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In Search of Lost Memories

DOMESTIC SPHERES AND IDENTITIES IN ROMAN AMHEIDA, EGYPT

ANNA BOOZER

ISERP GRADUATE FELLOW
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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Domestic Spheres and Identities in Roman Amheida, Egypt*

Anna Lucille Boozer
Department of Anthropology
ISERP Graduate Fellow
Columbia University

* Anna Lucille Boozer attended St. John's College in Annapolis, MD, majoring in philosophy and the history of math and science. At Columbia University, she was awarded the President's Fellowship for Graduate Study in the Department of Anthropology where she focuses on the negotiations between territorial empire and social life in Roman Egypt. Boozer has worked on excavations in the United States, the Mediterranean and Egypt.

Address: Schermerhorn Extension, Room 452, Mail Code 5523, 1200 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027, **Tel:** 347-728-0978, **Email:** alb44@columbia.edu

Abstract

Memory and heritage are critical components for identity formation. Within the context of empire, the display of heritage represents and transforms connections between individuals and their relationship to society. This essay examines a Roman Period Egyptian house as emblematic of the complex post-conquest conditions that intertwined memory, identity, and empire. This paper explores the integrative phase of empire, a process that continues long after the dramatic acts of conquest and submission have ended. I explore this process on a microscale in order to understand local negotiations, responses, and influences. Specifically, I focus on domestic contexts from the Roman city of Amheida (ancient Trimithis) in the Dakhleh Oasis. Amheida has a long occupational history, but it was under Roman rule that it reached its greatest extent (1st C AD–4th C AD). This historical trajectory offers a detailed example of a locality that developed during a period of social, religious, economic, and political change.

Keywords: memory, identity, empire, Egypt, archaeology, house.

INTRODUCTION

"Certain people, whose minds are prone to mystery, like to believe that objects retain something of the eyes which have looked at them, that old buildings and pictures appear to us not as they originally were but beneath a perceptible veil woven for them over the centuries by the love and contemplation of millions of admirers. This fantasy, if you transpose it into the domain of what is for each one of us the sole reality, the domain of his own sensibility, becomes the truth. In that sense and in that sense alone (but it is a far more important one than the other), a thing which we have looked at in the past brings back to us, if we see it again, not only the eyes with which we looked at it but all the images with which at the time those eyes were filled. For things…as soon as we have perceived them are transformed within us into something immaterial, something of the same nature as all our preoccupations and sensations of that particular time, with which, indissolubly, they blend."

PROUST 1993B.284

"As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. …The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand written in the corners of streets, the gratings of windows, the banisters of steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."

CALVINO1972:11

Memory holds a pivotal role in contexts of imperial change. The ways in which individuals and groups remember, forget, or re-articulate the pre-conquest past affects current associations, and future trajectories of social identities. Domestic spaces provide a nucleus for exploring cultural identities and memories because the *locus* itself dialectically shapes, and is shaped by, its inhabitants. The present work explores the potential interrelationship between memory practices, empire, and domestic contexts. Examining these negotiations within an Egyptian context, we might effectively recover instances of selective remembering, memory performance, and ethnic associations, even highlighting seemingly incommensurable juxtapositions of hybrid pasts. This essay examines a Roman Period Egyptian house as emblematic of the complex post-conquest conditions that intertwined memory, identity, and empire.

Scholars have long explored memory as a phenomenological process that can be conveyed through narratives and materiality. These mnemonics, whether intentional or involuntary, infuse social meanings into the past, present, and future (Connerton 1989, Fagan 1996, Fentress and Wickham 1994 [1992], Lovell 1998). Memories of origin— be they real or mythical—are particularly potent forces in the collective imagination. A material display of past identities has a two-fold function; a reminder of the past invoked by the present and as an incentive that shapes the future (Lovell 1998:14-15). Objects and images emblematic of the past serve as mediating elements to revivify a memory-place. In so doing, they stimulate memory as an analogue to an irretrievable homeland of memory, time, and place. A single synchronic image can therefore stimulate a host of memories, reforming and coalescing their diversity and contradictions, thereby positioning the past in the present—creating collective images in the present. As theories of memory have become more nuanced, scholars have explored diverse

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frameworks where memory has come to participate in a number of politically charged realms of society, from nationalism, to memorials and museums. The relationship between empires and domestic contexts offers an especially salient perspective for understanding the effect of remembrance on social forms of power.

The Roman house, in particular, was a vessel for the cultural identity and memory practices of its inhabitants. Roman houses differed architecturally across the Empire to varying degrees however these houses retained a similar cultural role throughout the empire. Across the Roman Empire, the upper-class house can be seen as a nexus that reflects and shapes both domestic life and the public careers of individuals. The material residues of these houses provide a compelling visual and architectural construct of the inhabitants' identity in Roman society. The Roman house, as the material embodiment of the self, could be seen as an affirmation of the inhabitant's Roman identity as well as signifying social and ancestral status to visitors (Hales 2003). In particular, domestic architecture often had wall paintings that included vignettes that would be familiar to individuals with a classical education. Viewers required familiarity with historical events, classical training, and creativity in order to assemble narratives from these paintings. Individuals outside of this cultural sphere may have had a host of responses to traditionally Roman works that would have varied depending on vectors of identity, such as their ethnicity, gender, age, and so on. The entire process of assembling narratives from these domestic wall paintings was creative and displayed one's placement with respect to Roman culture and education (Bergmann 1994). As such, the narratives deployed in such domestic decoration were deeply embroiled in identity politics, memory practices, and empire.

I first turn to the concept of memory as a reinforcing component of individual and community identities. In particular, contexts of empire provide arenas in which uses of memory become effective signifiers of identity. Second, I discuss the potential of opening up domestic contexts to the discussion of identity and memory within phases of imperial consolidation. Specifically, I examine domestic contexts from Amheida (ancient Trimithis), a Roman Period city (1st C AD–4th C AD) in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt. I offer specific examples of memory and identity from a domestic context and the implications these signatures would have when viewed within the greater social fabric of imperial consolidation. In highlighting a single locale for analysis this paper suggests reorienting our views of houses towards the microscale, thereby emphasizing individuals and families while remaining mindful of the wider contextual frame.

| 1 | MEMORY AND IDENTITY

The concept 'identity' expresses the ways in which individuals and groups are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and groups (Jenkins 1996:4). Identity positioning operates at two levels: on one hand the greater social milieu defines identities by formal associations and categories; on the other hand, the single subjective agent experiences many shifting facets of identity throughout the life span (Meskell 2001:189). Social categories of identity are generally stable and regenerative while an individual identity includes facets that can be momentary, fragmented, and contextually contingent. Both individual and group identities are comprised of heritage, genealogy, ethnicity, gender, age, economic class, and so forth. Identity can be discussed with reference to perceived sameness or exclusion and opposition to such facets. Identities are multiply constructed and maintained and are therefore fluid and contextually dependent. The multiplicity and permeability of identities produce real challenges for archaeologists, even in contexts that are buttressed by contemporary written sources. The most accessible means of assessing identity archaeologically is through exploring mechanisms of identity construction and maintenance. These mechanisms loosely tether facets of identities to historically understood trajectories and take the form of social, material and memorial practices. A study of memory promises a fruitful approach towards understanding how identities are socially created and maintained.

