research and restoration
season 2013
Report on research and restoration activities
Season 2013

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

In its twelfth season, the activities of the Qasr Dakhleh Project (QDP) focused especially on the continuation of the excavation of the area northeast of the ruined old mosque (trench 7). Also a new trench was opened due west of the ancient well.

There were no administrative or security delays and after a preparatory week the field season could begin on February 5th and lasted till March 5th.

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As in the previous seasons, the activities of the 2013 season of the QDP were subdivided into the two distinct, but not completely separate parts of research and restoration/reconstruction.

Research.

The 2013 season of the QDP lasted from January 29th till March 12th. Verena Leemhuis-Obrecht continued the re-photographing of the documents found in previous seasons. Manfred Woidich continued his linguistic studies.

The archaeological field season at al-Qasr began on February 6th and finished on February 28th. The excavations, as well as the study and documentation of the finds were executed by and under the direction of the archaeologists Paul Kucera and Maia Matkowski. Their report on the archaeological field activities and investigations is as follows:

Excavations north of the ancient mosque to the east of the Shihabiyya quarter.

Trench 7

In 2013, the first priority of the field season was to continue the excavation of Trench 7, in the area of the old mosque east of the Shihabiyya quarter. The trench 7, which was left incomplete in February of 2012, is located in the northeast area of the old mosque
This trench, measuring 4 to 7 m from north to south and 7 to 8 m from east to west, is adjacent to the northern wall of the mosque in the south, borders a crudely-built enclosure wall in the east, which is oriented north-south and in the north part of the trench borders on the walls of a modern house (House 1) and the adjacent rooms 1 and 2 thereof.

**Fig. 1:** End of excavation in 2012

**Fig. 2:** Master plan of Trench 7 at the end of excavation in 2012
The excavation conducted in 2012 revealed at least three phases of building activity in the area north of the old mosque. The earliest building activity and the most important one was related to the Roman castrum, of which a small section of the west façade of the east perimeter wall could be identified (unit 22) in the north-eastern corner of the trench. The second phase of activity identified in the Trench 7 took place in the Islamic period with the discovery of an east/west segment of a mud brick wall (unit 24), which is the continuation of the foundation of the southern wall of room 2. This wall was identified as a remnant of an Islamic structure which probably related to the old mosque. The last building activity in this area belongs to the modern or contemporary period identified by the remains of a circular structure (unit 2 and 7) that was built directly up on the mud bricks which constitute the Roman wall (unit 22). The poor state of conservation of this circular structure however makes it impossible to know its exact function.

During the 2013 excavation significant new information came to light concerning the Roman wall, particularly its foundation (Fig. 3-7). At the north end of the trench a closer inspection of the unit 27 showed this to be a compacted packing fill connected with the foundation of the Roman wall. The ceramic material obtained from this deposit is of a late Roman date, identified tentatively as belonging to the second and third century periods CE. It is expected that a future study of this material will confirm this dating and furthermore prove that the castrum was constructed towards the end of the third century as earlier hypothesised. Below this packing fill another well-stratified level (unit 41) containing similar ceramics was encountered. Unit 41 formed an initial packing layer that included stone pieces embedded in compacted mud. This was situated directly on backfill material which was composed of the natural tafl. The re-deposited tafl (unit 44) was then excavated and shown to have covered an 80cm wide foundation step upon which the Roman wall (unit 22) was built. The same line of brick coursing was exposed further to the south and across the east end of the trench. Traces of this foundation were previously identified as compacted mud (unit 38), but the excavation of fill deposits (units 39 and 40) in this area revealed its brick coursing and nature. As a result, a substantial length of the castrum’s foundation became apparent. It is clear that this part of the castrum’s foundation and east wall was adversely affected by erasure, pitting and truncation. In the southeast corner of the trench it had been cut to allow for the stone foundation of the mosque (unit 36) and its subsequent construction.
Fig. 3: Master plan of Trench 7 at the end of excavation in 2013

Fig. 4: General view of pit 40 which was cut into the Roman wall
Fig. 5: General view of the foundation step (unit 38) of the Roman wall, disturbed by the cut of the pits 39 and 40 and by the construction of the Islamic wall 24

Fig. 6: View of the test pit into the packing fill 52 for the foundation step 38 of the Roman wall
Fig. 7: East-West section of Trench 7 with the restitution of the Roman wall
A small sondage was made into the tafl backfill (unit 43) against the Roman foundation (unit 38) in the central area and this revealed its height to be 0.70 m in this place. This line of the foundation, taken together with the probable east façade of the east perimeter wall that is visible to the east of Trench 7 was measured to 5.2m. Allowing for an external foundation step on this side, the full width of the foundation would equate to 6m and this is consistent with the width of the castrum’s foundation as seen southwest of the mosque. The width of the perimeter wall superstructure may then be calculated as approximately 4.4m. These measurements and the stepped foundation feature finds a parallel in the Roman fort at al-Dayr in Kharga Oasis, bringing further comparable evidence of a similar structure at al-Qasr (Fig. 8 - 12).

