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Frontiers and Borderlands in Imperial Perspectives: Exploring Rome's Egyptian Frontier

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Abstract

Archaeological research has addressed imperial frontiers for more than a century. Romanists, in particular, have engaged in exploring frontiers from economic, militaristic, political, and (more recently) social vantages. This article suggests that we also consider the dialogue between space and social perception to understand imperial borderland developments. In addition to formulating new theoretical approaches to frontiers, this contribution represents the first comprehensive overview of both the documentary sources and the archaeological material found in Egypt's Great Oasis during the Roman period (ca. 30 B.C.E. to the sixth century C.E.). A holistic analysis of these sources reveals that Egypt's Great Oasis, which consisted of two separate but linked oases, served as a conceptual, physical, and human buffer zone for the Roman empire. This buffer zone protected the "ordered" Nile Valley inhabitants from the "chaotic" desert nomads, who lived just beyond the oases. This conclusion suggests that nomads required specific imperial frontier policies and that these policies may have been ideological as well as economic and militaristic.*

INTRODUCTION

Frontiers and borderlands occupy distinct positions in both geographic and conceptual space. Imperial agents often construct frontier peoples as quasihuman and dangerous, although these same peoples typically serve as human buffer zones to protect imperial resources. The physical realities of frontier life typically reflect this ambivalent connection to the broader empire. Frontiers often contain objects and architecture connected to core areas as well as material culture from beyond imperial boundaries. These frontier conditions resonate with the characteristics of Thirdspace, which Soja describes as a way to bridge the gap between physical space and the way we mentally con-

ceive of space.[1] This philosophical approach suggests that the material realities of frontiers can be shaped according to the complicated needs and understandings of different communities through time. In turn, the geographic reality of a specific frontier zone will influence the ways in which peoples of various places perceive the frontier. By exploring this dialectical negotiation within a Romano-Egyptian frontier, I aim to tease out instances of conceptual prejudice from everyday realities and suggest additional interpretations of this frontier.

I examine Egypt's Oasis Major, "the Great Oasis," from a Thirdspace perspective to disentangle and interrogate the physical and conceptual components that made this zone a frontier within the Roman empire. Ultimately, I suggest that these material and abstract constructions turned the Great Oasis into a physical, conceptual, and human buffer zone between the "civilized" Nile Valley and the "chaotic" deserts. This case study of a single frontier sheds light on how we might interpret ambivalent evidence from other Roman frontiers and borderland scenarios.

Egypt's Great Oasis consists of two separate but linked oases known as Dakhla and Kharga, which are set deep within the Western Desert (figs. 1, 2).[2] Climatic conditions in the Western Desert are severe, with extreme highs and lows in temperature, seasonal sandstorms, and unforgiving sunlight. The presence of oases in the Western Desert makes sedentary life possible in this arid region and is supported by the artesian-water sandstone underlying the entire Western Desert.[3]

The Dakhla depression occupies an area of some 2,000 km². A great limestone escarpment forms Dakhla's northern and eastern boundaries, while the southern

[1] Soja 2000.

[2] In Arabic, "Dakhla" means "the Inner Oasis," and "Kharga" means "the Outer Oasis" (i.e., with respect to the desert rather than the Nile).
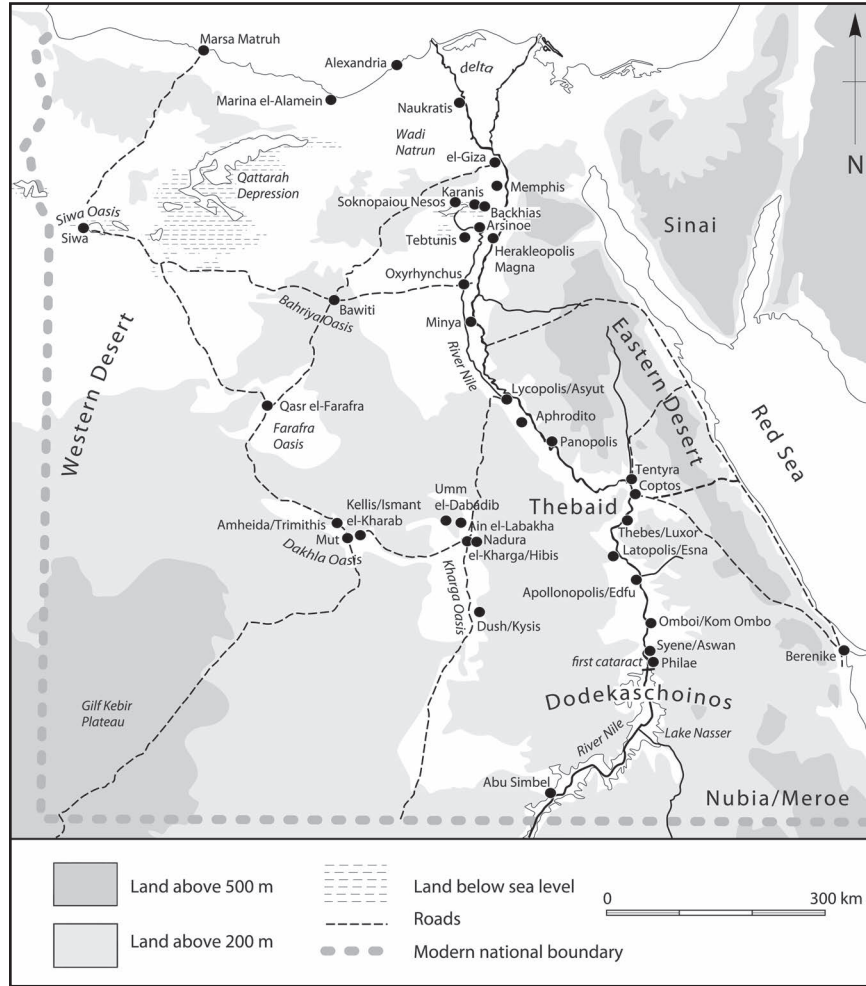
[3] Schild and Wendorf 1977, 10.
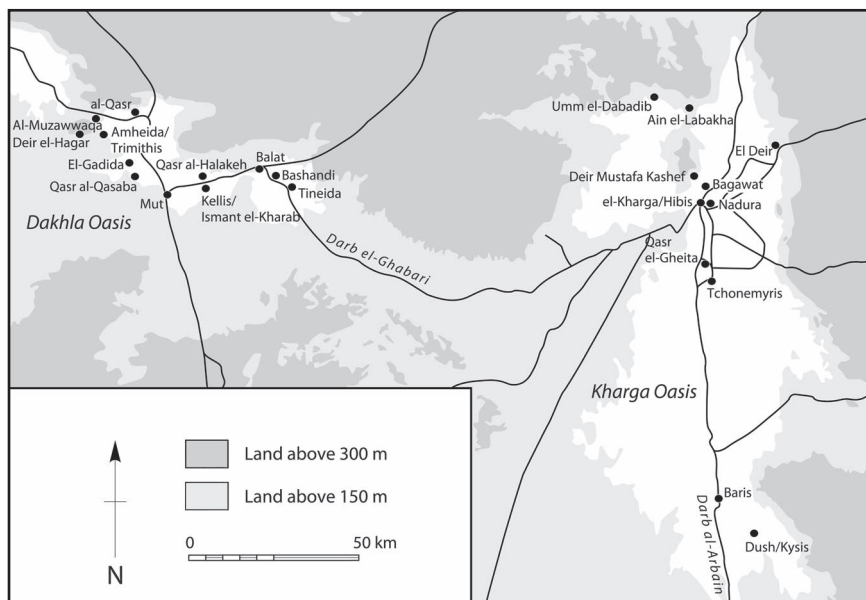
Fig. 1. Map of Egypt (drawing by M. Matthews).

