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M O N O G R A P H S

Papers from the 1st Workshop
Archaeology in Africa
Potentials and perspectives on laboratory
& fieldwork research
Edited by
Savino di Lernia and Marina Gallinaro

Arid Zone Archaeology, Monographs

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S. di Lernia, E.B. Ichumbaki, D. A. Iurino, M. Gallinaro, M. Guirguis, E. Janulardo,
L.-I. Manfredi, G. Manzi, F. T. Masao, A. Mastino, S. Menconero, A.M. Mercuri, P. Mitchell,
J. Moggi Cecchi, S. Ribichini, I. Rossetti, C. Rossi, N. Santopuoli, S. Sarmati, S. Tusat

with foreword by S. di Lernia



All'Insegna del Giglio

*This book is dedicated to Sebastiano Tusa,
colleague and friend*

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9. Filling the gaps: towards a comprehensive list of archaeological sites in the Kharga Oasis, Egypt's Western Desert

Corinna Rossi, Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed

Abstract. In comparison with the well-established and long-running archaeological excavations along the Nile Valley, the study of the antiquities located in the Western Desert oases dates to relatively recent times. In the Kharga Oasis, in particular, beside a number of projects focusing on specific archaeological sites, two large-scale survey projects were launched in the last twenty years with the aim to document the existence and position of hundreds of other archaeological sites of all sizes, that lie scattered around. As of today, only a small number of sites remain totally undocumented, but many of them are in immediate danger of being destroyed by the modern agricultural expansion. This article provides a first, short description of each of them, hoping that future investigations will reveal further, precious information.

Key Words. Egypt; Western Desert; Kharga Oasis; archaeology; survey; endangered sites.

C.R. Politecnico di Milano, Italy
corinna.rossi@polimi.it

M.I.A. Ministry of the Antiquities, Kharga Inspectorate, Egypt,
Princemoh2012@gmail.com

Authors' contribution. Corinna Rossi (Director of the Italian Mission to Umm al-Dabab) provided the general framework on the oasis and on the previous archaeological work that was conducted there; Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed (General Manager of the Kharga Antiquities) collected and provided the information on the sites that have never been surveyed.

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1. Introduction: the Kharga Oasis

The Kharga Oasis is the southernmost of the five large oases that punctuate Egypt's Western Desert (Fig. 9.1). It covers an elongated area over 160 km long in a north-south direction, and about 30 in an east-west direction; its northern outline is marked by a high escarpment that borders the depression also along its entire eastern side, whereas the western and southern limits of the depression are less defined in physical terms.

In prehistory a large lake covered most of the oasis' depression; the progressive reduction and subdivisions of this initial lake shaped the human occupation of the area, and left abundant physical traces that are still clearly visible in the modern desert

landscape (Beadnell 1909: 114-6). Historically, the oasis functioned as a major desert crossroad along the network of caravan routes that crossed the Western Desert and allowed travellers to avoid the Nile Valley (Rossi 2013; Rossi and Ikram 2013).

The oasis' depression contains a number of major archaeological sites, but also a substantial scatter of less-visible sites, ranging from prehistoric sites, to ancient agricultural installations to the elusive remains of the caravan routes themselves. Some of the major and minor sites have been the object of specific studies, but a comprehensive view of the local antiquities is still difficult to grasp. The aim of this article is to contribute to the construction of a global understanding of the archaeology of the Kharga Oasis, by offering some initial information on a number of sites that have never been documented before.

2. An overview of the archaeological studies on the Kharga Oasis

2.1 Projects on specific sites

The antiquities of the Kharga Oasis were noted by early travelers and explorers starting from Frédéric Cailliaud (1821) and Bernardino Drovetti (1822). Between the very end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century, John Ball and Hugh Beadnell worked in Kharga for the Geological Survey of Egypt and left important descriptions of the local topography, geology and water systems (Ball 1900; Beadnell 1909).

