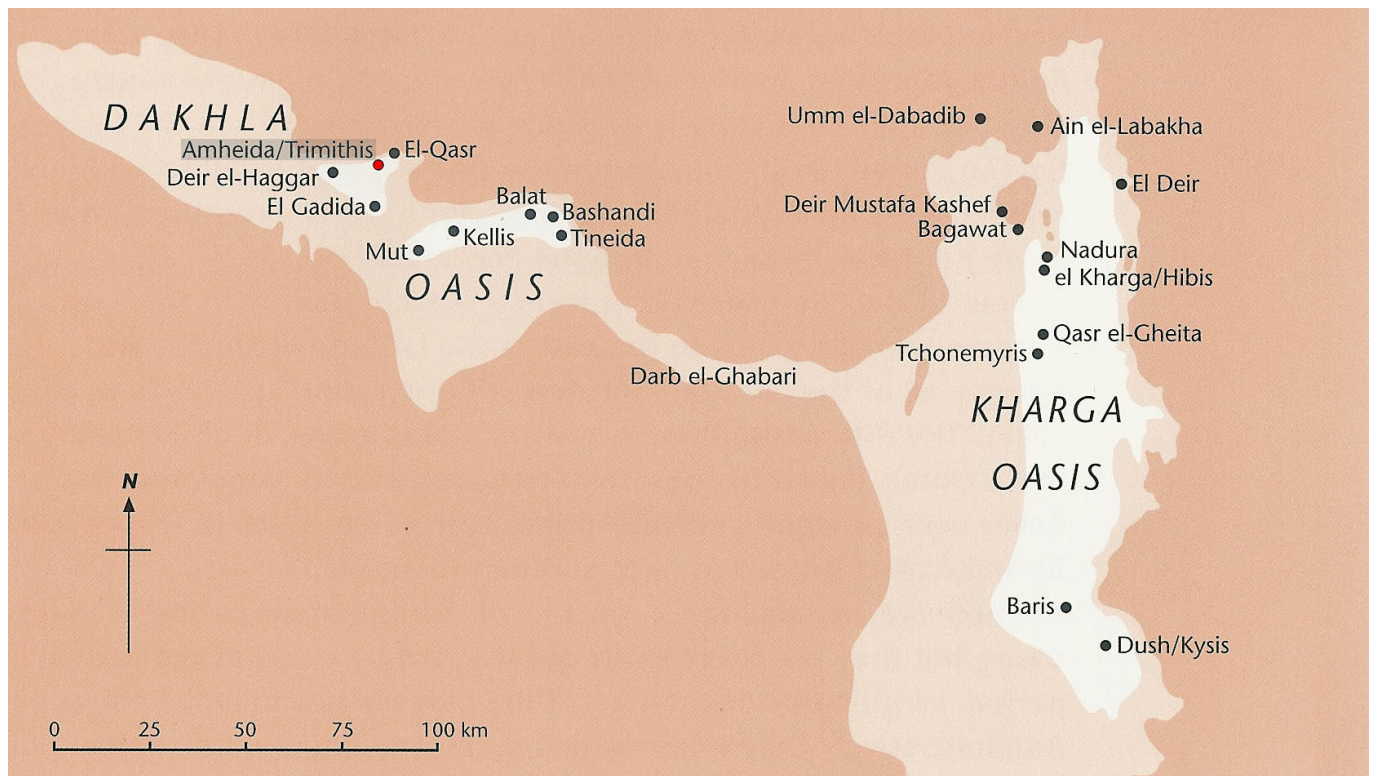


# A new temple for Thoth in the Dakhleh Oasis

As part of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, under the overall direction of Anthony Mills, a team from Columbia University has begun fieldwork at the temple at Amheida. **Paola Davoli** and **Olaf Kaper** describe the results of the first seasons of excavation.