Scholars have long been fascinated by memory, and therefore there are many approaches, distinctions, and definitions associated with the concept. The present work approaches memory in the tradition founded on the work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that memory must be understood as a social phenomenon (1992 [1925]). This assertion formed the basis of later scholarship that described the use of social memory to create and buttress a sense of individual and community identity (Basso 1996, Blake 1998). Memory practices can take shape as material, formulaic forms as well as performative, fluctuating behaviors. Material forms of memory are more accessible to archaeologists and have therefore drawn more attention than ephemeral, performative practices. According to VanDyke and Alcock the material indices of memory can be divided into four intersecting categories: ritual behavior, narratives, representations, and places[1] (2003:4-5). The current work engages the last two categories of material memories in an exploration of identity politics. Paintings and other representational media may commemorate past events, such as mythic narratives, and thereby aid the memory process. Places that are associated with past events or attachments are also significant vectors for exploring memory. Places can be associated with past events ranging from mundane, everyday activities to monuments or sites of violence. The current work examines a house (the place of memory) and wall paintings (representational media) as material correlates that commemorate and transmit memory and are therefore essential categories for exploring memory and identity in an archaeological context.

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[1] These categories of memory are intertwined. Representations and narratives are very closely interwoven in many contexts, as they are in the house discussed in the present paper.

| 2 | MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND IMPERIAL CONSOLIDATION

When imposing forces control the present and future, evocation of the past becomes imbued with the potential to mobilize the meaning of social identity, places, and traditions. Rearticulation of this past represents more than mere cultural archaism and nostalgia. It also offers an arena for social and political expression by both imperial agents and local individuals (Alcock 2001a). The past offers grounding for group identification as well as a stimulus for present and future actions. The construction of the past could do much to symbolically smooth over social divisions, creating a sense of community identity (Alcock 2002, Basso 1996) or, alternatively could do much in the service of more restricted and selective identities (Bodnar 1994, Bohlin 1998, Johnson 1995). As such, memories can affect loyalties, senses of place, aspirations, and other aspects of group identity. Within empires, rulers deploy the past in claims of universality and legitimacy, often creatively selecting and transforming both recent and deep pasts (Sinopoli 2003). Likewise, the influence of local areas should not be underestimated since the activities of local and non-elite actors often provoked changes in imperial structure, agendas, and approaches, as Deagan shows within the context of the Spanish Empire (2001).

Since memory performed such an active role in empire building and maintenance one would expect that it would attract scholars of ancient Egypt, a geographical area that was occupied by both conqueror and conquered during its long, interleaved history. Egyptology, however, has provided only a few studies of memory (Baines and Lacovara 2002, McDowell 1999, McDowell 1992, Meskell 2003, Montserrat and Meskell 1997, Richards 1999) and has yet to produce any that address how various groups construct memories with the framework of empire.

Egypt had a layered history of foreign domination following the dynastic era. When Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 BC, the Persians were the first outsiders to incorporate Egypt within a larger imperial power structure. Under the Persians, the oasis region became an important strategic area and increasing signs of an imperial presence are visible in the form of temples and waterworks. However, as a whole, the Persians did not settle in the region and relied more on hegemonic imperial practices than on territorial integration. The Persians lost Egypt to Alexander the Great in 332 BC. After Alexander's death, the Ptolemaic Dynasty ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years and, unlike their Persian forerunners, focused largely on the development of Egypt. Part of this development included a policy of settling foreign soldiers on the land and creating numerous Greek settlements, particularly in the Fayum region as well as the well-known Alexandria. Egypt was dealt with once again as a province within a greater empire when the Romans took over in 30 BC. By the time the Romans arrived there was already a powerful Greek overlay in place, particularly in the forms of government administration and legal systems as well as culturally in certain geographic locales. The numbers of Romans present in Egypt were relatively few by comparison with the Greeks that came to Egypt under Ptolemaic rule. The Roman Empire did not promote immigration to Egypt because of a concern that it might be used for political opposition (Lewis 1983:16).

Various groups probably responded to the new social conditions of Roman rule differently.   Local interests, social status, ethnicity and other vectors of identity influenced peoples' social choices and opportunities. Although households of different status levels may have had competing interests, they would have strong community-oriented tendencies as well. The pressures of Roman rule may have united different status groups in social cohesion.   By contrast, various households may have taken advantage of and supported the regime as a means of increasing their own wealth and social position.   State, community, ethnic and individual identities symbolic of these alliances were often articulated through the citation of the past.

Hellenism, in particular, offered a salient means of symbolizing alliances. Aspirations to Hellenism were fostered through the Greek/Egyptian dichotomy created under the Ptolemies. In order for individuals to advance in society, Egyptians often took on Greek names, learned to write in Greek, and familiarized themselves with Greek culture (Bowman 1986:122-123).   Likewise in the Roman Period, local elites, regardless of their ethnic heritage[2], relied upon Greek cultural symbols in order to promote their status (Lewis 1983:39). Meanwhile, Egyptians were disdained as lesser beings with a disorderly nature and a plethora of disreputable traits. Opportunism therefore involved the complex negotiation of ethnic categories that directly intertwined memory and identity. Remembering the past signified past group identities and therefore distinguished, fashioned, and potentially transformed current connections between individuals and their relationship to society. In this context, representations of the past affected both individuality and the interactions between individuals and groups within society. In the confines of this paper I examine a Roman Period Egyptian house as iconic of these complex post-conquest social conditions. This particular house provides a microscale context for examining representations of the past because one of the rooms contains wall paintings with mythological scenes that were typically associated with specific social groups.

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[2] Following the Roman conquest, the inhabitants of Egypt were all classified as Egyptians, with the exception of Romans, citizens of the poleis, or Alexandrians.

| 3 | MEMORY AND DOMESTIC CONTEXTS

"People foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further into the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realize that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena."

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PROUST 1993A:450

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I do not claim to provide a full account of the potential roles of memory in Roman Egypt, Roman Dakhleh, or even Roman Amheida through examining one single domestic context. Rather, in questioning the role of memory as it relates to this single house this paper suggests a reorientation of our views of domestic material culture and may contribute to drawing more attention to the role of memory in ancient domestic contexts. In so doing, the school of microhistory provides a relevant framework for highlighting a single locale for analysis (Cerutti 19990, Ginzburg 1993, Gribaudi, Levi, and Tilly 1998). Microhistories investigate individuals and small groups within specific socio-temporal frameworks in order to determine attributes associated with that framework. They are useful at certain stages of historical research because they are "attentive to the initiative and capacity for negotiation of historical agents in situations marked by uncertainty" (Ricoeur 2004:187). This approach is particularly suited for assessing vectors of identity since an individual's identity is fluid and contextually dependent.