The first major archaeological investigation of the Kharga Oasis was carried out by the Metropolitan Museum of Arts from 1909 onwards, with a break due to World War I, and focussed on the northern area, in particular on the Temple of Hibis and Bagawat (Winlock 1938-41). In the 1930s and 1940s, the Egyptian Egyptologist Ahmed Fakhri started a systematic investigation of the Western Desert oases, and documented the existence of a number of other sites scattered around the central core of the Kharga Oasis (Fakhry 1973, 1974). The late 1970s saw the beginning of a wave of

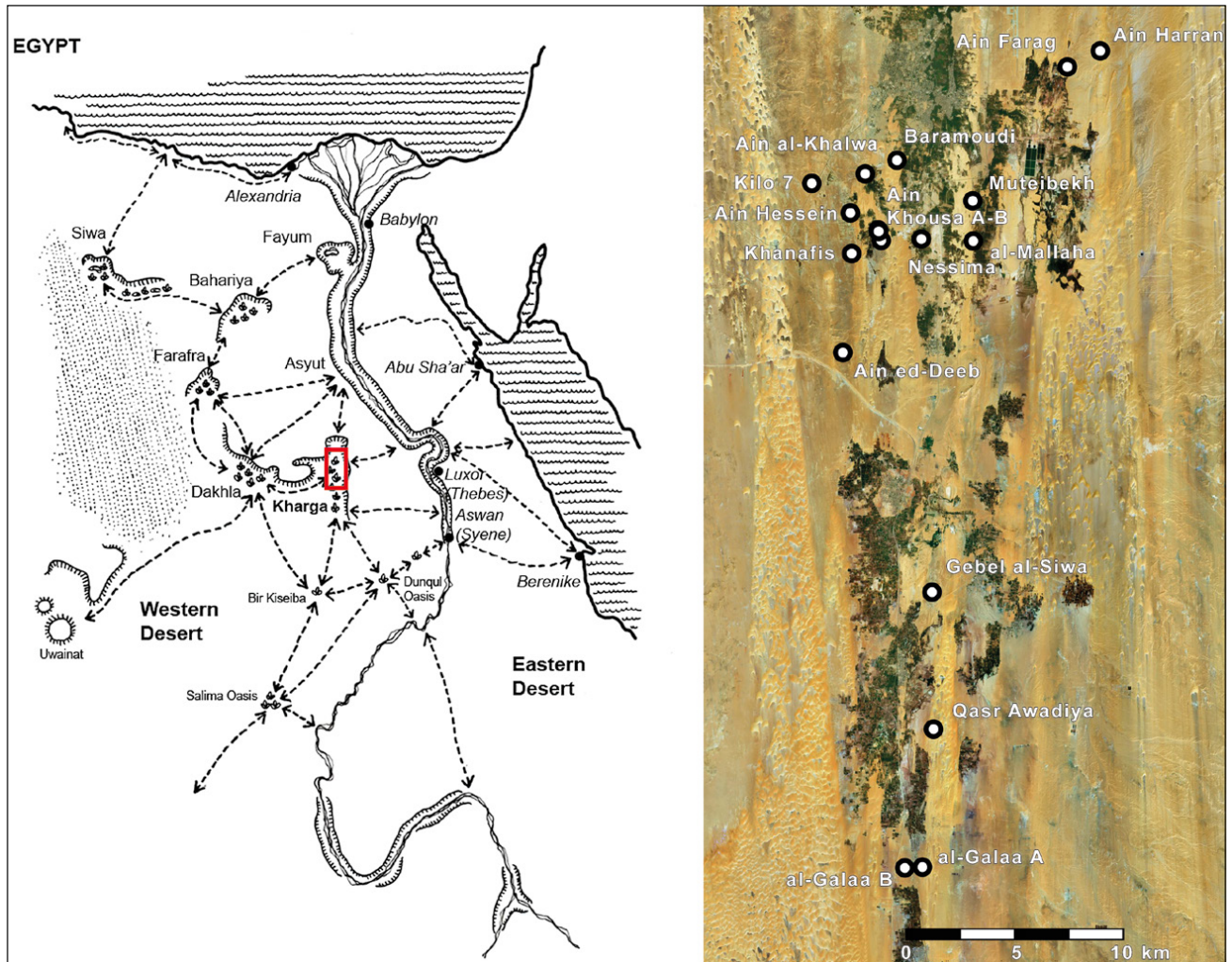


Fig. 9.1 – Map of Egypt showing the position of the Kharga Oasis, to the left, and satellite image of the central portion of the oasis showing the position of the sites described in this article to the right (C. Rossi).

