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It's hard to imagine that this is an oasis. Yet 1,600 years ago this area was buzzing with Roman soldiers and heavily-laden camel caravans coming and going from Kharga Oasis, as well as pausing here for water. Darb Ain Amur is the name of the caravan trail that heads west from Kharga towards the next major oasis: Dakhla, around four days’ walk. Positioned to guard the entrance to Darb Ain Amur, and collect the necessary taxes, was an imposing Roman fort, known today as Ain el-Lebekha. This photo was taken from the wall of the fort, looking down at the small settlement that housed the soldiers stationed there. Supported by ARCE, the North Kharga Oasis Survey has found that the settlement was made possible by underground aqueducts. These watered extensive fields of crops and made the surrounding area green and fertile.

THE NORTH KHARGA OASIS DARB AIN AMUR SURVEY

In the 16th century B.C., Thebes was in trouble. Both Lower and Middle Egypt were under the control of the Hyksos monarchy: foreigners who had settled first in the Delta and then slowly extended their influence. Crucially, the Hyksos also controlled the desert routes through the western oases, and so had unhindered access to the Nubian gold mines and the trade routes that criss-crossed the eastern Sahara.

The territory south of Elephantine (Aswan) was held by the Kushite rulers. With control limited to a small patch between Abydos and Elephantine, the Thebans were hemmed in. As a final insult, they had to pay a tax to venture into what was now Hyksos and Nubian territory. After close to a century of Hyksos presence, the Thebans clearly decided enough was enough; they were going to rid themselves of who they regarded as trespassers, and Egypt descended into a protracted and bloody civil war.

Around 1555 B.C., the 17th Dynasty’s King Kamose took up the fight that had already cost his father’s life, and began making inroads against the occupying Hyksos forces.
Sensing a turning tide, the Hyksos king, Apepi, tried to open a second front in the war. He dispatched a messenger south, carrying an appeal to Nubia to muster an army and join forces with the Hyksos against Thebes.

Avoiding the Nile, the messenger oasis-hopped along the caravan routes of the western desert. However, in a blow to Apepi’s strategic genius, the messenger was intercepted by Kamose’s troops:

“I captured his messenger in the oasis upland, as he was going south to Kush with a written dispatch.”

Embarrassingly, the messenger was sent back to Apepi, and Kamose documented his success in the oasis on a large victory stela erected at Karnak Temple.

Almost 2,000 years later, another empire sought to exert control over Egypt’s western desert and its lucrative oases. During the 3rd century A.D. the Roman empire was battered by repeated attacks from nomads and barbarian hordes. When Roman Emperor Diocletian came to power in A.D. 284, one of his first acts was to enforce the empire’s frontiers with a chain of forts. Kharga Oasis—the largest and most southern of all of Egypt’s oases—was prized for its agriculture, and as a stop on the long trade route that connected sub-Saharan Africa to the Nile Valley. It was thus marked for a series of army outposts to protect and control Egypt’s desert border.
This unique Early Dynastic serekh was discovered in 2004 along the Darb Ain Amur trail. It contains a single sign: an arm —, representing the letter ‘a’.

As Ikram and Rossi note, the sign inside the serekh’s frame doesn’t correspond to the name of any known Early Dynasty ruler. The closest matches are kings Aha (ca. 3100 B.C.) and Qaa (ca. 2890 B.C.)—the second and last kings of the 1st Dynasty respectively—whose names both contain an arm sign. The founder of Egypt’s 1st Dynasty, Narmer, has also been suggested as a possible match:

King Aha’s name is written with two arms holding a weapon and shield, while the Darb Ain Amur serekh contains only one arm which is empty-handed.

The Horus name of King Qaa contains a ‘q’ (𓊴), which is absent from the Darb Ain Amur serekh, and so probably rules this king out.

Narmer’s name has been found in other rock inscriptions using just a single horizontal stroke representing a highly-stylised catfish. Narmer could thus be a contender for the Darb Ain Amur serekh.