Map of the Dakhleh and Kharga oases, showing the location of Amheida

The site of the temple at Amheida, the largest surviving Roman town site in the Dakhleh Oasis, lies in the north-western region of the Oasis, and its ancient name was Set-wah ('resting place') in Egyptian, and Trimithis in Greek. Excavations by Columbia University began at the site in 2004 after a series of preparatory seasons of surveying.

The ancient town was built on a number of small hills and its highest point today is located roughly at its centre. This point was chosen for excavation because previous surface examination in 1979 and again in 2004 had indicated the likely presence there of a temple. Excavation of the temple, which is likely to reflect the major periods of activity at Amheida and is an obvious point of departure for finding out about the history of occupation of the site, began in February 2005.

Before the start of this excavation, very little architecture was visible on the surface apart from fragments of stonework, so the team had little idea of what to expect

as no previous excavation had been carried out there. The results have far surpassed our expectations, revealing a new temple to the god Thoth with historical evidence covering a period of a thousand years.

Surface finds over the temple area have included a block of weathered temple relief, found in 1979, and several bronze statuettes of Osiris, found in 2004. Only part of a mud-brick wall, probably part of the *temenos*, remained visible on the surface of the site, which indicated that the temple and its associated structures had been severely degraded. This was confirmed by the new excavations, because no *in situ* remains of the temple have been found so far: no traces of either the former floor level or the foundations of the temple have been identified in the area excavated.

The whole area had been severely disturbed by human activity of various kinds. The entire surface of the excavated area, which measures 20m x 10m, displays a layer of sand, mud-brick rubble and stone debris, into which



large holes have been dug. Hundreds of sandstone blocks of the temple were found, both inside these holes and in the layer of debris covering them. Of these about 300 are decorated in low or high relief and some are still painted with bright colours. They have revealed a previously unknown phase of the history of the Dakhleh Oasis and have provided important new evidence for one of the most obscure periods in Egyptian history; that of the 'Upper Egyptian' Twenty-third Dynasty.

The blocks and some column drums appear to have been thrown in at random after digging through the archaeological remains. This extensive digging is likely to have been the result of treasure-hunting in the past, the date of which is as yet unknown. Examples abound of stories of hidden treasure in Egyptian folklore, encouraging, in the past, illicit excavations. In the nearby town of El-Qasr several temple blocks from the site appear reused in houses from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it is possible, therefore, that the robbing of the temple took place at that time.

Apart from temple blocks, among the objects found in the area are demotic and Greek ostraca, fragments of statuettes in Egyptian and classical style and two stelae. There are also large quantities of ceramics ranging from the Old Kingdom to the fourth century AD. A large

quantity of Old Kingdom pottery suggests that there had been a settlement of that period on top of the hill before the temple was built; its remains having been disturbed during the destruction of the temple.

The texts and scenes on the blocks recovered have allowed us to piece together something of the temple's history. It is clear that the most recent construction phase dates to the Roman Period, as a fragment of a hieroglyphic cartouche was found with part of the name of the emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). The style of the reliefs also confirms that the building was contemporary with the latest additions to the temple of Deir el-Hagar near by.

Another layer of history was added as soon as it was realised that many relief blocks were decorated on more than one side. The Roman Period temple to Thoth had been constructed out of building blocks from an earlier temple of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. Three kings of that dynasty are named on the blocks, namely Nekau II (610-595 BC), Psamtek II (595-589 BC) and Amasis/Ahmose II (569-526 BC). The cartouche of Amasis in particular occurs in many of these reliefs. The reuse of these blocks in the Roman Period is apparent from the remains of gypsum mortar on the faces of all earlier reliefs. Nekau II is virtually unknown as a temple builder, so it is exciting to find his name here. So far, only a fragmentary Horus



*View of the temple area with pits from earlier illicit excavations and scattered blocks*