large-scale, modern archaeological projects: Dush (Reddé *et al.* 2004), the Temple of Hibis (Cruz-Urbe 1988, 1995), Deir al-Mounira (Dunand and Lichtenberg 2008; Tallet *et al.* 2013), accompanied by sporadic investigations focussing on other sites; a first global summary of all these investigations was pieced together by Guy Wagner (1987) in his *Les oasis d'Égypte*. The study of the prehistoric remains of the Kharga Oasis occupies an important position and yielded significant results over the decades (Caton-Thompson 1952; Briois *et al.* 2012).

A full bibliography on the early travelers and explorers and on

the archaeological projects that have been carried out in the Kharga Oasis can be found in Rossi and Ikram (2018, Chapter I.2).

2.2 Large-scale survey projects

The entire depression is punctuated by a large number of archaeological sites of all sizes. Studying in detail some major sites represented a fundamental starting point to attract the attention of the academic community on this area, but it was clear that only a small portion of the local antiquities had received some attention. This triggered, around year 2000, the birth of two major

survey projects, aiming at documenting all the visible antiquities of the oasis: the North Kharga Oasis Survey (NKOS) acquired the concession to survey the entire portion of the Kharga depression north of Kharga Town, whilst the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) acquired the entire southern portion.

NKOS worked from 2001 to 2007 and documented major and minor sites found in the northern area; the results have been published in a series of preliminary reports, and finally in a monograph (Rossi and Ikram 2018). In the larger southern portion of the oasis, the IFAO team worked at an overall survey of the antiquities from 2000 until 2014. Most of the work was carried out in the Dush area, but in the last few years the survey moved to the area around Kharga Town; the team documented a total of 524 sites. The untimely death of Michel Wuttmann interrupted the survey work and the publication of the information collected until then, which are however safely stored in a number of IFAO internal reports (e.g. Wuttmann *et al.* 2004 and 2006, copies of which are stored at the Kharga Inspectorate).

As of today, a relatively small number of sites, mainly scattered around Kharga Town and belonging to the IFAO concession, remain totally undocumented (Fig. 9.1). This contribution aims at presenting the evidence collected on these sites over the years by the Inspectorate of the Kharga Antiquities, consisting on a few descriptive notes and some images. Future, more detailed investigations carried out by IFAO and the Inspectorate will most probably identify a larger number of prehistoric sites and certainly add further valuable information on the Roman sites listed below.

The vast extent of the oasis and the large number of archaeological sites that lie scattered in the whole depression are not matched by sufficient resources, and therefore only a few major archaeological sites are permanently monitored by dedicated *ghaffirs* (custodians). About 15-10 years ago the local antiquities suffered a wave of attacks with heavy vehicles, that left several sites heavily damaged (cf. Rossi and Ikram 2018: 211 and 217, see also below). Currently the Kharga Inspectorate regularly organises tours of all the unprotected sites, carried out by *ghaffirs*, inspectors and policemen. This certainly slowed down the destruction, but cannot represent a final solution and, moreover, can do very little against the growing pressure of land-reclaiming. In the last few years, modern cultivations are expanding in all directions, also towards and around the archaeological sites that lie close to the inhabited part of the oasis, and that are starting to suffer in a substantial and unprecedented way. Some of them, like Ain Gib, Sumayra, Watermelon Settlement, Qasr al-Nessima, Mohamed Tuleib and most of the sites listed below might disappear within

a few years. This impending danger triggered the compilation of this article: it seemed useful to fill the existing gaps in the information which is available to the scientific community by publishing these data, even if partial and non-exhaustive.

