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GODS OF
THE WESTERN DESERT

Western Desert remains one of the most under-explored areas of Egypt, while at the same time, one with a huge archaeological potential. Though our knowledge on the subject is now immensely better than it was some 20 years ago, due to the combined efforts of many people and institutions, there are yet whole towns to be excavated there. The region with its five large oases both intrigued and scared the ancients. In writing, a tree-hill sign  *h3st* symbolizing the foreign, the alien, that which lies at the edge of chaos and order, was used for both deserts and the lands outside of Egypt.¹ Fear of the unknown, however, did not stop the Egyptians from infiltrating and spreading control over the oases (apart from Siwa) already during the Old Kingdom, bringing with them their culture and their gods. As the majority of material unearthed in the region dates to the Late or Roman Periods, the subject of local cults and the introduction of the Egyptian ones is a particularly difficult one. New arrivals probably replaced indigenous deities they encountered.

The chief deity of the Western oases was Amon-Re, venerated alongside the other members of the Theban Triad. Introduction of his cult there could probably be linked with the re-establishment of Egyptian control over the region in the early New Kingdom. There are two special forms of Amon-Re to be found in the oases – a composite god Amon-Horus and Amon-Nakht². The former appears in Bahariya, Deir el-Hagar and Hibis, the latter in Ain Birbi-

¹ Gardiner 1957, p.488, N25; cf. D.B. O'Connor, S. Quirke, *Mysterious Lands (Encounters with Ancient Egypt)*, London 2003, p. 10-13.

² Kaper O., *Temples and Gods in Roman Dakhleh: Studies in the Indigenous Cults of an Egyptian Oasis*, PhD thesis Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, privately published, 1997, chapter 3.

yeh. Further to the north, a ram-headed deity called Ammon by the Greeks was worshipped in Siwa³. The older of Bahariya temples is dated to the reign of Apries, XXVIth Dynasty, the younger one to the time of Alexander the Great.⁴ Here Amon and Horus are both receiving offerings but are depicted separately. In the Roman temple of Deir el-Hagar an even more complex form of the god appears, incorporating aspects of both Horus and Min of Akhmim – a similar depiction is to be found on the sanctuary wall in el-Ghueida, where Amon of Perwesekh was venerated⁵. Generally though he is presented in a human or criocephalic form.

Between Tineida and Bashindi villages in Eastern Dakhla lies a Roman temple of Amon-Nakht⁶. This interesting deity seems to be partially modelled after Horus, with Hathor as his consort, but has also additional features. He is depicted similarly to the falcon-headed Seth at Hibis and Mut el-Kharab – outstretched wings and a spear giving him a more aggressive, warlike character. Amon-Nakht was therefore a protector against the dangers to be found in the desert, a „Mighty One” as the name suggests⁷. Despite similarities he is actually an enemy of Seth, in fact it seems plausible, the introduction of an alternative protector played a role in the priestly attempt to replace lord of Mut in the oases. In Hibis Amon resided as a local god Amenebis or Amon of Hibis⁸, a small Roman temple dedicated to him lies nearby at Qasr el- Zaiyan, while another one stood in Ain al-Tarakwa⁹. His depictions appear frequently at the local necropoli in the tombs of Bahariya governors or in Dakhla’s Muzawwaqa cemetery.

Amon was the true lord of the oases but this title is commonly given to another god – Seth. The longevity of Seth’s cult in the West is puzzling, con-

³ Cf. K.P.Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion, Archäologie, Geschichte und Kultpraxis des Orakels von Siwa*. Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 75, Mainz 1988.

⁴ A.Fakhry, *A Temple of Alexander the Great at Bahria Oasis*, pp. 823-828, ASAE 40, Cairo 1940; Z.Hawass, *Valley of the Golden Mummies*, p. 195-201, Cairo 2000.

⁵ On Qasr el-Ghueida see: PM VII, pp. 291-293, 286; E.Cruz-Uribe, *The Persian Presence at Qasr el-Ghuieta*, Egypt at www.cais-soas.com..