Fig. 8: Master plan of the old mosque and restitution of the Roman castrum perimeter wall with probable position of circular towers depicted
Fig. 9: Master plan of Trench 7 and restitution of the Roman wall

Fig. 10: Restitution of the Roman castrum shown in relation to the old mosque
Fig. 11: Roman castrum at al-Dayr in Kharga
Fig. 12: Aerial view of al-Qasr with the restitution of the Roman castrum overlaid (satellite imagery from Google Earth)

Like the castrum, the foundation of the mosque was set into the *tafl* and its pit (unit 34-55) was then backfilled with the excavated clay material mixed with loose sand, fragment of mud bricks and remains of plants (Fig. 3,4,13). The pit for the foundation of the north mosque wall was clearly visible and the width was not more than 0,45 m with a depth ranging between 0,20 and 0,50 m. In the south-eastern corner of the trench, the mud bricks from the step of foundation (unit 38) of the Roman wall had been cut by the foundation pit of the north mosque wall (unit 55). In this area, the foundation pit is larger than in the south-western area of the trench: the width was 0,60 m with a depth of 0,65 m. We can suppose that when the old mosque was built, probably during the late Islamic period, the elevation of the façade of the Roman wall was already heavily diminished yet still visible at its foundation base. Hence the
mosque builders had to dig a larger foundation pit at this place to allow for the construction of the north-east corner of the old mosque.

Below the south wall of Room 2 (unit 58), a deep brick coursing (unit 48) and stone foundations (unit 49) were found on the same alignment and it is likely that this construction took place at a similar time to the mosque (Fig. 14 -16). These features are clearly visible in the east section profile of the trench. In elevation we can see that the south wall of room 2 is completely truncated and below this the remains of the brick coursing 48 and stone foundation 49 continue the line of the above structure. It’s seems that the wall 58, still preserved in elevation, originally belonged to a building of the late Islamic period but during the modern era it was then used as the south façade of the room 2, which was built against the House 1. This is indicated by the deeper part of the wall still conserved between 0,40 and 1,76 m in width and 0,96 m height and which had been used as a support for the circular modern wall foundation (unit 7). Eleven lines of brick coursing are visible (0,96 m wide) which sit directly upon 5 courses of stone foundation (0,80 m wide).
Fig. 14: West-East section of the late Islamic wall 58, shown in relation to the northeast part of trench 7.
Fig. 15: East-West section with the deeper late Islamic wall (Unit 48-49) showing which is part of the south wall 58 of room 2

Fig. 16: Late Islamic wall 58 sitting on the top of the Roman wall brick coursing
It is also relatively clear in the east section profile of the trench that portions of the Roman wall had already been greatly erased by this time and heavily ruined by pits that were likely dug in the Islamic period (Fig. 17-19).

Fig. 17: East section of Trench 7 in between the north wall of the mosque and the south Islamic wall 58

Fig. 18: General view of the East section in between the north wall of the mosque and the south Islamic wall 58
The laying of the foundation for the late Islamic building that is denoted by the south wall of the room 2 (wall 58) probably contributed to the destruction of the Roman wall. During the Islamic period, the mud bricks which formed the foundation step (unit 38) of the Roman wall were cut by 2 large pits (unit 39: 0,70 m width; 1,50 m length and 0,10 to 0,40 m depth; unit 40:1,40 m width, 2,70 m length and 0,35 to 0,70 m depth), (Fig. 3 and 4). The pits were filled with loose sand, compacted fragments of light brown mud bricks, of reddish bricks also, of stones and of small concentrated pockets of ash. Overall they were not very disturbed contexts. The ceramic contained within this backfill was clearly identified as material dating from the Islamic period, although there were also some pieces from the late Roman period. It is difficult to known the precise function of these pits but we can easily suppose that there were used during the construction of the Islamic building. They may have served as pits for the preparation of the mud mortar/plaster. We are able to observe the present day workmen of al-Qasr create and use such pits for this purpose. At the bottom of the pit 40 a highly compacted level of mud mixed with fragments of the natural red tafl (unit 42) was identified. This layer could possibly be the remains of an activity such as the preparation of mud mortar/plaster in the pit 40 or it could be the level of preparation for the foundation of the Roman wall.
During the season of 2013, the continuation of the excavation in Trench 7 to the northeast of the old mosque permitted the completion of the documentation of the mud-brick enclosure of the Roman castrum in this area. Additionally, we were able to hypothesize and draft a likely restitution of the full plan of the structure (Fig. 10-12), informed by the plan of al-Dayr in Kharga. The excavation of this area northeast of the old mosque also permitted us to understand better the different phases of building activity from the Roman period to the modern period. We could observe and document that the Islamic building activity contributed to the destruction of the Roman wall, which was cut by new constructions (Islamic building and old mosque in this part of the trench). Also, as in all of al-Qasr we could observe that the newest constructions reused older walls and configurations of walls that date to the late Islamic or Ottoman period. Where walls still preserved a significant elevation they were often included structurally into the new building (such as the modern room 2 with the late Islamic wall 58).