The approximate position of the sites listed below is marked in Fig. 1; in some cases, the notes provide the distance of the site, as the crow flies, from the junction of the road that, from Kharga Town, leads to Dakhla.

All the notes, observations and images listed below belong to the Kharga Inspectorate and were collected by the Chief Inspector Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed and his staff in the last couple of years; the date-range for each site was provided by the local inspectors on the basis of the analysis of the ceramics retrieved on the surface.

3. List of unpublished sites

3.1 Sites located to the north-east of Kharga Town

Ain Farag

It is located about 7 km due east of the Kharga junction, just outside the modern patch of vegetation, to the south-east of the Kharga airport. It takes the name from its nearest water source. The site covers an area of about 300x150 m, and includes both a settlement made of mudbrick buildings and its associated cemetery. It appears to date to the Graeco-Roman Period.

Ain Harran

At a distance of 1.6 km north-east from Ain Farag (a total distance of 8,6 km from the Kharga Junction), lies the now isolated site of Ain Harran, also called the 'Spring of Mud'. It consists of a roundish hill, the surface of which is covered by prehistoric artefacts.

3.2 The cluster south of Kharga Town

Kilo 7

This site is located at the 7th kilometre of the road leading to the Dakhla Oasis. Its existence was noted only recently, thus representing the latest addition, in chronological order to the list of archaeological sites of the Kharga Oasis. It consists of a cemetery of rock-cut tombs dug in a small sandstone plateau, and appears to date to the Roman Period.

al-Khalwa

At 2.4 km east of Kilo 7 and 4.7 south of the Kharga Junction lies the area of al-Khalwa, located immediately to the west of a mod-



Fig. 9.2a – General view of the site of Ain Khalwa (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.2b – Archaeological mound dug up by looters, showing mudbrick structures and one burnt wall (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.3a – The central building on a stone basement resting over the flat mound of Ain Khousa (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.3b – The western side of the central building resting on a stone basement (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.3c – The interior of the central building (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).

ern patch of cultivated land. It consists of the remains a mudbrick settlement founded on a relatively high hill in comparison with the surrounding terrain (Fig. 9.2a; as Ain Hessein (see below), the ancient mound has been extensively excavated either by *sabbakh*-diggers or by particularly active thieves, to the point that it has now the appearance of a crater, open on one side. The exposed architectural remains are all made of mudbrick, and appear to include a rectangular building built on a sandstone basement. On one side of the central hollow dug into the mound, the internal face of the exposed mudbrick wall appears to have been burnt (Fig. 9.2b).

Qasr al-Baramoudy

Along the same east-north-east alignment, 1.5 km further east and 3.7 km south of the Kharga Junction, on relatively high ground and surrounded by high sand dunes, lie the substantial remains of Qasr al-Baramoudy, consisting of two areas. To the north lie the flattened remains of a gridded mudbrick settlement surrounding a central building; to the south, on lower ground, lie the remains of other structures and of ancient cultivations. The site includes also two pigeon towers, one located immediately to the south of the gridded settlement, and the other on lower ground. Whilst the latter corresponds to the common type of tower with a rectangular plan, the former consists of a central structure surrounded by a unique flower-shaped external structure, covered by half domes. The surface ceramics suggests a Roman date.

The site is briefly described in Rossi and Ikram (2018: 423-4), where also two pictures appear, one of the main building and one of the peculiar pigeon tower.

Ain Khousa

Just less than 2 km to the west of Qasr al-Nessima (Ghica 2012: 2017-21), 7.5 km to the south-south-west of the Kharga Junction, lies the site of Ain Khousa. Packed between two patches of vegetation and cultivations and a modern road, the site is made of two parts: to the north, the remains of a mudbrick settlement with a central building resting on a stone basement (Ain Khousa A, Fig. 9.3a); to the south, the remains of a vast cemetery, consisting of rock-cut tombs quarried along the sides of an elongated outcrop (Ain Khousa B). The ceramics suggests a Graeco-Roman date for this site.