By examining individuals, families, or small groups within their social fabric, we become aware of variations that are smoothed over in macroscale analyses, which are attentive to the force of structural constraints exerted over a long time span. Macroscale analyses are not invalidated by microscale analyses. Rather macroscale analyses provide the contextual frame for situating and interpreting the range of options available and employed by agents on the microscale. Ultimately, variations in scale are necessary for meticulous and broadly applicable histories. The principle inherent in variation in scale is that "when we change scale, what becomes visible are not the same interconnections but the connections that remain unperceived in the macrohistorical scale" (Ricoeur 2004:210). As such, small-scale investigations provoke indications for future research on the macroscale, which thereby can provide nuanced and quantitatively viable histories.

Postprocessual archaeology has long attempted to access "individuals" in the past, that is, to locate and theorize individual agents regardless of how representative these individuals were within their socio-temporal framework (Bailey 1994, Hodder 2000, Meskell 1994, Morris 1993). However, in the process of teasing out much needed theorizations of individuals, the larger cultural matrix has often been left by the wayside. By contrast, a microhistory explores characteristics of social strata for specific social periods through individuals and small groups. The historical and social variability of these individuals is reined in by culture, which "offers to the individual a horizon of latent possibilities—a flexible and invisible cage in which he can exercise his own conditioned liberty" (Ginzburg 1993:xxi). The vocabulary that culture provides individuals is at their disposal to articulate their own social variability within their cultural matrix. These

microhistories enable us to understand reciprocal cultural exchanges between the dominant social classes and the subordinate social classes (Bakhtin 1965).

While previous studies of memory from Egypt have informed the present work, it is notable that they concentrated on the mortuary sphere. Although there are studies of memory that claim to access household contexts within ancient Egypt (Meskell 2003), the objects discussed relate primarily to ancestral busts and mortuary contexts. I argue that the subtle and everyday aspects of remembering the past remain to be explored. The objective of this paper is therefore to explore the role of memory in the mundane, personal surroundings of individuals. Houses, in particular, provide a glimpse into intimate spaces and how memories were materially expressed in semi-private locales. As shown in Bachelard's salient study of houses, houses embody our memories, our selves and uncertain, spectral pre-histories (Bachelard 1994:47). It is a place that tugs against concrete perceptions and touches upon imagination, memories, and dreams. The materiality of the house itself can embody continuity of origin (Tringham 2000), or it can serve as a vessel for relics from the past in the form of objects and narratives (Gillespie 2000:12-13). The house embodies memories of individuals and the specificity of personal histories localized spatially. It provides a sense of continuity and even a sense of origins beyond the lived experience of any of the inhabitants. Memories of individuals, collective memories, and deep pasts converge and reside within the household vessel.

The Roman house, in particular, provides an evocative example of the home as a *locus* that reflects and shapes the cultural identity of its inhabitants. The house provided a setting for both domestic life as well as the public careers of upper-class individuals. As such it provided a visual and architectural construct of the inhabitants' identity in Roman society (Hales 2003:2, Mazzoleni 1993:292). The Roman house, as an extension of the self, could be seen as an affirmation of the inhabitant's Roman identity as well as signaling social and genealogical status to visitors. For, despite the ethnicity of the inhabitants, mastery of Roman culture shapes both the ambitions and abilities to achieve those ambitions within the Roman context (Woolf 2003:13). Within the Roman Empire, adept references to mythological pasts and past events helped convey an individual's identity. Therefore, memory and the citation of both the pasts were embroiled in these domestic identity constructions (Thebert 1987:407). Although material culture may be used strategically, it cannot be disentangled from broader social forces, particularly within domestic contexts. The present work argues that ancestry provides a particularly salient narrative for domestic contexts within the framework of empire. Commemorating the past through representational media affirmed and imbued inhabitants with a sense of deep, long-term history and also transmitted a specific heritage to visitors. In the context of empire, such narratives highlight the potentially divergent histories of imperialist and local agents while shaping future trajectories and agendas.

| 3 | DOMESTIC MEMORIES IN ROMAN EGYPT: A MICROHISTORY

T he following paragraphs examine memory practices in a domestic context from Amheida (ancient Trimithis), an important city in the Dakhleh Oasis on the periphery of Roman Egypt (Figure 1). In so doing, I examine a house that retains signatures
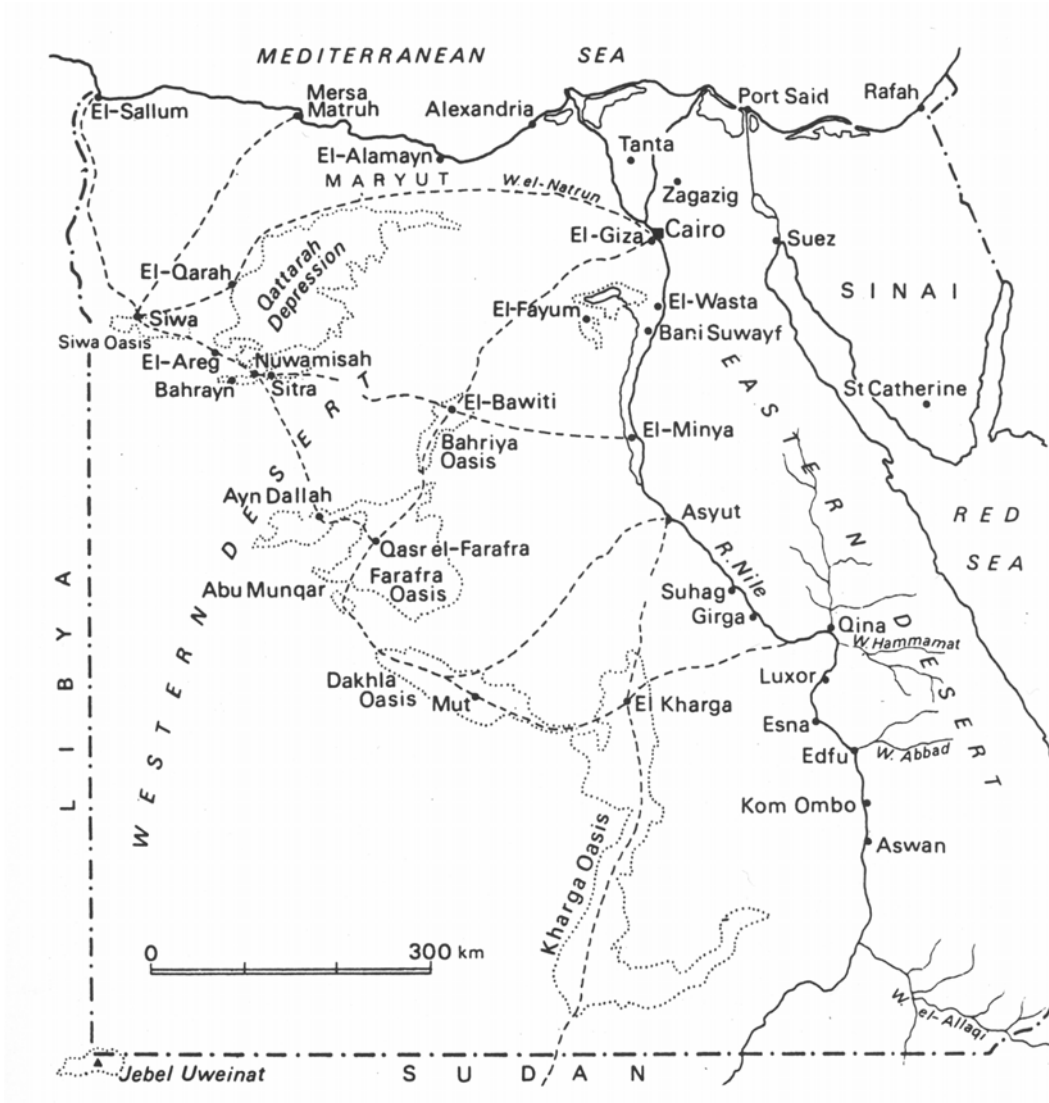