Excavations west of the ancient mosque to the east of the Shihabiyya quarter.

Trench 8

The opening of trench 8, west of the old mosque permitted new information about the human occupation activity during the late Roman period as well as the Islamic period.

This new trench was opened during the course of the season. It is positioned just west of the former well in a sloped, low-elevated area of the site. This side of the well was once highly developed with numerous multi-story structures built in a similar style to those found throughout much of al-Qasr (Fig. 20). Most of these buildings are now in a ruinous state, many of which have only partial two-story walls remaining from their original composition. The nature of structural collapse and site deflation in this area has resulted in very steep slopes of compacted rubble. The trench was laid out in a relatively open space away from precarious wall remains.
Trench 8 measured 6m north-south by 4m east-west and was placed along a mud brick wall (Unit 8), which could be traced upon the surface, oriented north-south. The area of the trench encompassed an earlier test trench (approximately 1.5 x 1m) that was excavated by Fred Leemhuis, but was abandoned soon after it was begun due to very dense rubble. The aim of our excavation in 2013 was to clear beyond the rubble in an attempt to reach well-stratified early Islamic period occupational levels that could provide information about the post-Roman/Byzantine period. We were encouraged by the fact that our Egyptian colleagues in the SCA Dakhla Inspectorate had encountered such levels nearby during a previous excavation. Although the focus of the QDP to date has centred mainly on the late Roman occupation of the site, this following period has raised many questions that require investigation and which are considered equally important to our knowledge. In terms of cultural material, the timeframe between the late Roman/Byzantine and Ottoman periods is poorly represented within archaeological contexts at the site. Nonetheless, our previous archaeological investigations have unearthed some ceramic material that can be dated up to the eighth and ninth centuries CE. We are also informed by the textual accounts of early Arab geographers and historians who indicated that al-Qasr was an important settlement from at least the eleventh century CE, and prior to this time it was a centre...
of the Lawata Berbers. Hence, the site holds much potential to shed light on a period in the oasis, which is little understood.

Before the excavation actually began, a fragment of a decorated temple block (M5-2/8/1) was found upon the surface (Fig. 21). Undoubtedly it originated from Amhida. The block bears a sunken relief of stars and the top of a column of hieroglyphs beneath. According to our colleague, Prof. Olaf Kaper, it contains titles of a goddess. Presumably the block was used in a structure, as is the case with most decorated blocks found at al-Qasr, and that this structure had collapsed. The entire trench area was covered in building rubble, except for a crude wall (Unit 10) exposed at the north end. This wall is heavily eroded and appears to sit upon a light grey brick coursing (Unit 9) possibly a platform. The rubble across the trench consisted primarily of mud bricks, fragments of bricks and stones. It had been deposited in several layers (Units 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), which were distinguished by differences in the amount of sand content, varying degrees of brick decomposition and variations of overall density and compactness. Up to approximately 1.5m of rubble was excavated before a line of stone foundation (Unit 11) (Figs 22–24) and more of the light grey brick coursing (Unit 9) were encountered below the wall bordering the west end of the trench (Unit 8). The wall feature labelled Unit 8 (ca. 70cm height preserved) was built with brownish-red bricks (24 x 12 x 7cm in size) and laid directly upon the brick coursing of Unit 9. This brick coursing feature (45–65cm height preserved) was built with light greyish-brown bricks (possibly 20 x 10 x 5cm or 24 x 12 x 7cm in size) which on the whole appears as one solid mud brick mass. The brick coursing may have been a platform that was laid directly upon the stone foundation labelled Unit 11. This foundation (35–60cm height preserved) consists of irregular-shaped sandstone blocks laid in 2–3 courses. It is not yet known what type of structure these features were once part of; however, it is clear that they extend beyond the confines of the
trench and in all likelihood connect with other walls. In viewing the different levels of buildings situated higher up to the west of the trench, it is conceivable that this is one of, and indeed the lowest of, at least three stone foundation lines. Overall, this gives the impression of a terraced building arrangement, which probably reached and aligned with the west circuit wall of the Roman castrum.