The mudbrick building rises on top of a mound, covered by debris, mudbricks and ceramics. Its eastern side appears to have been heavily modified and reconstructed in recent times: new



Fig. 9.4a – The mudbrick remains at Khanafis (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.4b – The devastated remains of a large stone building, probably a temple (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).

walls were built by re-using old mudbricks, mud and reeds. The western half of the building, instead, appears to be original; it rested on top of a basement made of sandstone blocks (Fig. 9.3b), an arrangement that can also be seen at the Late Roman buildings of Qasr al-Sumayra, Qasr al-Lebekha and Qasr al-Nessima (Rossi and Ikram 2018: 67, 177 and 378). In this case, however, the blocks are more regular in terms of shape.

The western side of the building appears to have been about 20 m long; the east-west length, measured up to the modern wall, amounts to slightly less, about 18 m. Along the southern side, the original wall recedes and, immediately after this inward step, part of a mudbrick arch is visible, embedded in the masonry; the original wall then ceases there, and gives way to the modern re-use. The arch might correspond to the usual design of the gates of the northern forts, as they can be still seen at Qasr al-Gib, Qasr al-Sumayra, Qasr al-Lebekha and Umm al-Dabadib (Rossi and Ikram 2018: 446-9). The interior appears to have been occupied by several rooms, but the confused state of the remains makes a precise reconstruction extremely difficult (Fig. 9.3c).

Khanafis

On the other side of the patch of vegetation, at about 1 km west of Ain Khousa B and at a distance of 8 km south-south-west from the Kharga Junction, lies the vast site of Khanafis. It covers an area of over 1 square km, and consists of a combination of settlement, cemetery and ancient water systems.

The mudbrick settlement lies in the north-eastern portion and includes the depleted remains of a large sandstone temple, once plastered and painted white, accompanied by thick mudbrick structures (Fig. 9.4a). The building must have been ravaged by a heavy vehicle, as large stone blocks lie scattered around in a totally disorderly way (Fig. 9.4b); several blocks show emplacements for dovetails, sometimes still half-filled by plaster (Fig. 9.4c). Nothing can be currently said about the plan of this building, but it is interesting to note that plastered sandstone was used also to build the temples of Ain al-Tarakwa and the central building (perhaps also a temple, or an administrative building) of Watermelon Settlement, both located in the northern part of the oasis (Rossi and Ikram 2018: 102-3, 343). Both temples, Khanafis and Ain al-Tarakwa, were heavily damaged in the same period, the late '80s or early '90s.

The site also includes a large cemetery, dating to the Graeco-Roman Period, as well as a combination of springs and subterranean aqueducts (*qanawat* or *manawir*), that might date to different historical periods (cf., once more, the area of Ain al-



Fig. 9.4c – Detail of a stone block with dovetail emplacements and traces of plaster (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).

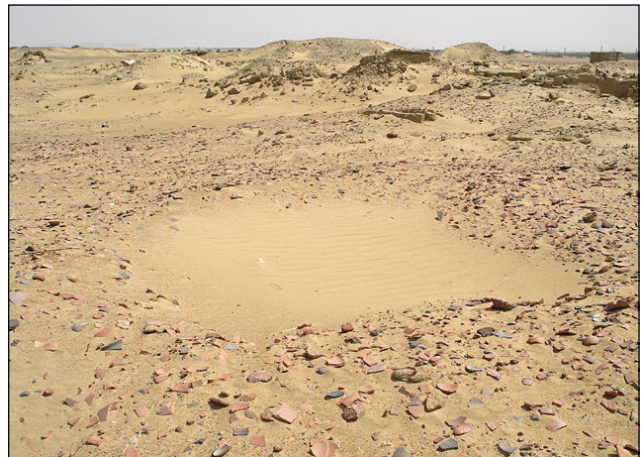


Fig. 9.4d – Ancient water source surrounded by potsherds near the temple (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.5a – View of the mound of Ain Hessein, located close to an inhabited area (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.5b – The interior of the mound of Ain Hessein exposed by looters by means of a heavy vehicle (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).