Figure 1: Map of Egypt showing study area

of both the local past as well as a mythical Greek past that was more in line with the remembered heritage of the conquerors. Amheida today is remarkably well preserved. It has a long occupational history, but it was under Roman rule that it reached its greatest extent (1st C AD–4th C AD). This historical trajectory offers an excellent example of a locality that developed during a period of social, religious, economic, and political change. Amheida comprises a substantial urban center with standing remains dating to the Roman Period. In 2000 the Columbia University Amheida Project identified and

mapped three very different sectors of the urban site (Figure 2): Area 1 is both domestic and industrial, Area 2 has vaulted and domed structures that are elaborately painted, and Area 3 has an impressive pyramid that is surrounded by vaulted tombs. Subsequently Area 4 was identified as a temple mound. Amheida was one of the most important towns in the Dakhleh Oasis during the Roman and Byzantine centuries. Documentary sources indicated that it became a city by the fourth century and was treated on the same level as the neighboring city, Mothis and the more distant Hibis in the Khargeh Oasis (Wagner 1987:191). The substantial above ground remains and surface pottery scattered across the urban center represent dates ranging from Pharaonic to Late Antique periods. Furthermore the surrounding environs contain evidence of prehistoric lithic scatters, an Old Kingdom site and several cemeteries. However, despite the long occupational history, Roman and Late Antique ruins dominate the site.

The historical trajectory of Amheida complements that of the greater Dakhleh Oasis. In the 1970's and 80's The Dakhleh Oasis Project surveyed the entire Dakhleh Oasis, revealing a moderate resident population in Dakhleh—a total of 49 sites—throughout the Pharaonic period (Churcher and Mills 1995). By contrast, an excess of 200 sites represents the Roman and Byzantine centuries of occupation[3]. The reasons for this enormous expansion in population cannot be found in documentary sources. However, Anthony Mills suggests that it was part of an imperial project that restructured the Egyptian economy, converting it from subsistence farming into export production. This process may have involved relocating Nile Valley farmers to an under-populated area where an increased production would serve the imperial demand for agricultural products (Mills 1993:194-95). Such conjectures are somewhat problematic since Egypt had been an export economy for hundreds of years prior to Roman conquest. Regardless of the reasons for a Roman expansion to the Dakhleh Oasis, it is clear that during the Roman Period the oasis population expanded to its greatest extent until the present day.

Houses and households from Roman Egypt have been notoriously under-studied (Alston 2002:45-52, Bagnall 2001, Bailey 1990, van Minnen 1994), however a few studies do exist (Alston 1997, Bowman 1986:146-50, Hobson 1985, Husselman 1979). Recent work by the Dakhleh Oasis Project has focused on houses in its excavations at Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis). As examples from these excavations show, Dakhleh domestic architecture from this period typically consists of a single-storey structure with barrel vaulted roofs. A staircase provided access to the roof, which was often used as additional work and storage space. Within the house, there was typically a central courtyard area surrounded by living and work spaces. Walls were mud-plastered and often contained strips of whitewash along rear walls, around doorways, and wall niches (Hope et al. 1989, Knudstad and Frey 1999). Presumably this whitewash provided illumination of these dark spaces, particularly when lamps were placed in the niches.

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[3] These data are based upon the ceramic chronologies originally employed by the Dakhleh Oasis Project. Since this first comprehensive survey was completed the regional seriation has become more precise and more Ptolemaic material has been recognized among the initial survey assemblage. There are therefore probably more Ptolemaic sites than originally accounted for in this initial survey. However, it is still clear that the Roman Period is represented in greater numbers than any other until the present day.
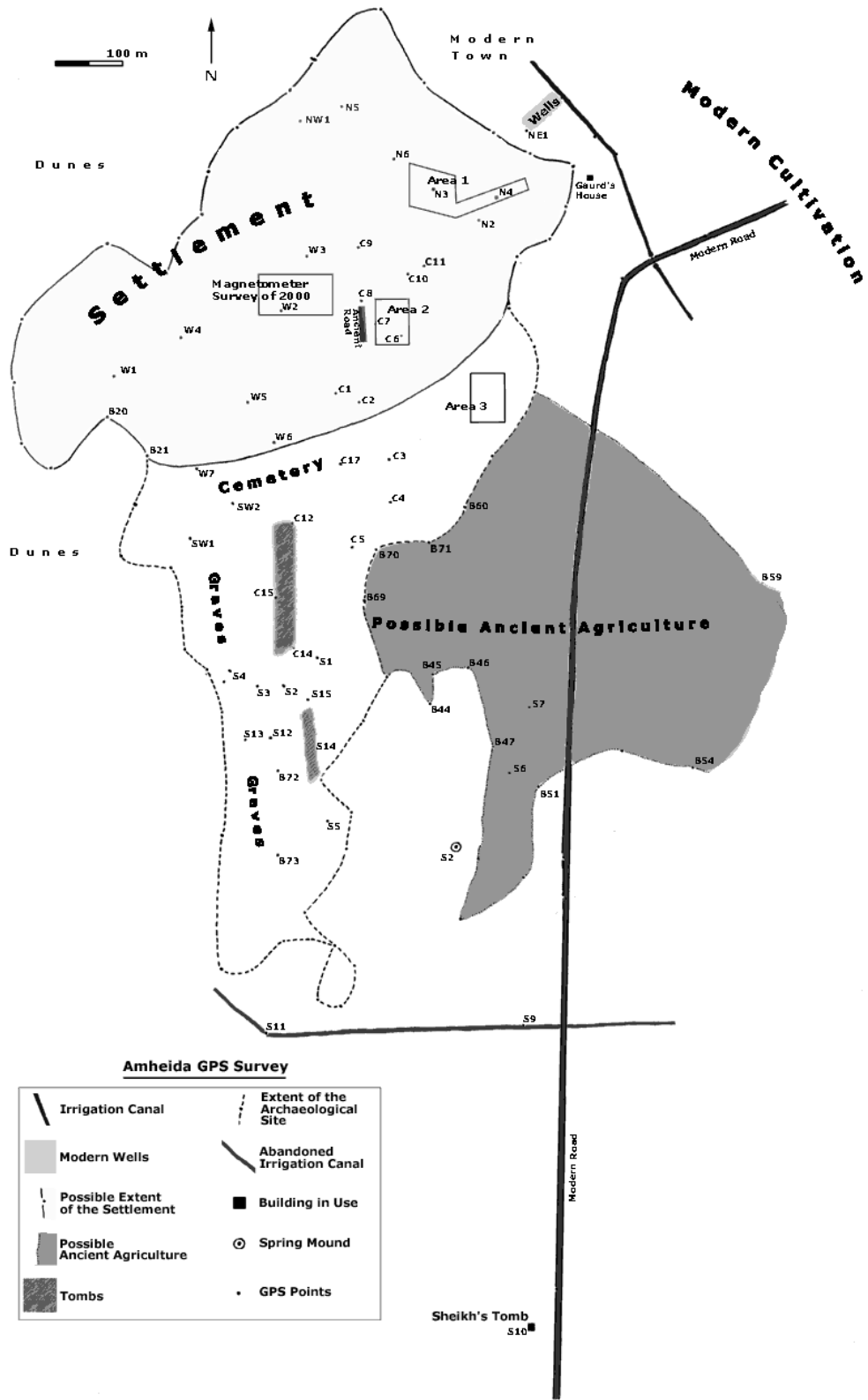
Figure 2: Map of Amheida, Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt

The Dakhleh Oasis Project took a preliminary look at Amheida in 1979, clearing the upper portion of two walls from a structure in Area 2, an area of the site that has a concentration of vaulted and painted structures (Figure 2). In so doing they found paintings with Greek mythological figures (Leahy 1980, Mills 1980a). These figures were reburied until formal excavations commenced in 2004. After two field seasons, the excavation of this structure is largely complete. The *in situ* wall paintings as well as both substantial and fragmentary material from the collapse are currently under study and conservation by the Columbia University Project (Silver 2005, Whitehouse 2005).

The house is situated in an area of the site that, from the surface, appears to have a dense concentration of structures decorated with painted and molded plaster. Immediately south of this house, and sharing a wall, lies another house of similar design and dimensions. Adjacent to the house in the north there is a large open area surrounded by walls and filled with refuse that was used for some unknown function. West of this domestic area, on the highest point of the site, lie the remains of a sandstone temple dedicated to Thoth of Set-wah. This temple has been completely dismantled over time, although the features and cartouches that survive suggest that it was active into the Roman Period (Davoli and Kaper 2005). Southeast of the house the terrain flattens out and provides the location for tombs and a Roman Period pyramid that dominates the vista. These principal architectural features complemented by stark sand and an escarpment to the north comprised the visible urban environment of the house.

Figure 3: Plan of Area 2 house

Preliminary results from the recent excavations suggest that the structure was a mud-brick, late Roman villa dating to the end of the third century with an abandonment in the middle of the fourth century (Figure 3, Figure 4). Its basic layout consists of a central courtyard with decorated rooms to the west and south, utilitarian rooms to the north, and additional undecorated rooms to the east. Many of the architectural features are typical of local domestic architecture from the Roman Period, as described above. However, this house also contained several architectural and decorative features that currently have no contemporary parallels in the Dakhleh Oasis. These features include a possible apsidal half-dome and Greek mythological wall paintings. However, we should be cautious in stating that this architecture is of a singular architectural program since much research remains to be done at Amheida itself as well as other houses further afield. Of particular interest is that this structure may have been part of a planned *insula*, which contained at least one house

of similar layout and dimensions[4]. At this stage of research, a microhistory of this structure not only highlights a chronicle of this particular household but also prompts research agendas for future work at Amheida and greater Roman Egyptian domestic contexts.
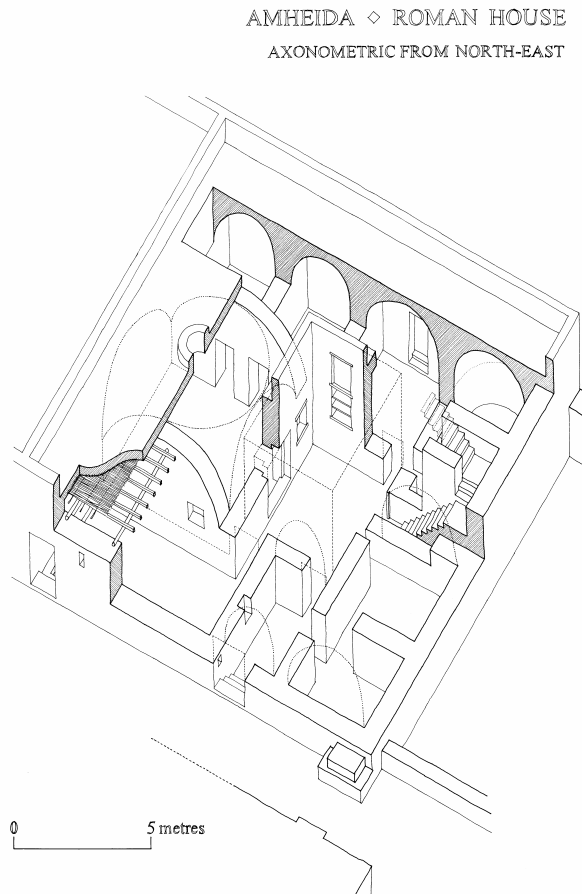
AMHEIDA ◇ ROMAN HOUSE
AXONOMETRIC FROM NORTH-EAST

0   5 metres

Figure 4: Preliminary reconstruction of house in Area 2 (Nicholas Warner)

The house could be entered from a room on its eastern end (Figure 3, R7), which was doubtless the main entrance into the functional areas of the house. It provided direct access to a central courtyard and a utilitarian room to the north. The central courtyard gave access to an additional utilitarian room to the north. The entrance itself was a simple, rectangular room with mud plaster walls. It was devoid of decoration with the exception of a small, arched niche with ornamental molding along one of the walls.

The courtyard (Figure 3, R2), accessible from the eastern entrance, functioned as the central axis point within the house. It can be entered from a total of six doorways, including a staircase to the roof as well as the eastern entrance. It was therefore necessary to walk through the courtyard in order to maneuver through the house. The walls have several large niches with shelves for the storage of written material and other small, portable objects. The walls were covered in mud plaster and were completely replastered at least twice. The first layer of plaster shows traces of red pigment, suggesting that the walls were at least partially painted. The second coating consists of coarse mud plaster. There were several

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[4] The introduction of a particular architectural design duplicated en masse has been suggested for the so-called Dakhleh Oasis "columbarium farmhouse" Mills, A.J. 1993. The Dakhleh Oasis columbarium farmhouse. *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Alexandrie* 45. Anthony Mills conjectures that this standardized design was part of an incentive scheme to encourage farmers from other areas to relocate to the Dakhleh Oasis. A similar incentive scheme, for a different social class with different vocations, may be at work in the possible standardized insulae at Amheida.

episodes of floor replastering and repair, which suggests heavy usage. As a central nexus for the house, individuals in the household probably used this space throughout the day for transit throughout the house as well as tasks that required more light than the other rooms may have afforded.