Today, these Roman forts, built at the edges of the oasis and at the junctions of caravan routes within it, are the most visible signs of historical activity at Kharga. They are, however, relative latecomers in the timeline of activity at the oasis. As the North Kharga Oasis Survey (NKOS) is discovering, Kharga has been a part of Egypt’s history for as long as there has been an Egypt—and for a long, long, (long) time before that.

The NKOS was founded in 2001 by Corinna Rossi of Collegio di Milano in Italy, and Salima Ikram at the American University in Cairo. Three years earlier, Rossi had visited Kharga Oasis and explored the ancient caravan route called Darb al-Arba’in: the north-south desert trail that connected Egypt to the Sudan. She was astonished by the number of late Roman forts of which she had read relatively little about.

Located in the Western Desert, around 175 km from Luxor, Kharga Oasis has been part of a vast transportation network from the earliest times. Since 2001, the North Kharga Oasis Survey has been systematically exploring the northern portion of Kharga and documenting its deep, connected history.

The enduring nature of the Egyptian civilisation is often presented as a result of the country’s isolation: separated from the impact (and armies) of other cultures by natural barriers on all sides. By recording the level of activity along the routes and tracks that crisscross Kharga Oasis and link Egypt with the far-flung African lands to the south and west, the NKOS is helping us realise that ancient Egypt wasn’t nearly as insulated as we used to think.

Compared to the smorgasbord of archaeological riches at sites like Luxor, North Kharga was somewhat of a black hole; Ikram and Rossi didn’t really know what to expect. The area was last explored in the early 20th century as part of a British geological survey of Egypt, and had received little attention since.

But this “black hole” turned out to be incredibly abundant with archaeological sites dating to all eras, ranging from the prehistoric period (ca. 6600 B.C.) through to the Coptic and Arab eras. These include temporary camps, permanent settlements, prehistoric rock art sites, pharaonic inscriptions, tombs and cemeteries (people and animals), aqueduct-fed fields, and, of course, those Roman forts that guarded this corner of the empire’s southernmost frontier, as well as acted as checkpoints and tollbooths for the trade caravans.

As Ikram explains on the NKOS website, “because of the amount and variety of archaeological material that was found in the western area, NKOS started a second phase of research, which concentrated on the exploration of the ancient caravan routes leading west towards Dakhla.” This new project, headed by Ikram, received important funding from ARCE and was dubbed the North Kharga Oasis Darb Ain Amur Survey (or NKODAAS for short).

Salima Ikram reported in the ARCE Bulletin (Winter 2015/2026) that the NKODAAS mission was to “record all
These may be the oldest depictions of spiders in the world. In December 2013, the NKODAAS team were exploring a shallow sandstone wadi, or valley, near the Darb Ain Amur. On the western side of the valley, positioned so that they would be illuminated by the rising sun, were the above petroglyphs.

Circled here are depictions of what appear to be two spiders, each with eight flexed legs. The leftmost “spider” is carved next to a star-like design that may represent a web. The comb-like lines are more enigmatic, but have been suggested to portray plants, insects trapped by the spiders, or even silken tubes spun by the spiders.

While dating petroglyphs is difficult, Salima Ikram has suggested that based on remnants of human activity found nearby, these inscriptions could date back to around 4000 B.C.—or even earlier.

If the interpretation of these images as “spiders” is correct, their appearance would be very rare; spiders don’t seem to have played any significant role in Egyptian religion and appear in pharaonic-era art only a handful of times.

Writing in the journal “Sahara”, Ikram proposed a possible answer as to why spiders might appear on the ancient rock panel: “Interestingly, some spiders, such as the Argiope lobata, which lives in both eastern and western deserts of Egypt, are found, shaded and surviving, in the middle of their orb web under the burning sun at noon. This would combine the force of the sun and the ability of this solar creature to survive its heat successfully, and thus be worthy of reverence or totemic allegiance.”