Tarakwa, Rossi and Ikram 2018: chapter II.8). Three major springs or wells are especially visible: one in the south, surrounded by a parabolic wall open to the south, from where a large canal winds its way towards the plain; a huge one in the north, surrounded by enormous spoil heaps; and a smaller to the east. A large depression surrounded by potsherds is visible near the temple (Fig. 9.4d).

Ain Hessein

Less than 2 km due north of fino qui Khanafis, at a distance of 6.7 km south-south-west of the Kharga Junction, lie the substantial remains of Ain Hessein, consisting of a large mound engulfed by sand (Fig. 9.5a). The mound contains the remains of a mudbrick settlement, perhaps a *tell* that developed over the centuries, surrounded by a thick scatter of ceramics, especially substantial to the west. The site has been ravaged, also with the help of heavy vehicles: the pottery mound to the west has been flattened and turned into a track leading to the mound, that has been burst open on the north side; a deep track, clearly bearing the marks of a caterpillar, leads into the core of the mound, that has been emptied to reveal the presence of tall, mudbrick buildings, covered by reddish plaster (Fig. 9.5b).

A cemetery of rock-cut tombs lies nearby, and lines of underground aqueducts crisscross the area. The ceramic suggests that this site was occupied from the Graeco-Roman to the Coptic Period.

Muteibakh

The area of Muteibakh is located at a distance of 6 km south-south-east from the Kharga Junction, along the eastern border of a thick patch of sand that interrupts the modern cultivation, to the east of the main road heading south. The archaeological remains are engulfed by a thick layer of sand and include a number of mudbrick buildings (Fig. 9.6a) and at least one large well or spring; some buildings have been exposed by looters (Fig. 9.6b). The ceramic suggests a Graeco-Roman date for this settlement. The site is briefly mentioned in Rossi and Ikram (2018: 422).

Al-Mallaha

At a distance of 1.8 km south of Muteibakh (at 8 km south-south-east of the Kharga Junction), along the same edge of the patch of sand, lie the remains of the cemetery of al-Mallaha, consisting of a group of rock-cut tombs carved horizontally in a sandstone outcrop at a height of over 50 meters above the surrounding

land. The ceramic suggests that the site dates back to the Greco-Roman Period.

The site is briefly mentioned in Rossi and Ikram (2018: 422).

Ain ed-Deeb

Immediately to the west of the green patch of Ginah, beyond a thick chain of dunes, lies the area of Ain ed-Deeb, at a distance of 13 km in a south-south-west direction from the Kharga Junction. It covers an area of over 1 square km, dotted by ancient springs or wells. It contains the ruins of a large mudbrick settlement dating back to the Greek-Roman era, engulfed by sand. Its associated cemetery consists of rock-cut tombs quarried in the sandstone outcrop that borders the northern area of the formerly inhabited area.

3.3 Southern sites

Gebel Al-Siwa

This vast archaeological area is located at a distance of 21 km due south of the Kharga Junction. It corresponds to a substantial, elongated hill about 3 km long in a north-south direction, and about 1 km wide. The currently barren area is surrounded by green patches of vegetation and cultivations and is flanked by the main asphalted road to the west and the area of Qasr al-Zayyan to the east. The site consists mainly of a large Roman cemetery, made of rock-cut tombs with shafts leading to the burial chambers. The remains of a mudbrick settlement can be seen in the western part of the site.