Fig. 2. Map of the Oasis Major, "the Great Oasis" (black lines indicate roads) (drawing by M. Matthews).

portion of the oasis merges with the Saharan sands and extends into what is known as the Great Sand Sea.[4] The floor of the Dakhla Basin is approximately 100 masl. The scattered low-lying areas within this basin are used for cultivation, while settlements are built almost exclusively on the higher patches of landscape to preserve as much land for cultivation as possible.[5]

By contrast, Kharga is considerably more elongated than the Dakhla Oasis, making it the largest and most southerly of Egypt's main oases. The Kharga depression extends for 160 km along the north–south axis of this oasis, and Kharga varies between 20 and 80 km in width.[6] As in Dakhla, settlements in this oasis occupy the high ground, while people reserved the land that dipped into the basin for cultivation.[7] Despite these broad similarities, each oasis maintained a distinct personality throughout its settlement history.

Today, these oases are remarkably well preserved, and they have been the focus of recent documentary and archaeological research. There are now numerous publications about the archaeology, texts, art, geology, and history of the region.[8] From these studies, it emerges that the Romans established authority over the sedentary peoples of this region, or oasites, soon after they took control of Egypt in 30 B.C.E., although most archaeological and papyrological data indicate that Roman investment reached its apex in the third and fourth centuries C.E. A papyrus of 368/9 C.E. shows that the distribution of wealth between the oases was disproportionate, since the tax quota of Dakhla was 63% of the total for the Great Oasis unit.[9] This documentary evidence, complemented by recent archaeological data indicating lavish Dakhlan domestic

architecture, suggests that Dakhla was a substantially wealthier community than Kharga.

Most of the Roman-period sites from these oases date to the first through fourth centuries C.E., although they often rest on top of, or alongside, material from earlier periods, as many of these same sites were continually reused for settlement for at least three millennia.[10] This occupational history appears to have shifted toward the end of the fourth century C.E., when the population density contracted and inhabitants abandoned some of the major cities in favor of other areas. This shift in settlement patterns leaves us with numerous exposed Roman ruins, often without significant subsequent disturbance.

Drawing from a Thirdspace perspective, I suggest that Roman spatial ideologies influenced the development of the Great Oasis during the Roman period. These ideologies were based, in large part, on the particular geographic situation of each oasis. The social construction of space is part of imperialism. Imperial agents constructed their borders guided, in part, by these spatial ideologies.[11] Moreover, because the Romans thought of themselves as conquerors of peoples, not as conquerors of land, an exploration of the social and material components of this region will follow the Roman conception of imperialism more closely than isolated studies of military structures and linear barriers.[12] A Thirdspace perspective reveals that Roman frontier exploitations bridged empirical and phenomenological understandings of locality. Through a better understanding of this interplay on the frontier, we can build a more thorough understanding of Roman imperialism.

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[4] Schild and Wendorf 1977, 12; Mills 1985, 125.

[5] Schild and Wendorf 1977, 9–12.

[6] Ball 1900, 116.

[7] For more on the geography and geology of Kharga, see Ball 1900; Beadnell 1909; Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1952.

[8] The bibliography for this region is too large to list here. For summaries, see Giddy 1987; Wagner 1987; Kaper 1998a. A more comprehensive bibliography can be found at www.amheida.org/.

[9] Bagnall and Rathbone 2004, 262. A papyrus (*P. Lips.* 1.64; Wilcken 1912, no. 281) lists payments from the oases, and the contributions from Mothis (modern Mut el-Kharab) and Trimithis amount to roughly two-thirds of the total for payments. It is not clear whether Bagnall and Rathbone consider the wealth to be differential with respect to population density, arable land available, or economic value.

[10] Recent research has shown continuous occupation in Dakhla, although it was diminished from the late fourth century C.E. until the present day. E.g., ongoing research by Leemhuis (2009–2011) at al-Qasr, Dakhla, shows connections with the nearby Roman site of Trimithis.

[11] Jacobs 1996, 158. Scholars have long debated the extent to which imperial boundaries were rigidly defined along the physical landscape. Some scholars have cited rivers and linear barriers as evidence of physical limits (Isaac 1988, 128–32). Others have denied the existence of defined boundaries altogether. Although boundary markers (cippi) between cities were common, it is rare to find them used to demark the edge of an empire (Elton 1996, 17–19).

[12] On the Romans conquering people rather than land, see Hanson 1997, 377. Because these oases were located deep within the desert, natural barriers (e.g., rivers) did not determine the frontier there as they did in other areas of the empire. It has been argued that the Romans had no real interest in the desert itself (Isaac 1990, esp. 420). Rather, the desert barrier was a relational one. Locals understood the desert barrier with respect to its proximity to water, civilization, and dangerous nomadic groups. This barrier shifted over time and depending on the groups involved. An understanding of how different groups perceived this relational scale is dependent on both a social and a material exploration of the environment and underscores the need for Soja's Thirdspace approach.

EMPLACING THE ROMAN FRONTIER

Roman frontier studies address a range of topics including Roman management and control, military formulations, socioeconomic issues, and broad perspectives on change.[13] Recent studies have shown that the interactions between frontier peoples and the empire were more complicated than had been acknowledged previously, and Roman scholarship has begun to explore these multifaceted frontier exchanges.[14] This article explores the sociospatial frontier dialectic and complements these prior studies. Moreover, its physical emphasis will promote engagement between Roman scholarship and related disciplines (e.g., social geography, anthropology), which will be mutually beneficial by highlighting the sociospatial issues commonly present in frontier situations.[15]

This article draws on the resurgence of spatial theory that began with Lefebvre, a French sociologist and philosopher. Lefebvre's work addressed the social production of space and particularly how space relates to everyday life and material production.[16] He argued that material and conceptual space augment and influence each other in a way that can only be described by a third concept, which he called *un Autre*. Soja, an American geographer and urban planner, also sought an alternative approach to the binary opposition between mental and material space.[17] Soja built on Lefebvre's work in order to describe the distinctions between three different types of space. Firstspace consists of geographic and material space. Secondspace comprises conceptual understandings of space. The augmented entity created by the combination of Firstspace and Secondspace is Thirdspace, which is very much like Lefebvre's *un Autre*.[18] In summation, Lefebvre and Soja argue that mental and physical space not only influence each other but combine to form an amplified spatial unit.[19]

These philosophical concepts underscore physical space as an integral component in the material constitution and structure of social life rather than as a given backdrop against which social lives occur. The concepts of Thirdspace and *un Autre* underscore a common theme: social and spatial relations are dialectically interwoven, interdependent, and interreactive. In other words, social life and physical space mutually reinforce each other, creating a continuously evolving sense of space. Social actions within the material world are intertwined with this spatiality.[20]

This ongoing theoretical discussion explores how to bridge the gap between actual, physical space and the mental world that conceives of space. It seems reasonable that the physical and mental components of our existence should be in a dialectical and mutually reinforcing relationship with each other. In following Soja's theorization of Thirdspace, I suggest that the theoretical developments on material and conceptual space combine to form something greater than the sum of their parts. This theoretical focus is appropriate for exploring the Roman frontier because archaeologists depend on physical objects and spatial placement in our interpretations, but we have also realized that perceptions of frontiers affected their role within the empire. By exploring Egypt's Western Desert from a Thirdspace perspective, this article examines the social and geographic issues that came to bear on the relationship between this region and Rome after the former was incorporated into the empire. This frontier also provides a case study for understanding how sociospatial relationships affected other Roman frontiers.