Although it is difficult to prove one way or another, the appearance of the spiders may simply be a helpful message to fellow travellers, warning them of the presence of eight-legged critters nearby.

sites of human activity. . . thereby creating an archaeological map of the area as well as a permanent record of the many fragile inscriptions, petroglyphs, and sites that surround them. This documentation is intended to serve as a future record of the existence of these sites after human and natural agencies have completed a process of destruction that began many centuries ago.”

Because so much of North Kharga has been undocumented, the survey involves a lot of wandering around promising-looking rock outcrops and through ancient gorges, examining every surface—often more than once. The time of day can make a big difference on what appears on the rocks. A site usually needs to be visited several times to ensure that raking light accentuates the artwork that has been scraped and pecked into the stone.

Some of the rock inscriptions are testaments to the changing climate of the eastern Sahara. During the Neolithic Period (ca. 8500 B.C.) monsoonal rains swept into the Sahara, transforming the region into a place of green valleys with forested areas sprouting near seasonal lakes. It was only a temporary respite from desert conditions, however, and the rains began retreating around 5300 B.C. The NKODAAS has documented rock art near what were once ancient lakes, where images of fish have been subsequently scratched out—perhaps by frustrated fishermen whose on-and-off lakes had finally dried out for good. Although the lakes have long disappeared, the subsurface water has remained, which is tapped for cultivation by today’s farmers.

During the pharaonic, Ptolemaic and Roman periods, Kharga was renowned for its abundant agricultural wealth. Several kinds of wheat were grown there, along with barley, olives, grapes, and different kinds of fruit trees. Even today, there is a great deal of grain grown in Kharga Oasis, and this is, in fact, what helped contribute to Egypt’s reputation for being the grain basket for the Roman Empire.

Fortunately, the people of Kharga not only ate well, they were famous throughout the Near East for their wine. Ikram informs us that in the Roman period, Kharga Oasis wine was compared favourably against the almost legendary (and ludicrously expensive) Falaric wine, made from grapes grown on the slopes of Mount Falernus in southern Italy. "Sadly for my expedition," Ikram laments, "there is no longer any wine produced at Kharga, and it all has to be brought in rather painfully."

Protecting Kharga’s precious wine output was just another reason for the Romans to maintain a conspicuous
Invisible while walking over them, the outlines of ancient fields become apparent in this photo taken from a kite. In the last issue of NILE Magazine, we read that Kharga Oasis was sometimes used as a place of banishment. Punishment for certain types of misbehaviour could see the perpetrators sent off to Kharga. Surrounded by sandy wastelands that took four or five days to cross, it made for a very effective prison.

Today, Kharga is the site of one of Egypt’s highest-security prisons, and it is for this reason that it is illegal to fly a balloon or drone over the area. The members of the Ain Amur Survey, ARE, however, allowed to fly their kite. You can see the long string in the centre of the above photo.

The agriculture supporting the ancient settlements of the North Kharga was served by subterranean aqueducts. Once the water reached the surface, it was channelled towards the fields by a system of long open-air canals. These are the mounds you can see in the above aerial photo, taken at Ain el-Lebekha.

This was the site of a Roman fort that overlooked the entrance to the Darb Ain Amur trail. Here, a local farmer has cleared the debris that clogged one of the ancient aqueducts, and found that, remarkably, it still works, providing enough water for his small farm.

The fortified presence there. The Pharaonic Egyptians also stationed troops in Kharga Oasis as part of their defence network, and it is possible that some of the late Roman forts are located on the sites of their pharaonic predecessors. Only future excavation will be able to determine this.

Compared to Egyptian forts, with their massively thick walls, the late Roman forts at Kharga Oasis appear rather flimsy. Ikram likens them to a Hollywood film set; they look impressive from afar, but as you get closer, you realise that the facade is somewhat shaky. These Roman forts are only one or two bricks thick. With a firm kick, anyone could easily break through the wall.

The idea appears to have been to make the forts appear threatening from afar, and hope that the attaching Bedouin tribes were so intimidated by this display of Roman might that they wouldn’t get too close to realise the ruse—and that there were only ten soldiers inside trying to guard it.