Fig. 22: view of Trench 8 showing the west section and Units 8, 9 and 11

Fig. 23: top plan of Trench 8
The ceramic material collected from the rubble deposit across the trench as well as from parts of the brick coursing is broadly dated, though predominately Islamic, including glazed wares of Mamluk, Ayyubid and possibly Fatimid periods. A small portion of the material is certainly late Roman in date. All of this ceramic awaits further analysis for more precise identification of forms and dates, yet it should be noted that none of this material derives from a secure context. Apart from pottery, the trench yielded much glass, fragments of glass bracelets, metal, jewellery items, wood, ceramic objects, animal bones, leather and textiles. Additionally, two ostraka were found in the trench and are of particular interest to our study of the site. The first–highly probable– ostrakon (M5-2/8/2) came from Unit 3 approximately 60cm below the surface and is quite intriguing (Figs 25–26).
The ceramic piece itself is a late Roman form (K ware, datable from the fourth century CE), which was originally decorated with an incised motif. Over the top of this motif another design, which includes two recognisable Tifinag characters, was added in ink. The letter ‘z’ (Tuareg ‘yazh’) and a labialisation marker are clearly visible. The find holds much interest as it is known that before the arrival of Islam in Dakhla, the Lawata Berbers occupied the region and al-Qasr. They were a group of people who migrated through parts of Libya in late antiquity and potentially this ostrakon could provide a link with the Lawata. It is also tempting to speculate that it could even be connected with a Libyco-Berber script, yet the piece requires much more scrutiny and further examination.

The other find of interest came from Unit 7, at approximately 1m below the surface. It is an Arabic ostrakon (M5-2/8/5) mentioning an ‘abu Omar’ and probably dates to the Ottoman period (Fig. 27). This piece also awaits further examination. Unfortunately both artefacts derive from disturbed, rubble deposits and therefore cannot be related to an occupational level.

Due to time constraints, two small sondages were made along the stone foundation (Unit 11) in order to explore the deposits associated with this feature, its base level and also ascertain the depth of the natural tafl level (Figs 23–24). Sondage A measured 1.6 x 1.6m and was placed in the northwest corner of the trench and against a buttress (1.2 x 0.55m), which forms part of Units 11 and 9. Sondage B measured 2 x 1m and was placed on the south side of the first sondage and along Unit 11. Several deposits were excavated within the sondage areas: a concentration of brick rubble (Unit 12) in A and B, a small ash pocket (Unit 13) in A, a compacted mud layer (Unit 14) in A and exposed in B, sand and rubble deposit (Unit 15) in B, and a 1–2cm thick mud plaster layer (Unit 16) in A. Both sondage excavations produced Islamic ceramics, including a
fragment of a glazed lamp of possible Ayyubid date and fragments of smoking pipes, which may be of Mamluk or Ottoman date. The ceramic material also contained chaff-rich fabrics, some decorated wares and some non-typical Islamic forms, which all require further examination. As some of these deposits were identified as well-stratified units they may provide valuable dating evidence for the construction and use of the stone foundation. The natural tafl (Unit 17) level was reached below the thin mud plaster layer (Unit 16) in Sondage A. This mud plaster was also detected beneath the bottom stone coursing of Unit 11, revealing it to be a preparation layer for the construction of the foundation. The level of the natural tafl was measured at approximately 1.15m below the surface of the trench.

Temple block (M5-2/0/2)
A second decorated temple block was discovered during the field season. It was spotted by chance within a foundation level of a ruined wall not very far from Trench 8 (Fig. 28). The block was sitting upside down and had been used either as a step or a building stone for the now ruined wall. In consultation with and at the request of the antiquities Inspector, it was decided to document the stone as it lay in situ (Figs 29–31) before removing it for safe-keeping in storage. There was a concern that the block may be robbed given that it was exposed to the elements with its decoration clearly visible and burying the block was deemed insufficient to protect it from this possibility. The block bears the lower legs of two figures with a staff associated with one of the figures (Fig. 30). It is believed to also have originated from Amhida and according to Prof. Olaf Kaper, the block belongs to a relief depicting a king and a god facing each other.

