before next season.

29. Surroundings of Bayt al-Qadi and Bayt al-Qurashi on ground floor level.

30. Surroundings of Bayt al-Qadi and Bayt al-Qurashi on first floor level.
In the 2006 season which lasted from 11 January till 15 March the QDP-team consisted of Prof. dr. Alexander Fodor (23 – 27 January), Mrs. Verena Leemhuis-Obrecht (20 February – 12 March), Prof. dr. Frederik Leemhuis, Mrs. Anetta I. Lyzewa-Piber MA (14 February – 6 March), Mr. Szymon Maslak MA (14 February – 6 March), (11 January – 12 March), Prof. dr. Rudolf Peters (14 February – 12 March) and Dr. Wolfgang H.M. Schijns (7 – 22 February). The activities with respect to restoration, reconstruction and excavation were executed in close cooperation with the local collaborators of the QDP-team. These local collaborators consisted in 2006 of a group of 52 workmen from al-Qasr and surroundings. Many of those have worked with the project for three or more seasons and clearly have gained experience and skills that proved very useful. Their restoration and reconstruction work was executed under supervision of and in cooperation with the master craftsmen Mr. Ahmad Salih Mohammed, Mr. Subhi `Abdallah Sanusi, Mr. `Abd-al-Ghaffar Mohammed and Mr. Mus`ad Faris Mohammed who all have collaborated on the project before. In the
2006 season they were joined by master Ahmad `Ali Mahdi and for a short period by master `Abd al-`Aziz Mohammed Mohammed. Apart from the fact that the collaboration and the experience of these masters is crucial with regard to the complex matter of the construction of high-rise buildings in mud brick they also guarantee the transmission of their traditional expertise.

Within the framework of the QDP this transmission is taking place in a structured manner, because it was tried, with success, to employ each season as much as possible the same team of workmen. To the satisfaction of the old experienced masters two of the younger collaborators have in the previous two seasons proved their mastership and it is to be expected that in the near future one or two others will likewise reach that stage.

The transmission of traditional expertise and knowledge took place not only in the domain of building techniques related to restoration and reconstruction. In order to provide traditional rush mats for a basic furnishing of some of the rooms of the houses the old mat weaver of al-Jadida not only agreed to

35. The local collaborators of the al-Qasr team in 2006.

36. The mat weaver.
resume his old trade and make new matting with traditional material and according to the old pattern, but also to teach his skills to a younger generation (fig. 36).

The very skilful and experienced Mr. Rizq Abdalhay Ahmad, chief restorer for Islamic Antiquities of the SCA in Dakhla again was charged with the day-to-day management and coordination of the restoration and reconstruction. Especially his knowledge about traditional expertise and whether and/or where it still exists continues to be invaluable to the project.

The supervision on behalf of the SCA was entrusted to the supervising inspector Mrs Affaf Saad Hussayn. The support of Mr. Hamdi `Uthman, director Coptic and Islamic Antiquities of the SCA for West Dakhla, Mr. Kamil Bayyumi, director Coptic and Islamic Antiquities of the SCA for East Dakhla and Mr. Magdi Mohamed Abdallah, inspector for al-Qasr of the SCA must also be mentioned. As always, the active interest and support of the director Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of the SCA in the New Valley, Mr. Ahmad Salim is gratefully acknowledged.

The QDP owes much gratitude to the various people mentioned in this report. Their dedication, especially that of the local collaborators of the team, has made also this phase of the restoration and reconstruction of mud brick houses in al-Qasr a success, which, I hope, will eventually lead to the reconstruction of this unique historical little town.

Groningen, 29 June 2005
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