EGYPT'S WESTERN DESERT AS CONCEPTUAL SPACE

Marginal locales, whether located on the periphery of a state or in an area removed from the predominant state culture, provoke a range of reactions from peoples inhabiting the core—concern, indifference, inclusion, exclusion, fear, and/or curiosity. Distance and natural barriers influence perceptions of physical space as central, peripheral, or in between. Elite ideologies often confirm these physical areas as socially

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[13] On the perspective that the Romans had a consistent, planned frontier policy, see Luttwak 1976. On the perspective that Roman frontier policy was reactive and localized, see Mann 1974, 1979; Potter 1992; Whittaker 1994, 23–50. On the army and troop supplies along the frontier, see Breeze 1984; Garnsey and Saller 1987, esp. 88–90; Hanson 1989; Isaac 1990; Bowman 1994. On frontier social changes more broadly, see Millett 1990; Elton 1996; Wells 2005.

[14] Downs 2000, 197.

[15] Some authors have observed that Roman frontier scholarship has not reached beyond Romanists (Rodseth and Parker 2005, 6), which could be redressed by more engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship.

[16] Lefebvre 1976, 1991a, 1991b.

[17] Soja 1985, 1996, 2000.

[18] Soja 1996, 10–11.

[19] The French philosopher Foucault (1986) also believed that material and mental space merge into an entity greater than the sum of those parts. Foucault provided the example of seeing oneself in a mirror: Othering takes place when viewing this image. This Othering results from the disconcerting combination of tangible and intangible elements within a single entity. This combined spatiality is called "heterotopias" in Foucault's terminology, and it is similar to Soja's Thirdspace and Lefebvre's *un Autre*.

[20] Soja 1985, 90.

and geographically peripheral, adding another level of engagement to the way individuals understand and relate to physical space. This issue is relevant to contemporary concerns, as Shields explains:

> [T]he marginal places that are of interest are not necessarily on geographical peripheries but, first and foremost, they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other.[21]

Spatial ideologies and geography greatly influence spatial perceptions in most empires.[22] These perceptions affect a myriad of decisions, including military campaigns, political distinctions, ideological choices, and economic sanctions.[23]

Within the Roman empire, geographic emplacement had a strong influence on the way the Romans interacted with different provinces. Far-removed provinces, such as Egypt, were particularly fraught regions within the Roman construction of space, and the Romans often actively reaffirmed those regions' geographically marginal nature through policy.[24]

In this section, I review the Roman social construction of the Great Oasis by considering the ways in which Romans understood its occupants. The paucity of documentary sources prevents a full diachronic perspective, yet discrete glimpses into how Roman authors viewed this region are possible. First, I look at the minimal evidence we have of Roman perceptions of the oasites. Then I explore the nomadic peoples who lived beyond the Great Oasis and whom the Romans understood as quasimythical and dangerous beings. Finally, I look into the Roman practice of banishment, in which exiles were sent to this region because they were considered too dangerous to occupy core areas of the empire. Romans who wrote about this region often conflated these three groups in their literature and considered them synonymous with the geography of the Great Oasis.[25]

The Oasites

Voyagers viewed travel to and from the oases with significant apprehension; the scorching heat of the desert aroused great anxiety. Roman-period texts documenting travel through the desert describe the area as a wasteland of heat, sandstorms, and general desiccation.[26] Mixed with this apprehension of the treacherous nature of the environment was a fear of the people: social and historical events distinguished the oasites from other Egyptians.[27] They were not only different but also forbidding, because the oases were a source of raids on the Nile Valley throughout history.[28]

Roman legal documents represented Egypt's oases as distant from the ordered world. For example, a census statement from 202/3 C.E. describes a slave "of the Oasis."[29] The specifically local designation of oasites in this document recognizes that critical divisions existed between these peoples and inhabitants of other regions in Egypt, much like the Roman distinctions between other ethnic groups. This labeling is not unique to the oasites, but it indicates that this piece of information was considered relevant for Roman legal documents.

Local oasis traditions appeared backward in comparison with the traditions of the Nile Valley inhabitants because oasites maintained somewhat archaic customs. The oasites used both the Egyptian and Alex-

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[21] Shields 1991, 3.

[22] Sinopoli 1993, 625.

[23] Archaeologists have addressed these issues through explorations of sacred space (Alcock 1993; Sinopoli 1993), memory (Alcock 2001, 2002; Sinopoli 2003), economic activity (Sinopoli 1994; D'Altroy and Hastorf 2001), and identity (Smith 2003; Mattingly 2010).

[24] The dialectic between geographic placement and social emplacement common to many societies profoundly affected the Egyptians during the Pharaonic era as well. Throughout Egyptian history, Egyptians considered foreign lands to be backward, exotic, and, perhaps worst of all, un-Egyptian. This perception shaped the exchanges that Egyptians had with peoples outside Egypt as well as localities far from home. During the Pharaonic era, Egyptians viewed ventures into the desert as exceptionally dangerous (Meskell 2002, 47–52; Sidebotham et al. 2008; Sidebotham 2011, 89). Social distinctions between individuals from different geographic areas persisted in Egypt and are still prevalent today (Hopkins and Saad 2004). Egyptians believe that both the nomadic and sedentary people of the Western Desert hold different ances-

try and customs from the rest of Egypt's populations (Abu-Lughod 1999, 41; Fakhry 2003, 166). Some current views of oasites remain negative, since many people still believe that the region is foreign and dangerous.

[25] For an overview of the confusions that often arise with nomadic and seminomadic groups, see Wendrich and Barnard 2008.

[26] Wagner (1987, 117–18) cites Athanasius of Alexandria (375 C.E.), who described desert travel as life threatening and added that if one arrived in the oases alive, one still had a good chance of perishing (Athanasius, *Apologia ad Constantium* 32 [Migne, *PG* 25.637]; *Apologia de fuga* 7 [Migne, *PG* 25.652–53]; *Historia Arianorum ad monachos* 72 [Migne, *PG* 25.780]). Prior to this time, Herodotus (3.26, 4.181) viewed desert travel as threatening but the oases as more civilized. Olympiodorus (*FHG* 4.64.33) and Diodorus Siculus (17.40.6, 17.50.3) had similar interpretations.

[27] Pinch 1994, 170.

[28] Hope 2007.