Fig. 28: general view of Trench 8 and location of the temple block M5-2/0/2
Fig. 29a–b: detail of the temple block M5-2/0/2 *in situ*

Fig. 30: top plan showing the position of the temple block M5-2/0/2

Fig. 31: temple block M5-2/0/2
Restoration and reconstruction.

Conservation, restoration and reconstruction of the Shihabiyya quarter and surroundings.

As in the previous season still no decision was taken by the relevant authorities about the use of the five restored and/or reconstructed houses of the south-western part of the Shihabiyya quarter. So, again we had to persist in the decision not to continue with restoration and reconstruction work in al-Qasr as long as such a decision has not been taken. As these houses always have been places to live in, they should preferably be used for that function again. They are fit to be used as such, because in accordance with the decision of the Permanent Committee of 18 September 2008 electrical wiring and water pipes and sewage drains have been installed. But whatever function they get, it is important to note that if these houses have no viable function and are not used in a sensible way, they will most probably slowly fall to pieces again and the entire restoration will have been in vain. Maintenance of these unique houses should be performed regularly, so that major maintenance problems can be avoided. Inhabitants of such houses are well placed to cope with small maintenance issues before they become big. In the 2013 season the QDP has started to perform this neglected maintenance task.
Most of the maintenance concerned small issues. In many places small cracks had appeared. This is a natural phenomenon in new mud brick structures, because the settling of the mud brick takes time. These cracks and fissures were mended in the traditional way (Fig. 32). Once their mud is dry they will be plastered over.

A serious problem was encountered concerning the southern wall of the annex to Bayt al-Qurashi (aBQur), which was beginning to bulge out. It was decided to buttress this wall with a solid beam at the height of the first floor of aBQur6 (Fig. 33).

As in the previous season we were prevented from doing maintenance work in Bayt al-Qurashi by Mr. Ahmad Salim, the general director for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of the SCA in the New Valley. It appears that he is still renting the house and repeated requests, including from Mr. Mohammed Abd al-Rasul, General Director for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of Middle Egypt, and Mr. Kamil Bayyumi, director for Coptic and Islamic Antiquities of the SCA for West Dakhla, to give the QDP access to Bayt al-Qurashi for maintenance were not successful. This is a very regrettable and worrisome situation and the more bewildering, because the QDP has reconstructed the
totally ruined Bayt al-Qurashi according to the decisions of the Permanent Committee and, as far as is known, ownership has not been officially established.

Apart from maintenance work there is one task that has not been completed. The plastering of the outside of some of the restored houses is not yet completed. This season the plastering of the walls of the first floor's open courtyard of Bayt Abu Yahya was completed (Fig. 35).

Fig. 34: Plastering of the first floor's open courtyard of Bayt Abu Yahya.
In the 2012 season, which lasted from 29 January till 12 March, the QDP team consisted of Dr. Paul Kucera (5 February - 7 March), Mrs. Verena Leemhuis-Obrecht (20 February – 12 March), Dr. Frederik Leemhuis (29 January – 12 March), Mrs. Maia Matkowski MA (5 February - 5 March) and Prof. Dr. Manfred Woidich (20 February – 2 March).

The excavation and maintenance activities were executed with the help of and in close cooperation with the local collaborators of the QDP-team. These local collaborators consisted in 2013 of some 20 workmen from al-Qasr and surroundings. Many of those have worked with the project for many seasons and have become very experienced. This team was overseen by Mr. `Abd-al-Ghaffar Mohammed and Mr. Mohammed Mahdi Sabir, who both have been with the project for a long time and whose experience has been crucial. The practical help and cooperation of both Mr. Rizq Abdalhay Ahmad and Mr. Yasir Sayyid Ali is gratefully acknowledged.

The supervising inspector of the SCA was Mr. Ihab Yusri Mahmud. We gratefully acknowledge his collaboration in a spirit of good cooperation. Mrs. Wafaa’ Mebarez Abd-al-Karim was assigned as a restorer. The QDP expresses its gratitude for the encouragement and assistance of Mr. Kamil Bayyumi, director for Coptic and Islamic Antiquities of the SCA for West Dakhla. The involvement of the general director for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of the SCA in the New Valley, Mr. Ahmad Salim, is duly recognised.

The advice and help of Mr. Mohammed Salah, Director of Restoration of the SCA for Middle Egypt was gratefully accepted. As in previous years the QDP is greatly indebted to Mr. Mohammed Abd al-Rasul, General Director for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities of the SCA for Middle Egypt, for his advice, interest and help in the project.

Groningen, 25 September 2013

Fred Leemhuis
Field director QDP