Sandstone block with the cartouche of Amasis and the name of the god Thoth



Sandstone block with the cartouche of Pedubast

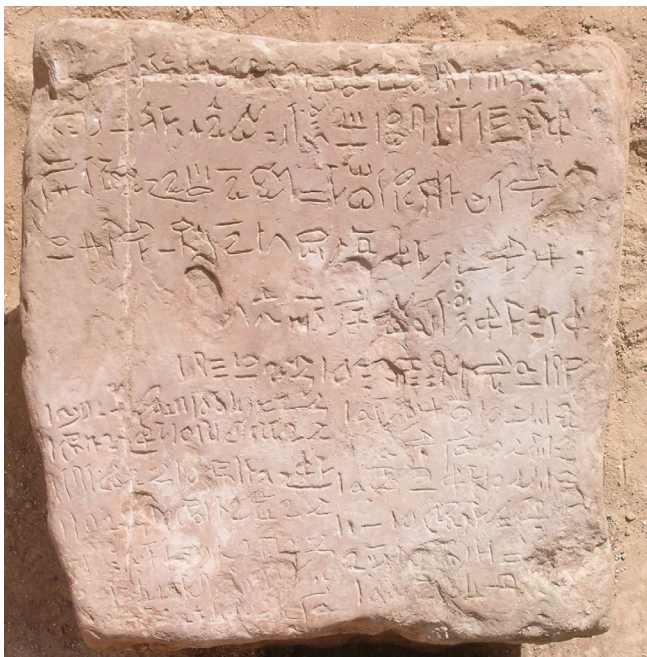
name (*serekh*) of Nekau has been found, and it is as yet unclear which part of the temple's decoration may be attributed to his reign. Psamtek II is attested upon several blocks found at Amheida. One of these had already been in the time of Amasis, so that it seems that this phase of the building remained standing for many years.

Among other reused blocks in the Roman Period temple are some from another, even earlier, temple dedicated to Thoth, providing evidence for the presence of the Upper Egyptian Twenty-third Dynasty in the Oasis. One block was found with a cartouche of King Pedubast: the first time that a cartouche of this king has been found on a temple relief in the Western Desert. King Pedubast ruled from Thebes contemporaneously with the later half of the Twenty-second Dynasty (around 800 BC). The influence of the Upper Egyptian Twenty-third Dynasty in Dakhleh was further confirmed by the text upon an intact hieratic stela found among the temple remains. This monument is dated to Year 13 of a Libyan king called Takeloth, probably

Takeloth III who ruled towards the end of the Upper Egyptian Twenty-third Dynasty, not long before the reign of Piye (Pianchi) and the start of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. The stela mentions the chief of the Libyan tribe, the Shamain, who held sway in the Oasis at that time, and who bears the same name as the chief depicted upon a previously known stela from Dakhleh from the reign of Piye. The new stela records a donation to the temple of Thoth of Amheida and the names of several temple priests. This stela was certainly one of the most exciting finds from the temple during the first season of excavations, as it confirms that a temple for Thoth was already in existence during the Third Intermediate Period, and that the Libyan rulers of the Oasis had a particular interest in this temple. Moreover, it had not been known previously that the kings of the Upper Egyptian Twenty-third Dynasty had such influence in the Oases of the Western Desert.

Another important discovery about the temple is its dedication to the god Thoth of Set-wah, whose name appears on many blocks. Set-wah, 'resting place', was the name of the area that included both Amheida and Deir el-Hagar. At the same time, the god carries the epithet 'Lord of Hermopolis', which indicates his origin in the famous town in Middle Egypt.

For the future, we hope that further excavations will uncover some *in situ* remains of the temple of Thoth at Amheida, and provide evidence for its original ground plan. At the same time, excavations will continue in the town itself, where we can now be certain to expect a settlement dating back to the Third Intermediate Period, if not earlier. The remains of this phase of the town may still lie buried beneath the Roman Period houses somewhere in the site.



Hieratic stela of Year 13 of a King Takeloth, probably Takeloth III

□ The mission of Columbia University is directed by Roger Bagnall as part of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, which is led by Anthony Mills. The authors are responsible respectively for the archaeology and the epigraphy at the site. Paola Davoli is Associate Professor of Egyptology at Lecce University, Italy; Olaf Kaper is Professor of Egyptology at Leiden University, The Netherlands.