Qasr Awadiya

At a distance of 6.2 km south from Gebel al-Siwa, and thus at nearly 27 km from the Kharga Junction, lies Qasr Awadiya, in an area currently barren and half-covered by sand dunes, to the east of the modern village of Bulaq. The site consists of both a settlement and a cemetery, and appears to date to the Graeco-Roman Period.

al-Galaa

Along the same north-south line, 6 km further south, just before the modern area of Ezbet Algier, lies the site of al-Galaa, cut in two by the modern asphalt road. To the west lie the remains of a settlement (al-Galaa A), endangered by the encroaching agricultural expansion; the hills to the west contain instead a large Graeco-Roman cemetery made of tombs cut in the tafla and tombs consisting of shafts leading to the burial chambers (al-Galaa B). The area shows evidence of prehistoric activities as well.



Fig. 9.6a – The remains of Muteibakh engulfed by sand (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).



Fig. 9.6b – Buried structures of Muteibakh exposed by looters (Photo by the Kharga Inspectorate staff).

4. Summary and conclusions

From a first superficial observation of the sites listed above, a number of conclusions and suggestions for future directions of research can be suggested.

First of all, Ain Khalwa, Ain Khousa and Qasr al-Baramoudy represent yet three other examples of gridded settlements surrounding a central, sturdy building. This arrangement is typical of the Late Roman settlements documented in the northern and central part of the oasis (Umm al-Dabadib, Qasr al-Lebekha, Mohamed Tuleib and Qasr al-Nessima); curiously, so far no similar settlements have been located in the south of the oasis, not even at its southernmost end (cf. the description of Ain Mabrouka, KS009 in Wuttmann *et al.* 2004). Further studies on the architectural characteristics of these three undocumented sites located in the central part of Kharga, paired with a detailed analysis of the ceramics, may be able to refine the date of their occupation, and indicate for how long this type of 'fortified settlement' was built in the Kharga Oasis. The outline and layout of Ain Hessein and Muteibakh, engulfed by sand, are impossible to discern, and it is unclear whether or not they were surrounded by an enclosure wall.

Khanafis is definitely a very interesting site: once large and imposing, it is now apparently flattened and destroyed. However, future excavations might reveal important information on the substantial stone building, most probably a temple, that once stood there. The presence of a cemetery is currently not mirrored by the remains of a settlement, that must be hidden somewhere under the sand. The enormous size of the local wells/springs suggest a significant and long exploitation of the area, which is now barren and covered by sand.

As it happens elsewhere in the oasis, most of the sites listed above include both a settlement and its relating cemetery; it is the case of Ain Farag, Ain Khousa, Ain Hessein, Ain ed-Deeb, Gebel Siwa, Qasr al-Awadiya and al-Galaa. Kilo 7 and al-Mallaha only show the remains of cemeteries, whereas al-Khalwa and Muteibakh only show the remains of settlements. Apart from Kilo 7, quite isolated, all the other sites lie engulfed by sand and very close to modern patches of vegetation (cf. Fig. 9.2), that might well hide further archaeological remains.

As already mentioned above, a thorough study of the ceramics visible on the surface of these sites might narrow down the range of dates of their occupation, broadly indicated above as the 'Graeco-Roman Period'. The overall impression is that most of these sites were inhabited well into the Late Roman Period, but it will be interesting to understand if at least some of them can yield clear evidence of

early Ptolemaic activities, that are still unevenly documented in the northern part of the oasis (cf. Wagner 1987: 168-9; Wuttmann *et al.* 1998; Ibrahim *et al.* 2008; Rossi and Ikram 2018: 556-9).

In conclusion, we hope that the publication of these notes and of this initial set of information on these sites will trigger further interest for the antiquities of the Kharga Oasis, that is likely to yield a significant amount of fresh evidence on its exploitation in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Clearly in the last part of this period the Kharga Oasis boomed and reached an extent in terms of inhabited and cultivated areas that is being matched only now, thanks to the modern, large-scale investments that have been allocated by the Egyptian Government to the province of the Wadi al-Gedid. Just for this reason, many of these archaeological sites are now in danger of being either swallowed or heavily damaged by the expansion of the modern agricultural installations; we hope that this publication will not be the last record of these sites, but the first of a fresh series.

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