When the North Kharga Oasis Survey began, it’s unlikely that Rossi or Ikram expected to discover a hitherto unknown king. During the 2003–04 field season, the team examined a large rock outcrop not far from the Darb Ain Amur caravan trail. Here, ancient graffiti has preserved the name of a man who, around 3000 B.C., had sent some kind of expedition to this remote area.

The name, contained in a royal serekh, and surmounted by a crouching falcon, consists of a single sign that appears to be an arm (𓊻), representing an “a”. A suggested reading is “King Aa”, “Great One”.

Stylistically, the serekh dates to the 1st Dynasty (ca. 3100 B.C.) or earlier, making this the earliest royal name found in any of the Western Desert oases. The only problem is that the name hasn’t been discovered anywhere else, and it is hard to slot him into the established sequence of rulers.

Some suggest that the simplified carving is a stylised version of a known 1st-Dynasty king such as Narmer, regarded as the founder of the dynasty and the first ruler of unified Egypt. (See page 26 for more details on this and other suggested options for the owner of the serekh.)

Whether the Darb Ain Amur serekh belongs to a brand new king or an existing 1st-Dynasty pharaoh, it demonstrates that Egypt’s first pharaohs were reaching out at least as far as the western oases. Certainly by the reign of Khufu, around 450 years later, the king was sponsoring large expeditions to the Western Desert for a mineral powder that was perhaps used in medicine and paint. With increasing archaeological interest in the Western Desert region, we can only hope that a second example surfaces at some point to help solve the mystery.
The difference that a year can make.
The Temple of Umm el-Dabadib in 2003 (top) and 2004 (bottom).

Located along the ancient caravan route of Darb Ain Amur is Umm el-Dabadib, one of the sites chosen by the Romans as part of a network of forts, temples and fortified settlements at the beginning of the 4th century a.d.

Thanks to their remote location and the dry environment, these mud-brick forts and their associated temples have survived relatively well. Unfortunately, while motor vehicles have made the Oasis much more accessible for Egyptologists, it has equally improved the ease with which those with greedier intentions can reach these fragile areas.

In 2004 looters arrived at Umm el-Dabadib with a front loader, looking for gold. They ploughed into the mud-brick temple and dug down to the foundations. Tragically, large sections of the temple were reduced to powder and rubble.

The looters may have been encouraged by the “Dush Treasure”, discovered by a French mission in 1989 at the Temple of Serapis at Dush; the southernmost Roman outpost of Kharga Oasis. The hoard, hidden during the 4th or 5th century a.d., included a golden crown depicting Serapis, the Graeco-Egyptian god created for Ptolemy I (see page 45).

In Arabic, Kharga means “outside”. To the Egyptians, the area was wehat resyt, “Southern Oasis”. For the North Kharga Oasis Darb Ain Amur Survey, it means examining 10,000 years of history, spread over 1245 square kilometres—from studying Neolithic eggshell fragments to measuring Roman fort buttresses. In between, there’s an awful lot of surveying, mapping, drawing, photographing, kite-flying and identifying archaeological material. And walking. Lots and lots of walking.

When NILE Magazine caught up with Salima Ikram, she, on behalf of the NKOS co-director, Corinna Rossi, expressed her deep gratitude to the Friends of the Kharga Oasis, without whom much of the survey would not have been possible. The NKOS is also appreciative of the support from the Ministry of Antiquities, the Kharga Inspectorate, the American University in Cairo, and, particularly for the explorations of the Darb Ain Amur, ARCE’s Antiquities Endowment Fund.

Rossi and Ikram have recently published their monograph of the first seven years of explorations. North Kharga Oasis Survey: Explorations in Egypt’s Western Desert is available from Peeters Publishers. This edition is volume one; we look forward to learning what other “hidden history” the Kharga Oasis has in store.

You can discover more about the main sites of North Kharga and the work of the NKOS at www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/northkhargaoasisurvey/home.htm.

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