Two rooms, located in the northern part of the house, were used for utilitarian purposes, such as the storage and preparation of food (Figure 3, R8, R4). The two rooms were once connected, but the door connecting them was plastered over at a later stage. Both rooms had low subdividing walls that created storage spaces. The quality of the floors in these rooms was poor and both yielded high numbers of objects, including jar stoppers, animal bones, coins, and *ostraka*[5]. One of these rooms contained a hearth while the eastern room contained instruments for grinding. Both rooms were covered in grey-brown mud plaster with straw inclusions and the eastern room had a whitewash band running along the north wall of the room and partially along the eastern and western walls.

The courtyard gave access to an architecturally unique room in the house (Figure 3, R6). This room was unusually large and was once covered with a flat roof, as could be seen by the presence of several decayed beams and mud plaster with palm rib impressions. The presence of a flat roof in a house containing vaults occurs on occasion in the Dakhleh Oasis (Hope 1987, Hope 1988). At Kellis these flat roofs were constructed with palm ribs, tied together as bundles, supported by beams of palm, and then covered with mud plaster and possibly bricks. These Kellis roofs seemed to have been used as storage spaces since numerous pottery vessels and papyri were associated with the roof collapse (Hope 1988). It is possible that the room from the Amheida house served a similar function. The west wall of the room possesses a niche that was once shelved. Grey-brown mud plaster covers the walls and white plaster bands surround both the doorway and the niche. Against the south wall there is a narrow, linear arrangement of baked brick. This element bonds to additional mud bricks set in front of the possible blocked door and might be a low and narrow *mastaba* (bench) or an element made to buttress the south wall of the room. Few artifacts were recovered from the room so it is not possible to determine the function of the room.

Four unexcavated rooms form the west wing of the structure (Figure 3, R 11, R12, R13, R14). Two of these rooms were vaulted while a third appears to have had an apsidal half-dome, which currently has no parallels in local domestic architecture. Test trenches were excavated in these rooms to determine the presence of painted plaster and what conservation effort would be necessary for the wall paintings. In the course of this preliminary testing it was found that three rooms were completely whitewashed and painted with various motifs. At this time very little can be said about these paintings since the test trenches were terminated at the top of these paintings. However, one of these rooms displayed the presence of both geometric and figurative motifs in the upper registers of the paintings. No objects from secure contexts were recovered in these rooms because they have not been fully excavated.

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[5] A class of written artifacts that uses broken pottery for material.

In addition to these presumed living spaces there was a large painted room (Figure 3, R1), accessible from the courtyard. These paintings are currently unique in the history of Roman wall painting because they represent Homeric mythologies at such a late date. Although preliminary interpretations have been offered (Leahy 1980, Mills 1980a), they await substantive study by art historians. However, preliminary dating of these paintings and contextualization of their placement can be presented at this time.

Of particular interest is that the representational media in this house commemorate Greek and Roman heritage through mythology[6]. The citation of this heritage links the identities of individuals in this house to historically understood categories of ethnicity. Within the context of imperial consolidation, Hellenism was vital for inclusion in the upper echelons of society.   The visible wall paintings depict several Greek myths, predominantly from Homer. Although the mythologies have deep roots in domestic decoration, their narrative form could take many variations. A closer examination of the scenes represented emphasizes the Hellenic nature of these images and potential interpretations of their importance in this context.

Some of the scenes from the walls of the painted room are still *in situ* and it is possible reconstruct some of the upper registers with fragments found from the remains of collapsed wall debris.   From *in situ* paintings and fragments, it is clear that the arrangement of the paintings followed a simple plan, with figural scenes positioned above geometric designs representing stonework. Although the wall paintings display the hand of a skilled artist, the materials used were of poor quality, which caused the original paintings to deteriorate during the occupation of the house. The occupants had the paintings repaired in at least two episodes and there is some indication that they may have altered the original motifs slightly in places (Whitehouse 2005). As more structures are excavated at Amheida, it would be useful to compare the quality of materials used to determine if they co-occur with other architectural and social attributes.

The room originally had a domed roof, supported in the corners by four pendentives, the triangular segments that allowed the rectangular plan of the walls to support the circular shape of the dome. The entire interior surface of the walls, the pendentives and the dome were covered with whitewash and selectively decorated. Fragments collected from the collapsed dome reveal that it was partially decorated, with the central portion holding a colorful geometric design. The pendentives were painted with figures of nude winged female figures with outstretched arms holding a floral wreath in their hands that reached from one figure to the next. Some parallels to these figures, as well as the architecture, can be found in a mortuary context, the tomb of Petosiris at al- Muzawwaqa in the Dakhleh Oasis. The Petosiris tomb has similar figures supporting the heavens amid an interesting melding of Greek, Roman, and traditional Egyptian mortuary motifs (Osing 1982, Whitehouse 1998). However, it is important to note that Egyptian iconography was presumably deployed in the mortuary context in order to emphasize the other-worldly qualities of death or specific cultic activities, as can be found in other examples of

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[6] The portrayal of Greek mythology was common in Roman domestic paintings. The reference to a Greek mythological past was neither exclusively Greek nor Roman, but fully a part of the identities of both cultures.

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"double-style", or hybrid Greek/Roman and Egyptian iconography (Castiglione 1961, Empereur 2003, Gabra 1941, Venit 1997, Venit 1999).

Beginning with painting on the northern wall, which divides the painted room from the courtyard, there are several recognizable mythological scenes. To the left of the door leading to the courtyard, Perseus holds the head of Medusa, while he rescues Andromeda from a rather endearing sea monster. This scene is distinguished from all other scenes because it has a pale yellow background rather than the white background used for the other painted scenes in this room. All of the scenes have light colored backgrounds, which were traditionally used during the Late Antique Period in areas that admitted little natural light (St. Clair 2002:245). Below Perseus and Andromeda is an unconnected and less sophisticatedly painted sub-zone that consists of two panels. The left panel depicts a servant in a decorated tunic standing beside wine jars in a rack and the right panel shows a nude child lounging on a bolster. Helen Whitehouse suggests that this child is a representation of Harpocrates and that it originally featured a snake that was subsequently obscured by a later addition of cherub-like wings (2005). To the right of the door leading to the courtyard, Eurycleia washes Odysseus' feet while he reclines on an elevated stool covered in sheepskin. A noble woman, presumably Penelope, sits to the right of these figures and looks off into the distance rather than at Odysseus. It is the occasion of his homecoming and the moment where the nurse first recognizes his concealed identity. Although the story is well known, the painting is unique in Egypt (Jackson 2002:295, note 116). An occasion of homecoming raises tempting questions about the homeland of the occupants of this house and why this particular moment in the story of Odysseus was chosen.