[29] *P. Oxy.* 1548; see also Wagner 1987, 120.

andrian calendars until the fourth century C.E., while the rest of Egypt had changed over to the Alexandrian calendar many years before.[30] Furthermore, oasites worshiped Seth, the god of chaos and foreign countries, from at least 1070 B.C.E. until ca. 200 C.E., while the rest of Egypt had systematically removed him from temples and worship after ca. 700 B.C.E.[31] The oasites often described themselves as different from other Egyptians, but this distinction may have been ambivalent, as it changed depending on the social context.[32]

Nomadic Peoples

During the Roman period, the oasis lands were divided between sedentary oasis people and nomadic tribes such as the Goniotai, Mastitai, Blemmyes, Nobatai, and Maziques, who from the third through sixth centuries C.E. periodically raided the oases and pillaged, killed, or enslaved people.[33] On occasion, these tribes joined forces with sedentary Libyans and attacked the Nile Valley. In 100 C.E., nomadic Bedouin and other groups began a series of raids on the Nile Valley, followed by the Blemmyes, who repeatedly came at it from the south (from the mid third to the mid sixth centuries C.E.).[34] In 258 C.E., the Libyans attacked the village of Kaminon in the Fayum.[35] The Goniotai attacked several villages in 237 C.E., and the Mastitai attacked Herakleopolis at around the same time.[36] Oxyrhynchus suffered numerous attacks throughout the third century by the Libyans and Goniotai.[37] Hibis, the capital of the Kharga Oasis, was attacked in 373 C.E., possibly by the Blemmyes, although it is debatable which group was responsible.[38] Hibis may have been destroyed under a second invasion in 450 C.E. (by the Blemmyes or possibly the Nobatai), during which the town was sacked and its inhabitants carried off as prisoners.[39] Following this attack, the city

went into a state of decline, although there are Coptic graffiti nearby that suggest the town continued to survive well into the Islamic era.[40]

Documentary sources on the Blemmyes identify them as outsiders, "either as part of a geographical description, as an exotic phenomenon, or as enemies of the state or established religion."[41] It is unclear to what extent the Blemmyes can be identified as an ethnic group, particularly as there are vast numbers of synonyms relating to them (e.g., Bulahau, Beja, Bougaites). Barnard has put forward the suggestion that several nomadic groups probably wandered the desert and that the boundaries between these groups were fluid and overlapping, making any disentanglement of them impossible for outsiders.[42] Indeed, the label "Blemmyes" appears to have been a catchall term for nomadic groups in the vicinity of the Nile Valley, the Red Sea, and the Western Desert, so acts ascribed to the Blemmyes are dubiously attributed and should be understood as such.

Myths of the Blemmyes can be traced through many centuries of works dating back to the pre-Roman period. Roman authors inherited and reappropriated these myths to explain who the Blemmyes were and what they represented. Pliny the Elder's ca. 80 C.E. description of the Blemmyes contains fossils of these long-standing myths:

> In the middle of the desert some place live the Atlas tribe and next to them the half-animal Goat-Pans and the Blemmyes and Gamphasantes and Satyrs and Strapfoods. . . . The Blemmyes are reported to have no heads, their mouth and eyes being attached to their chest.[43]

The Blemmyes, as described here, consorted with all sorts of creatures—mythical, hybrid, and enigmatic.

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[30] The Egyptian calendar was a solar calendar lacking a leap year (Hagedorn and Worp 1994; Kaper 1997a, 149).

[31] Gardiner 1933; te Velde 1967, 107, 115–16, 138–51; Osing 1985; Kaper 1997a, 210–11; Pinch 2002, 191–94. There is a famous relief of Seth at Hibis in Kharga (Cruz-Uribe 1988). Seth was a particularly important god in Dakhla, and the cult of Seth is represented at Mothis, at Shrine I at Kellis, and at Deir el-Hagar (Mills 1981, 188; Kaper 1997b, 210–11; 1998b, 149). Seth can also be found at the temple at Amheida (Kaper, pers. comm. 2011).

[32] Inhabitants of the Great Oasis and the Eastern Desert viewed the Nile Valley as another country. Roman and Early Byzantine documents from these regions refer to the Nile Valley with the word "Aiguptos" (Egypt). Travel to the Nile Valley entailed "going to Egypt" (Bingen 1998, 290).

[33] Wagner 1987, 247.

[34] Bagnall 1993, 146.

[35] Wagner 1987, 395. On Kaminon, see *P. Princeton* 2.29.5–7.

[36] Wagner 1987, 395. On the Goniotai, see Wessely 1965, 2:

sec. 45.2. On the Mastitai attack on Herakleopolis, see Königliche Museen zu Berlin 1900, no. 935.

[37] Wagner 1987, 395. On these attacks, see *P. Oxy.* 2681.5–13, 3292.

[38] Wagner 1987, 396–97. This argument about the destruction of Hibis is based on a Demotic text from the Temple of Isis at Philae, dated to November 373 C.E. (Griffith 1937, 104–5 n. 371, pl. 56).

[39] Winlock 1936, 48–9; Wagner 1987, 399.

[40] Winlock 1936, 49–50. Some authors show doubt about the continued survival of the town (e.g., Jackson 2002, 179), but Hibis does seem to have survived.

[41] Barnard 2005, 33. On the Blemmyes, see also Kirwan 1972, 173; Török 1988; Updegraff 1988; Eide et al. 1998, esp. 1177–81, no. 324; Lassány 2005; Barnard 2007; Sidebotham 2011, 266–67.

[42] Barnard 2005, 34; see also Burstein 2008.

[43] Plin., *HN* 5.44, 5.46 (translation by Rackham 1989).

Individuals typically divide up and label landscapes in reflection of their inhabitants.[44] Indeed, a social construction that fetishizes physical attributes is found in numerous societies, both ancient and modern.[45] Although Pliny recognized that the Blemmyes occupied a human form, he removed the most human of attributes—the head—and displaced the essential organs. The absence of a head removed rational, human capacity and even humanity from the Blemmyes. That these acephalous creatures consorted with other mythical tribes who occupied a fragile territory between human and animal underscored the questionable nature of the Blemmyes.

These mythical accounts were remarkably consistent over time. Avienus, a Roman writer from the fourth century C.E., described the Blemmyes as large in stature, dark skinned, and slender waisted. Protruding muscles delineated their arms and legs, and when they ran they never left a footprint.[46] Avienus bestows more humanity on the Blemmyes than does Pliny, yet Avienus invests them with magical, quasihuman powers, such as moving without affecting the material world. Rather than assaulting their humanity, Avienus cultivates an image of the Blemmyes as superhuman, larger, and more potent than the human forms with which Romans were familiar.

Such creatures naturally required special tactics in warfare. According to the *Chronicon Paschale*, Decius employed particularly unusual measures in his wars against the Blemmyes (249–251 C.E.):

> Decius . . . brought from dry Libya poisonous snakes and dreadful hermaphrodites and released [them] at the Egyptian frontier because of the barbarians, the Noubades and the Blemmyes.[47]

The Romans could not rely on the standard tactics executed against humans because these nomadic peoples inspired notions of ambiguity. In recognition of this ambiguity, the Romans dispatched creatures that occupied similarly ambivalent territories between standard categories of human/animal, male/female, and domesticated/wild. Hermaphrodites, as beings occupying the border between male and female, served as potent forces against the peoples who inhabited a geographic frontier between cultured/sedentary Rome and the barbarian/nomadic world. The use of correspondence in magic, known as sympathetic magic, was considered a particularly potent apotropaic device by many ancient cultures and served as grounding for this deployment of Hermaphrodites.

Exiles

Social constructions of oasites and their nomadic neighbors as strange and frightening peoples encouraged the Roman state to use the quasi-Egyptian oases as a zone of exile. As a result, the oases were home to criminals, a group of people who were also partially contained within and held outside of human society, much like the quasihuman nomadic peoples. The Romans created this category of exiles both through fostering intangible perceptions of the oasites as dangerous and through the tangible act of banishing criminals to the oases. Criminals, unorthodox thinkers, and taxation escapees took refuge there, if involuntarily.[48] The perpetual migrations of liminal groups actively reaffirmed the original construction of the oases as a buffer zone.

Deportation, a formalized form of banishment, was customary in the Roman empire for accused persons. Deportees were typically sent someplace unpleasant, and the Great Oasis is explicitly mentioned as one of the disagreeable options for banishment.[49] According to the third-century Roman lawyer Ulpian (*Dig.* 48.22.7.5), Roman laws designated the Kharga Oasis as a place to banish criminals for short periods of time, such as six months to a year.[50] The Byzantine hagiographer Metaphrastes describes the frightful experience that two priests, Eugenius and Macarius, had when exiled to the Great Oasis in 362 C.E. According to Metaphrastes, Emperor Julian sent them there "because this region carries illness, mainly due to the

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[44] On the link between individuals and the landscape, see Shields 1991, 12.

[45] Taussig 1987; Harrison 1992, 6–10; Horkheimer and Adorno 2000; Benjamin 2007, 114.

[46] Avienus, *Descriptio orbis terrae* (translation by Updegraff 1988, 69).

[47] *Chron. Pasch.* (Dindorf 1832, 504–5; translation by Updegraff 1988, 69). The use of snakes from Libya underscores potential connections between Libya and Egypt. Although the *Chronicon Paschale* is a seventh-century C.E. text, it follows earlier chronicles.

[48] Mitteis 1912, no. 78. For Eastern Desert parallels, see Sidebotham 2011, 165.

[49] Robinson 1998. The oases had long been used as a banishment region. The New Kingdom story of Wermai describes a Heliopolitan priest who fled to a rural community in the Great Oasis after being stripped of his office and excluded from his town (Caminos 1997, 26). Between the 21st and 25th Dynasties, the rulers of Thebes used the Kharga Oasis as a place of banishment for political opponents (Fakhry 2003, 62).

[50] Edmonstone 1822, 137; Krueger 1987 (*Inst. Iust.* 1.12.1).

devastating winds which sweep it; as a result, not a single one of those who were sent there has ever survived more than one year; on the contrary, they all died very quickly over there, succumbing to serious illness."[51]

The perceptions of Egypt's deserts changed somewhat with the advent of Christianity—fears of the Western Desert were largely amplified—and the Great Oasis remained a popular banishment zone.[52] During this time, the desert became strongly associated with monasticism, deprivation, and withdrawal from human society.[53] Ascetics used the desert to create spatial and social distance between themselves and traditional family, property, and social ties.[54] Banishment institutionalized these spiritual associations with the desert.

Nestorius, the archbishop of Constantinople (428–431 C.E.), is the quintessential example of a Christian exile. His controversial teachings, called Nestorianism by his enemies, emphasized the disunity of the human and divine natures of Christ and brought Nestorius into conflict with other prominent churchmen of the time, who accused him of heresy. On 3 August 435 C.E., Theodosius II issued an imperial edict that exiled Nestorius to a monastery in the Great Oasis. Nestorius was later injured in the previously mentioned desert bandit raid on the area around Hibis.

An examination of the Western Desert as conceptual space shows that a range of Roman authors—sober historians (the *Chronicon Paschale*), geographers (Pliny), and poets (Avienus)—perceived the oases as removed from the ordered world and their occupants as creatures intertwined with magical and barbaric realms. Documentary sources indicate that Roman lawyers reinforced the liminal nature of this zone by using it as a place of banishment for dangerous peoples from at least the third century through the fifth century. Therefore, the perception of this space appears to have influenced Roman imperial policy with respect to the movement of peoples as well as tactics for dealing with them.

THE GREAT OASIS IN MATERIAL SPACE

Archaeological remains provide crucial testimony of the strong physical impact that Roman rule had on oasites. This material also indicates that local peoples had social ties to regions beyond the Great Oasis. In this section, I explore three material components of daily life in Dakhla and Kharga: fortresses, domestic structures, and material culture. These three components provide different views of physical realities in the Great Oasis and represent some of the most comprehensive archaeological material recovered from this region. These data suggest that the Great Oasis was significantly more cosmopolitan than one might imagine from descriptions in documentary sources, and they explain why this region became a valuable buffer zone between chaos and order. I explore this interplay between material and conceptual space in the final section to indicate how this buffer zone came about.

Fortresses

The Romans distributed fortresses along the oasis routes and resource networks sometime during or after the Tetrarchy (293 to ca. 313 C.E.) to protect their new sources of wealth.[55] This timing coincides with the documentary evidence of banishment as well as some of the fanciful descriptions of oasites. The oases were known as a crucial source for goods such as cotton, olives, dates, and wine, as well as alum, a chemical compound mined in the oases.[56] The oases also served as key trade points to more distant regions south and

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[51] Cited in Jackson 2002, 164.

[52] For a description of this shift and a corresponding list of ancient sources from the Christian era, see Wagner 1987, 117–20.

[53] Goehring 2007.

[54] Athanasius' *Life of Antony* describes Antony's withdrawal into the desert along with the disposal of his wealth and property.

[55] Egypt's Eastern Desert contains a Roman *limes* that may have been built on a proto-*limes* system created by the Ptolemies (Sidebotham 1991; Bagnall and Sheridan 1994; Maxfield 2005). The *limes* protected mines and quarries and facilitated the movement of travelers and merchants between the Nile and the Red Sea *emporia*. The *limes* also served as means for monitoring bandits and nomadic groups such as the Nobatai and the Blemmyes, who became hostile at points (Sidebotham 1997, 503; De Romanis 2003). Toward the end of the Roman presence in Egypt, the Blemmyes and other nomadic groups "barbarized" the Eastern Desert frontier.

It is not clear whether the Romans officially sanctioned this change or whether they simply accepted it as the reality of their current abilities to control such groups (Sidebotham 1997, 506).

[56] The time lag between Roman conquest and investment in the region may be explained by the advent of cotton as a crop in Egypt, which was probably introduced prior to the third century C.E. The oases were particularly suited for cotton cultivation (Bagnall 2008). Other oasis products have a longer history of exploitation. On wine, see Kaper and Wendrich 1998. On alum, see Giddy 1987, 5. The Nile Valley coveted specialized oasis crops, such as olives, dates, and wine, the cultivation of which was encouraged through improved irrigation techniques sponsored by the state (Caminos 1997, 13; Kaper and Wendrich 1998). Wine was the most desired oasis product from at least the New Kingdom until the Roman period (Redford 1977, 3). There are numerous references for Pharaonic appreciation of this oasite product (Newberry 1900; Giddy 1987, 62–5; Gosline 1990; Fakhry 2003, 59).

west of the Nile Valley, and therefore the economic value of the Great Oasis extended beyond the oases themselves. The massive population increase in Dakhla following the Roman conquest was potentially due to new economic ventures that were created in the oases in response to a Roman demand for luxury agricultural goods. The fortresses probably were established to protect these ventures.[57]

These Roman fortresses are attested in both documentary and archaeological sources. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, which dates to the Late Roman period, is our only complete list of military units and their places of garrison for any period. As such, it is a critical source for understanding military distributions in the empire. The chapters covering the eastern frontier are widely agreed to reflect the dispositions of Diocletian, as they probably date to sometime in the fourth century C.E. More specifically, the *Notitia* provides us with information about military distributions along Egypt's Western Desert. The defense of Dakhla appears to have included a cohort (foot soldiers) at Mut and an *ala* (mounted troops) at Amheida, and it seems likely that these defenses had been in existence since the early fourth century.[58] This distribution of forces in Dakhla suggests that threats to the security of the region came from the west and south.[59] It is clear from the *Notitia* that most Roman units, including the legions, were based on the desert fringe in the eastern portion of the empire, and therefore the data from Dakhla resonate with other eastern frontiers.[60]

Archaeology has corroborated the distribution of Roman military structures along Dakhla's desert fringe, although this distribution appears somewhat different from what the *Notitia* suggests.[61] Only three possible fortresses have been identified archaeologically in Dakhla thus far: Qasr al-Halakeh, located 4 km north of Kellis; Qasr al-Qasaba in the southwest; and al-Qasr (see fig. 2).[62] Al-Qasr may be the fortress that the *Notitia* identified as belonging to Trimithis; it is the one in

closest proximity to the site. These fortresses affirm that there was a perceived military need along the desert edge, but they are significantly less substantial in size and quantity than the Kharga fortresses. None of these fortresses has been excavated, so it is not yet possible to trace diachronic developments and adaptations.