The eastern wall of the same room is divided into two horizontal registers containing smaller painted figures than those found on the other walls (Figure 5). Between the two

Figure 5: East wall of Area 2 house: *Polis* and the gods wall painting

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figured scenes, a grey band labels the Greek figures in the scenes. Beneath these registers there is an additional geometric zone. Only the lower portion of the upper register and the geometric zone survive *in situ*. A possible temple is represented on the left with four columns and an architrave and the city walls below. To the right of the images of public architecture, a woman labeled as *Polis*, gestures toward the temple with her right hand and holds a golden scepter in her left. The depiction of public architecture was not uncommon in Roman domestic wall paintings and may have been employed as an analogy to the control the *paterfamilias* had over his own world that, in turn, was represented as high status (Hales 2003:128-129, 144-145). Lisa Montagno Leahy, in one of the few articles published on the paintings, posits that the figure of *Polis* represents Amheida itself (1980:354), which suggests that the inhabitants included Amheida within the trajectory of Greek and Roman heritage displayed on the walls. To the right of *Polis*, the eastern wall depicts Aphrodite and Ares caught in the act of adultery. Hephaistos uses an invisible net of chains to hold them while a group of inquisitive male gods steals a look as the drama unfolds.

The west wall of the room is only partially preserved (Figure 6). Like the east wall it is divided into horizontal registers by a black register line and only the lower register survives *in situ*. Individual scenes on the lower register seem to be subdivided by a vertical black line. Beneath the scenes a geometric zone appears again, just as it did on the eastern wall. The figured scene portrays a family at dinner. Four figures, three adult males and a woman, recline on a couch and listen to the music provided by a figure to their left. A smaller figure, a male child, stands next to the musician. Three large

Figure 6: West wall of Area 2 house: Family at dinner wall painting

detached blocks from this wall display mythological material comparable to myths encountered on other walls in this same room. These scenes include Orpheus charming the animals with his lyre; a chariot scene featuring a male figure in military dress standing beside a female figure at ease; and a group of figures, including a woman, restraining another figure, who wields a sword. Despite the incomplete state of these blocks, many related fragments have been identified amongst the smaller detached pieces, and reassembly should aid specific identification of the myths recounted in these images (Whitehouse 2005).

The south wall of the room is the most poorly preserved wall of the painted room. It contained a large niche that may, in part, be responsible for the collapse. To the right of this niche there remains *in situ* only a horse's head above a reclining woman wearing a turban. The details of this figure recall scenes in which an Emperor rides in victory above prostrate barbarians however the *in situ* paintings and the associated fragments cannot yet verify such an identification (Whitehouse 2005).

The subject matter of the wall paintings displays a prevalence of Homeric references. The representation of such narratives within this domestic context is particularly significant because they emphasize a Greek and Roman heritage. The citation of the past ties individual identities into historically understood categories and therefore provides a potent representation of a chosen identity. Elite efforts to carry on the Roman tradition throughout the empire symbolized their participation in the greater Empire and buttressed their prestige locally (Thebert 1987:329). Likewise, the narratives from the painted room assert belonging to the greater Roman Empire. The scenes cite a deep mythological past while simultaneously indicating the identity of an individual with the education and creativity associated with elite members of the Roman Empire. Within an imperial context, such memories take on greater significance because they are seen as maintaining a particular lifestyle embodying a set of cultural *mores* (Said 1993:66). Through the citation of both recent and deep mythological pasts, the wall paintings promote a sense of continuity between these pasts and the establishment of civic identity at Amheida. Furthermore, the representation of *Polis* tempts an interpretation of these paintings as a declaration that Amheida itself, a *polis*, is a descendent of its classical ancestors. Along with this *polis*, the household has inherited its proper social position as part and parcel of this Roman social context.

The use of representational media to commemorate past events is one of the most accessible means for archaeologists to retrieve memory. Wall paintings are particularly helpful media for understanding memory because the social behaviors that accompany them have a long history of study in the Roman context. As Bettina Bergmann has argued, educated Romans learned proper attitudes for approaching the narratives displayed in decorated houses. The entire process of maneuvering through the house involved a creative association between the scenes displayed and memories of mythologies from the Greek and Roman past (Bergmann 1994:226). Mastery of Roman culture, regardless of one's origin, was an important component of patronage and privilege within the Roman Empire. Being or becoming Roman entailed a participation in the cultural system comprised of material culture, habit, and social *mores* common to the empire (Woolf 2003:238-249). Furthermore, knowledge of mythology became an effective status marker that unified the elite across the Roman empire (Cameron

2004:218). The visitors and inhabitants of this house would have interpreted the deployment of Greek mythological scenes within the context of Romanization, even if some visitors did not understand specific cultural references because they were missing from their own educational repertoire. The material manifestations of narrative anchored memories and bestowed them with tangible and long lasting associative aspects within their contexts of usage and display. For example, Edward Said has demonstrated that narratives are significant components to the intertwining of culture and imperialism (1993:xii). Narratives within imperial or colonial contexts enable the expression of identity and expound the existence of divergent histories for colonists or colonized people. Material indices of narrative, in particular, enable palpable and residually potent memories both within the initial context of their creation and in the long-term.

Interpretations garnered from the wall paintings cannot be interrogated or complemented by the associated assemblage since the material culture of this structure has not yielded significant information regarding the identities of the inhabitants. Both elite and utilitarian artifacts are associated with this house. However, there was a general lack of material left behind, suggesting that the departure from the house was slow and planned. Valuable items were most likely removed at this time and therefore there is little that remains with which to materially balance and test identity interpretations suggested by the wall paintings. As an assemblage, the material culture suggest that the major period of occupation was sometime between the late 3rd through the middle of the 4th century AD. The latest datable coins and *ostraka* that we have date to the reign of Constantius II, which gives us a *terminus ante quem* for both the occupation of the house and the execution of these paintings. Likewise, the ceramic assemblage from the house is primarily helpful with regards to comparanda since it is similar to domestic assemblages from nearby Ismant el-Kharab, with many multi-functional vessels represented in the most common local fabric (Dunsmore 2002, Pyke 2005). Ultimately, the material culture so far recovered affirms an upper class identity, although there are no signatures associated with specific identities—be it ethnicity, gender, age, and so forth—in the artifacts among the assemblage.

Unlike the material culture, the associated texts offer some indication as to the identity of the inhabitants. Among *ostraka* recovered, three identify a city councilor, Serenos, who appears to have been the owner of the house. These three *ostraka* belong to a number of personal letters exchanged between Serenos and his colleagues Philippos and Paesis (Bagnall and Ruffini 2004). In addition to these letters, a large number of *ostraka* refer to businesses related to wells, which have always been the real measure of wealth and importance in the oasis (Giddy 1987, Mills 1998). These texts affirm that the owner of the house was probably of an elite status with a margin of control over local civic affairs (Bagnall and Ruffini 2004). Since the man who commissioned the decoration of his house typically held the decisive role of determining the themes and perhaps even the way they were carried out (Thebert 1987:393), it is likely that these paintings were commissioned and planned by Serenos or one of his ancestors.