The Kharga Oasis contains many more Roman-period fortresses than does Dakhla, and the locations of these forts suggests that the Romans were concerned with internal security as well as trade routes.[63] The most significant and commonly used road (which corresponds to the modern road typically used today) connected the north of the oasis to Asyut (ancient Lycopolis). Another route, which was nearly as important, reached the Nile Valley in the northern Panopolite nome, near the Antaiopolite.[64] Fortresses can be found in the vicinity of these major trade routes.

The dating of Kharga's fortresses remains as uncertain as that of Dakhla's fortresses. It is unclear whether their presence and distribution represent a response to changing circumstances, whether they were part of an overarching strategy, or a combination of the two.[65] Most of these fortresses are not substantial and were probably designed to impress, to intimidate, and to control traffic. Likewise, the construction techniques used for these fortresses signify that they could not sustain an earnest attack.[66] Despite uncertainties in dating, it is likely that the frontier was well established by the fourth century.

The function of these Kharga fortresses was not purely defensive. For example, part of the garrison of Hibis was probably located at Nadura, southeast of the Hibis temple and the surrounding settlement, which indicates mixed use of space.[67] Umm el-Dabadib also contains a fortress surrounded by a settlement (fig. 3). Dush, in the southern extremity of Kharga, was a garrisoned fortress with a settlement, temple to Sarapis, and cemeteries.[68] The fortress at Dush indicates the Romans' desire to signify their presence along the

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[57] Boozer 2011.

[58] A cohort consists of 500–1,000 foot soldiers. An *ala* consists of 500–1,000 troops mounted on either horses or camels. The dating of the distribution is dependent on *P. Kellis* 1.G.49 (Wagner 1987, 375–77).

[59] Wagner 1987, 394–400.

[60] Egypt's Eastern Desert provides important comparanda for the Western Desert. On the Eastern Desert *limes*, see supra n. 55. On bandits, tax evaders, and local nomads of the Eastern Desert, see MacMullen 1966, 255–68; Sidebotham 1986, 164–65 nn. 229–30; 2011, 3, 163; Young 2001, 71–2; De Romanis 2003. On banditry in the Roman empire, see Shaw 2004; Adams 2007, 20–1.

[61] Parker 1997, 116–17.

[62] On Qasr al-Qasaba, see Jackson 2002, 202. Al-Qasr has

recently shown surface evidence of Roman defensive walls, and excavations by the Supreme Council of Antiquities have exposed more of the circuit wall (J. Jobbins, "Surface Evidence," *al-Ahram* [23–29 March 2006] http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/787/heritage.htm).

[63] Reddé 1999.

[64] Bagnall and Rathbone 2004, 249–50.

[65] Morkot 1996, 87.

[66] Rossi 2000; Ikram and Rossi 2004.

[67] Bagnall 2001, 6–7.

[68] Dush has been under excavation by the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale for more than a quarter of a century and is the best-documented site in Kharga. For more on these excavations, see Dunand et al. 1992; Reddé et al. 2004.

Fig. 3. Umm el-Dabadib fortress, viewed from the south, along with mudbrick structures from the surrounding settlement ("Umm el-Dabadib, Fortress [V]," Ancient World Image Bank, New York, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 2009–, www.flickr.com/photos/isawnyu/4565753237, used under terms of a Creative Commons Attribution license).

desert's edge.[69] These fortresses were clearly multifunctional—serving as military, administrative, and even religious centers for oasis settlements—and therefore might best be interpreted as Roman footholds in the region rather than as purely defensive footprints. At this stage, it appears that the Kharga Oasis merited greater attention for these multiuse structures, and the enhanced Roman military presence in Kharga may be attributed to its close proximity to the Nile Valley as well as its importance as a way station for merchants.

Domestic Structures

The archaeological evidence of houses from the Great Oasis gives us a sense of how ordinary people adapted themselves to this extreme environment and to Roman rule. Houses are important for exploring

questions of individual and community identities because households are the result of the interaction between larger social forms and the individual.[70] They measure social processes because they reveal the forms and consequences of broad social changes on the local level.[71] Because the house serves as a locus of family life and mirrors expansive social norms, it is a useful arena for exploring the lived experiences of individuals in the Great Oasis.[72] This evidence shows individuals actively "making" the frontier through material culture and their daily life choices. These choices indicate that oasites occupied an intermediary position between local traditions and Roman Mediterranean norms.

Domestic structures in Dakhla drew on Greek and Roman traditions as well as Egyptian forms.[73] The typical layout of Dakhla domestic architecture from

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[69] The Romans seem to have had a preference for building their fortresses on previously unsettled land. It is possible that this practice arose from a desire to avoid conflicts with indigenous peoples and their gods, who may have viewed overbuilding as provocative behavior (Beard et al. 1998, 214–15). The emplacement of fortresses on the extreme edges of habitable land in the oases may reflect this preference, although there is certainly evidence for Roman co-option of historic structures

in Egypt (e.g., Nadura and Luxor).

[70] Johnson 1989; Cowgill 1993; Dobres and Robb 2000.

[71] Hendon 2004, 279.

[72] On the relationship between houses and broad social norms, see Bourdieu 1966; Hillier and Hanson 1984; Donley-Reid 1990; Bachelard 1994.

[73] Boozer 2007. The Fayum region is the most comprehensive source for Romano-Egyptian houses with which we

the Roman period can be seen most clearly in the evidence from recent excavations by the Dakhla Oasis Project at ancient Kellis (Ismant el-Kharab). Results from these excavations indicate that Roman Dakhla domestic buildings of the second through fourth centuries C.E. usually consisted of a single-story structure with barrel-vaulted roofs and a central room that was often partially, lightly, or completely unroofed (fig. 4).[74] This central room may indicate Roman Mediterranean influences rather than a traditional Egyptian plan, which relegated such areas to one side of or behind the house proper.[75] We see some variations in this plan during the second through fourth centuries in the Dakhla Oasis at both Kellis and Trimithis. Even so, it is significant that these houses lean toward the Roman-style end of a Romano-Egyptian domestic spectrum.

Houses owned by Dakhla's wealthy inhabitants were lavishly decorated with wall paintings that resonated with Roman Mediterranean cultural norms (fig. 5). The New York University Excavations at Amheida (ancient Trimithis) have recovered the material remains of a house belonging to Serenos, a city councilor who worked and resided at Trimithis, one of the two cities in the Dakhla Oasis in the fourth century C.E.[76] Serenos' house (B1) contains material culture, artwork, and architecture that indicate a Roman Mediterranean identity, in which Homer may have served as a key anchor of this identity.[77] Although Homer was the quintessential Greek signifier, an obsessive love of Homer was worthy of remark. Indeed, Dio Chrysostom, writing in the first century C.E., remarked on the particular devotion to Homer that he found among the geographically liminal people of Borysthenes.[78] Excavations at the nearby site of ancient Kellis have revealed additional large decorated structures that reflect Roman Mediterranean influences. In particular, House B/3/1 at Kellis contains lavish decorative elements, paintings, and architecture. It is a 28 x 24 m residential structure that dwarfs most domestic units found elsewhere in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.[79] The wall
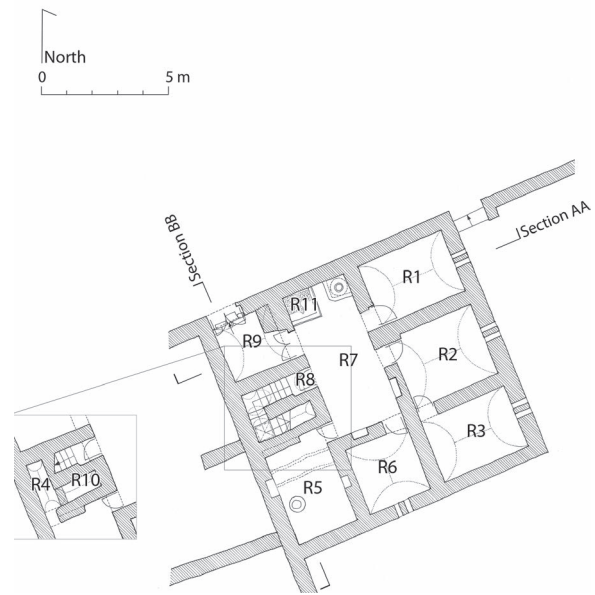

Fig. 4. A typical domestic building plan from late third-century C.E. Dakhla, showing room numbers (House B2, Trimithis, Dakhla Oasis) (drawing by N. Warner).

paintings in this structure draw on Pompeian styles as well as the Hellenistic "Masonry Style," further suggesting Graeco-Roman influences on oasite houses.[80]

On the lower end of the economic spectrum, we have a variety of second- to fourth-century C.E. houses from both Kellis and Trimithis in Dakhla. A modest third-century house (B2) from Trimithis reveals a family who negotiated a range of cultural affinities by deploying Greek, Egyptian, and Roman signatures at different points within the structure (see fig. 4).[81] Of particular interest were the indications that the women of House B2 may have adhered to an Egyptian identity more strongly than the men, who appear to have transitioned more seamlessly to Greek and Roman

can compare houses from the Great Oasis. The University of Michigan thoroughly excavated several towns in this region in the 1930s (Boak and Peterson 1931; Boak et al. 1935; Husselman 1979; Gazda 1983). As a result, Fayumic houses are well known to archaeologists, and they occupy a cornerstone in Romano-Egyptian domestic study. Houses from the Fayum are typically multistory structures with linear paths of access between rooms (Davoli 1998, 53, 85). This linear layout reflects more traditional Egyptian housing styles than does the clustered plan evident in Dakhla.

[74] Hope et al. 2006, 29.

[75] Husselman 1979, 49–54; Davoli 1998, 47; Alston 2002, 53.

[76] Bagnall and Ruffini 2004.

[77] Boozer 2005, 2010.

[78] "Knowing, then, that Callistratus was fond of Homer, I

immediately began to question him about the poet. And practically all the people of Borysthenes also have cultivated an interest in Homer, possibly because of their still being a warlike people, although it may also be due to their regard for Achilles, for they honour him exceedingly, and they have actually established two temples for his worship, one on the island that bears his name and one in their city; and so they do not wish even to hear about any other poet than Homer. And although in general they no longer speak Greek distinctly, because they live in the midst of barbarians, still almost all at least know the *Iliad* by heart" (Dio Chrys., *Or.* 36 [translation by Cohoon and Crosby 1940, 429–31]).

[79] Hope and Whitehouse 2006, 317.

[80] Hope and Whitehouse 2006, 327.

[81] Boozer 2010.

Fig. 5. Polis, the personification of Trimithis, from House B1, Trimithis, Dakhla Oasis (courtesy NYU Excavations at Amheida).

material culture.[82] Further, deep sondages beneath House B2 yielded Demotic (a late Egyptian script form) ostraka and traditional Pharaonic Egyptian objects. The built and portable material from this structure suggest that ethnic boundary making may have been mutable among ordinary people and that they did not police these boundaries strictly, at least among the more modest economic strata.

Houses from the Kharga Oasis appear to be situated between the Roman and the traditional Egyptian ends of the Romano-Egyptian housing spectrum. The unexcavated Roman-period houses from Umm el-Dabadib are laid out in regular blocks and consist of at least two

stories of barrel-vaulted rooms.[83] Likewise, the North Kharga Oasis Survey revealed that most domestic units were multistory, consisting of at least a ground story and a first story, with barrel-vaulted roofs. A central room appears to have been a characteristic of this architecture, which provides some overlap with the domestic forms found in Dakhla.[84] This range of domestic styles reflects local traditions within the general Romano-Egyptian housing spectrum and shows that houses from Dakhla reflect a greater Roman influence than those from Kharga but that both oases adopted Roman traditions more than other regions of Egypt, such as the Fayum, did.

Material Culture

The material culture recovered from recent excavations in the Great Oasis reveals the relationships between oasites and broader social networks within the Roman empire. The relationship between empires and frontier peoples is dialectical. We can explore this dynamic relationship through the objects that people used and that symbolized social connections with larger groups of people. The rise of interest in materiality and the relationship between peoples and objects indicates the significant role that material culture plays in daily life.[85] Likewise, comparative perspectives drawn from global society can be helpful because they highlight the role of material goods in increasing the interconnectedness between divergent local cultures. In the case of the Egyptian oasites, this interconnectedness points toward a type of culture that is not anchored in any one territory.[86] This deterritorialized culture is similar to the material culture and architectural styles that pervaded the Mediterranean following Roman conquest of the region. One signature of this increased interconnection is the presence of material objects beyond their original geographic, cultural, and temporal domain.

Our current data from the Great Oasis suggests material connections between local peoples and other regions in Egypt as well as the Roman Mediterranean. The goods employed in daily life, such as figurines, loomweights, and jar stoppers, appear similar to material

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[82] For evidence of this trend from Egyptian-occupied Nubia, see Smith 2003, 189–93. Goody's (1982, 151–52) cross-cultural survey of foodways suggests that it is common for individuals experiencing social change to be more conservative about food consumption.

[83] Rossi 2000, 335, 341–42.

[84] On the Kharga houses, see Ikram and Rossi 2004, 80–1. On some possible elite houses at Dush, see Reddé et al. 2004, 25–74. These structures have clustered plans, and at least one has a possible open courtyard. Unfortunately, the boundaries and uses of these structures are not entirely clear.

[85] On objects and architecture as agents in social lives, see Miller 1987; Shanks and Tilley 1987. Object biographies follow the life histories of artifacts—their production, use, reuse, and eventual discard—over time (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). This approach highlights the continual negotiations and social implications of object meanings (Hoskins 1998; Seip 1999), which is helpful for understanding imperial encounters on the frontier.