However, it is important to be cautious when constructing a collective image of the *familia*'s identity. The individuals who visited and occupied this space would have viewed the images differently depending upon divergent vectors of their identity, be it age, sex, ethnicity, or even class (Meskell 2001). The house reflects the particular status

of an elite male with the associated status of his role in society. As of yet, we have not recovered identities of other individuals inhabiting the house, either through written sources or objects. Furthermore, we have only scant yet tantalizing hints of the identities of potential visitors to the house from the *ostraka*. We are left with questions regarding who else would have inhabited this space and how their interpretations would have shifted during the course of their own life spans and in reflection of their gender, status, and ethnicity. As mentioned earlier, it is also unclear who would have had access to these paintings and at what times. Glimpses of these paintings would have been visible from most rooms in the house yet it is unlikely that everyone would be provided admittance. The privilege of viewing the paintings may therefore have been at least a subconscious marker of status within the household.

| 5 | THINKING ABOUT MEMORIES, IMPERIALISM, AND DOMESTIC CONTEXTS

A microhistory of a domestic context at Amheida reveals a house inhabited by moderately wealthy occupants. The lifespan of the house itself probably did not extend beyond two or three generations. During this lifespan, the architecture shows signs of remodeling, while the decorative motifs employed in the painted room were never substantially altered. The architecture of the house displays a combination of typical local Late Antique domestic architecture in addition to other traditions, including currently unparalleled architectural features. However, the painted room attracts the most attention today, as it probably did in antiquity. As such, this microhistory catalyzes a host of questions that may help guide future work on the houses at Amheida, Roman Egypt, and beyond.

How would other houses express social, ethnic, and political identities? A close examination of Serenos' house helps highlight possible interpretations for incomplete material from other houses at Amheida. For example, a thick fragment of wall-plaster with a heading in large letters and four lines of Greek poetry was found on the surface of an elaborate, potentially domestic structure north of the one currently under excavation (Bagnall 2005). This fragment probably originates from the same structure as the fragments of a metrical text discovered at Amheida prior to excavations at the site (Wagner 1976). These fragmentary texts have Homeric associations and appear to have been part of the wall decoration of this house. Signifiers of a classical education therefore may prove to be an important theme at Amheida among wealthier inhabitants. However, the means of expressing classical education may vary from structure to structure, be it through texts, paintings, architectural signatures, or portable artifacts.

How would houses of different status levels have expressed their own identities? Given the supposition that elite houses at Amheida may illustrate a predominately classical identity, the representation of memories associated with specific ethnicities may be linked to status and should be an important aspect of research as additional houses are unearthed. Another partially excavated house from Amheida provides some helpful points of contrast with the one under discussion. This second house is from Area 1, in the northern portion of the site (Figure 2). This second house is much smaller than Serenos' house and is approximately square in plan view (Figure 7). Although the building itself was considerably eroded by the strong sand-laden wind in this portion of the site, the material culture and botanical remains were preserved to a higher degree than the house in Area 2. This second house used slightly different building technologies than Serenos' house, with brick-laying strategies that appear more similar to techniques used in the Fayum region. The ceramics assemblage for this second house is quite similar to the structure in Area 2, although simpler in shape and decoration (Pyke 2005). Ceramics and associated texts also suggest that the second house might be slightly earlier date than the house in Area 2. Soil samples taken from this second house have better preserved botanical remains than elsewhere at Amheida. High concentrations of desiccated rodent droppings found in and around complete vessels on the floor of one room indicate high levels of rodent activity in the area (Walter 2005). Furthermore,

several beads were found, two of which were likely imported since they are made of clear glass with gold leaf inside. Finds that may prove particularly potent include Egyptian language texts and a piece of a *djed* pillar amulet. This amulet is an apotropaic device associated with Osiris, resurrection, and the stability of the ancient Egyptian monarchy. The confluence of several artifacts that may point to an Egyptian heritage in a lower-status house suggest future lines of inquiry into the associations between specific ethnic heritages, economic level, architectural style, and perhaps even neighborhood.
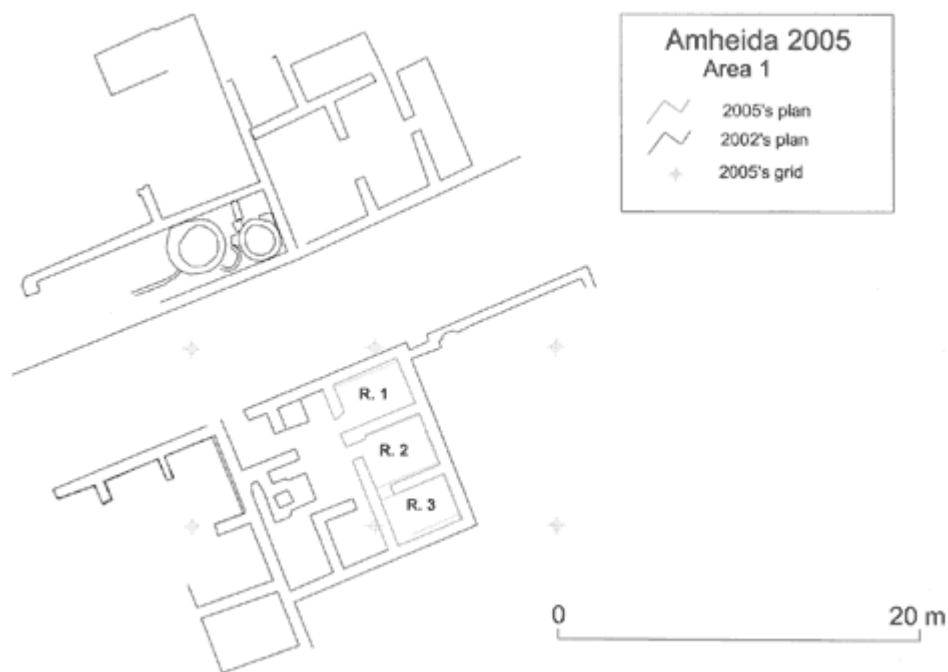
Figure 7: Plan of Area 1 house

How would expressions of identity and heritage change over time? In the course of excavating the house linked to Serenos, a room belonging to an adjoining house to the south was excavated. This room appears to have had a very different occupational history from its neighbor, as indicated by numerous floor layers and substantial numbers of artifacts. Given that this additional house has a similar layout to the excavated house, it is likely that it also had wall paintings. These wall paintings would have been retouched and overpainted during the life history of the house. This southern house might therefore provide valuable information of the changing sources of identity construction at Amheida by a family of comparable wealth to that of the excavated house.

Conclusion

Memory and heritage are critical components of identity formation and continuance. Within the context of empire, the display of heritage reinforces and informs connections between individuals and their relationship to society. A Roman Period Egyptian house provides an illustrative microhistory of the complex post-conquest conditions that intertwined memory, identity, and empire. The house examined here provides us with the image of Serenos that he wanted to display; an elite with an element of control over local civic affairs and a definite signature of Hellenism. No artifacts, other than the *ostraka*, currently remain to complicate that representation of Serenos or to access other individuals that occupied the house. However this microhistory provokes avenues of inquiry for future research into households from Roman Egypt, as well as the small-scale elements of imperial consolidation.

Identity negotiations were probably strongly felt—and displayed—in this important urban center, particularly in a house owned by an elite member of the city council. Fortunately there is every reason to believe that future excavations at Amheida will yield evidence to clarify matters further—and perhaps provoke even more questions about the lives, memories and identities of its inhabitants.

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