[86] On the increased interconnections found in global culture, see Hannerz 1990, 237.

found in houses from other Roman-period sites in Egypt (e.g., Karanis, Backhias, Soknopaiou Nesos). Connections with Alexandria and the broader Roman Mediterranean can be found among more expensive material cultural categories, such as imported gold glass beads, a cache of bronze and pewter objects, and the wall paintings from Trimithis.[87] Other categories of material culture suggest differential access dependent on the economic status of the individual. For example, there are numerous local forms among the ceramics of the Great Oasis, but there are also Oasis Polished Ware vessels, which imitated the Roman Mediterranean prestige ware terra sigillata. Faunal data and macrobotanicals indicate that individuals consumed a range of foods; wealthier individuals consumed a more typical Roman Mediterranean diet centered on pork, while less wealthy individuals ate more traditional Egyptian foods and grains.[88] Comparisons with goods from Libya can also be found, as evinced by bone beads found in a less wealthy house at Trimithis (House B2).[89] This archaeological research on daily life indicates that the social processes at work on the local level were ambiguous and that multiple ethnic and economic influences existed in the ways that individuals understood and expressed their local connections and broader interconnections while under Roman rule.

The physical remains of the Great Oasis provide a range of data testifying to its particular placement within physical space. Although the Great Oasis was geographically positioned in a locale that removed it from the standard Romano-Egyptian purview, its placement allowed interconnections with the rest of Egypt, the Roman Mediterranean, and Libya. Material remains reveal the complicated interplay between local dynamics and interconnections across the Roman empire. Through their material choices, the sedentary oasites effectively rendered themselves a human buffer between the enigmatic nomadic peoples and the acceptable peoples of the Nile Valley.

CONCLUSIONS: JOINING MATERIAL AND
CONCEPTUAL SPACE

Egypt's Western Desert demonstrates the dialectical relationship between material and conceptual space.

An exploration of this dialectic brings out the often contradictory and complicated nature of the Romano-Egyptian frontier and allows us to explore the flow of influence between conceptual and material space. In so doing, it becomes clear that Roman spatial ideologies and the physical geography of the oasis region fed into one another, and the totality (Thirdspace) of this dialectic gives us a new vantage on the multiplicity of life along this Romano-Egyptian frontier.

First, sociospatial perceptions influenced numerous decisions about how the Romans sought to exploit the frontier. There was a strong Roman literary emphasis on the Otherness of the oasites, which provided an ideological basis for the Roman exploitation of this region.[90] The placement of criminals and unorthodox thinkers along this imperial fringe reinforced the state paradigm in which the oasis region represented a buffer zone between order and chaos, human and quasihuman. These practices reveal not only disdain tempered with curiosity but also a good deal of apprehension toward the nomadic peoples who lived in the desert beyond the oases. The very existence of the military establishment in the Great Oasis indicates that the Romans perceived the nomadic desert tribes to be a threat. The indefensibility and multifunctional nature of many of the fortresses suggests that the Romans may not have interpreted this threat solely as militaristic but may have understood it to be a cultural or ideological threat.

This perspective indicates that the Great Oasis fortresses may have been ambivalent Roman footholds in the region, ideological reminders of a perpetual Roman presence rather than signs of militarism. Conceptually, the oases represented a liminal zone, and various Romans actively reaffirmed this longstanding perception through their fortress constructions, banishment policies, and tales of magical beings inhabiting the desert. The motivations for the Roman occupation and physical investment in the oasis region were probably economic and strategic as well as ideological/cosmological. This particular social construction finds a counterpart in the ways that the Roman writers constructed the inhabitants of Libya's oases.[91] Moreover, the perception of nomadic groups

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[87] Boozer 2007, 150–51, 221.

[88] Walter 2006; Crabtree 2011.

[89] For more on Trimithis, see Boozer 2007, 221.

[90] Mattingly (2010, 215) argues that this construction of ethnic identity sanctioned colonial violence.

[91] Marshall (1998, 51–3) explains that Herodotus constructed the desert Libyans as marginal while Strabo and Diodorus represented these desert peoples as completely barbaric, unlike Cyrenaicans and other, more civilized Libyans. The social construction of the desert-dwelling Libyans as barbarians

rendered them as outcast Others wholly different from urban Libyan groups. In the Libyan example, the divide often seems to rest between the nonagricultural, nonurban lifestyle of southern desert Libyans and the urban, sedentary lifestyle of the Cyrenaicans. According to Synesius, a Cyrenaican who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., the Libyans who inhabited the desert region lived far from towns, roads, and commerce, and the Cyrenaicans perceived them as ignorant of the sea and morality (cited in Fitzgerald 1926, 243–47).

as an ideological threat sheds light on the deployment of Roman military posts and garrisons in other areas of the empire. For example, the distribution of these structures in the North Arabian Desert indicates that there was a strategy aimed at controlling a persistent—albeit usually low-intensity—threat from nomadic Arab tribes.[92] Interpreting these fortresses as more than simple defensive structures suggests that the Romans viewed nomadic peoples in particular as an ideological threat to the empire.

Second, the oases are geographically positioned in a region physically removed from core Egyptian and Roman culture, but they provided connecttions between Roman Egypt and areas farther afield (e.g., nomadic groups, Libya, and Nubia). Material evidence from excavations suggests that individuals not only promoted interconnections between themselves and the Roman Mediterranean but also emphasized the local distinctiveness of their identity.[93] Archaeological evidence of daily life indicates that there were intricate negotiations between Egyptian, Roman, and Greek cultural systems, in which individuals combined signatures of these cultural influences into specifically local amalgams. Oasites may have viewed themselves as part of a vast Roman network or may have understood their situation in relation to more localized issues, although it is also likely that there were fractures between different oasite groups. For example, it is clear that some elite individuals developed great facility with Roman material goods and may have viewed themselves as belonging to their local environment as well as the broader Roman empire. However, our current evidence suggests that less wealthy individuals were considerably less invested in cohesive displays of social identity.[94]

The sedentary oasites socially interconnected themselves with the Roman Mediterranean, which rendered them a human buffer against the nomadic peoples beyond the oases. As such, oasites were situated at the junction between Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and local influences, occupying a locally distinct yet interconnected space within the Roman empire. Although the Romans often conflated oasites with other groups in the region, it is clear that the oasites' sedentary and familiar culture was critical to the Roman development of this frontier as a buffer zone. Just as the fortresses may have served as an ideological and physical buffer to the desert, the inhabitants themselves appear to have become a human barrier between the nomadic peoples farther afield and the settled peoples of the Nile Valley.

On the basis of this evidence, it is clear that the material and conceptual components of Rome's Egyptian frontier were mutually reinforcing. These two components fed into each other and culminated in the particular local character we find in this Roman frontier. The perpetual flow between conceptual and physical space provides insights into both Roman imperial policy and social positioning among oasites. The Great Oasis became a physical and conceptual buffer zone between "ordered" sedentism and "chaotic" nomadism. Moreover, this Thirdspace interpretation of one frontier helps raise new questions about the purpose of Roman fortresses found across the empire's edge, as well as the role of borderland peoples within Rome's imperial strategies. Beyond the Roman empire, we might find that an exploration of the dialectic between conceptual constructs and physical space will help us understand more about the multiplicity evident in borderland scenarios.

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92 Parker 1997, 116–18. An ostrakon from Krokodilo records Vespasianic fort building in the Eastern Desert in response to marauding nomads.

93 Dakhlans forgot certain elements from their past in or-

der to forge a specific local identity through the fusion of local and pan-Mediterranean cultural signatures (Boozer 2011).

94 Boozer 2012.

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