⁶ Kaper, o.c., chapter 3; A.J.Mills, A.Zieliński, *The temple of Amun-Nakht at ‘Ain Birbiyeh in: Dakhleh Oasis Project 2003-2004 Season Final Report*, p.47-48; A.J.Mills, *The ‘Ain Birbiyeh Temple Project, 2008 report*.

⁷ J.Osing, *Beiträge zu den Oasen in: Egyptian Religion The Last Thousand Years: Studies dedicated to the memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, OLA 84-85, Leuven 1998, p. 1443.

⁸ N.Davies, *The Temple of Hibis in el-Khargah Oasis. III: The Decoration*, PMMA 17, New York, 1953; D.Klotz, *Adoration of the ram: Five hymns to Amun-Re from Hibis Temple*. Yale Egyptological Studies 6. New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 2006.

⁹ S.Ikram, C.Rossi, *North Kharga Oasis Survey 2004. Preliminary Report: Ain Tarakwa and Ain el-Dabashiya*, MDAIK 63, 2006.

sidering the demonization he underwent in the Nile Valley in the Late Period. Both archaeological and textual sources confirm his presence in the southern oases¹⁰, he is also depicted as receiving offerings in Umm Ubayda temple at Siwa. Seth's main cult centre of the region was Dakhla, material found there and also at the nearby watch posts, suggest he may have already been worshipped in the oasis during the early Old Kingdom. His temple stood at Mut el-Kharab and it is possible it functioned continuously from Dynasty XVIII onwards¹¹. Veneration of Seth at this site is most vividly illustrated during the IIIrd Intermediate Period by the older of so-called Dakhla stele, ascribed to Shoshenq I or III and objects from the reign of Dynasty XXI. With Mut being the main administrative centre of the oasis, the temple flourished, added to and redecored by the consecutive rulers of the Late Period up till the Ptolemaic Dynasty. A small number of finds confirms the existence of Roman time structures at the site from the first three centuries AD, though there's a possibility that the cult of Toth, who replaced Seth in the Nile Valley sanctuaries after his demonization, was also celebrated there. Seth appeared in the oases in a variety of forms – that of his sacred animal, a man with this creature's head or, similarly to Amon-Nakht, with a falcon head, tripartite wig, collar, kilt and wings. This last form is known especially from the famous relief at the Hibis temple, where Seth spears the serpent – he is depicted as Apophis slayer also at Deir el-Hagar and in Shrine I at Kellis.¹² Not only had his cult continued into the Roman Period, he was also given predominance in Dakhla as the „Lord of the oasis” and presented in his most positive aspect – the protector of Re. The reason for such veneration seems to be simply a fact that the desert, lying at the edge of chaos, populated by dangerous creatures, was the place where Seth's powers were strongest. It was therefore logical and profitable to worship him in his domain. Still, the introduction of Amon-Nakht may imply an attempt of supplanting the god's position in the oases at some point in time.

Apart from Amon and Seth, another major deity venerated in the West, was Thoth, considered to be of secondary importance there only to Amon-Re¹³. He had a temple in the ancient city of Trimithis (Amheida) in Dakhla, where he

¹⁰ H. Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion*, Leiden 1967, p. 115-116.

¹¹ On Mut el-Kharab see: Dakhleh Oasis Project annual reports 2000-2007 at <http://arts.monash.edu.au/archaeology/excavations/dakhleh/index.php#reports>, assorted Dakhla bibliography at: http://www.amheida.org/inc/pdf/amheida_bibliography.pdf.

¹² Davies, *The temple of Hibis*, vol. III, pls. 42-43, 77b. Seth at Dakhla cf. Kaper, o.c., chapter 3.

¹³ O. Kaper, *The Egyptian God Tutu. A Study of the Sphinx-God and Master of Demons with a Corpus of Monuments*, OLA 119, Leuven 2003, p. 125-127.

resided as Thoth of *št-w3h*¹⁴ and lord of Hermopolis. Though the monument is now almost completely destroyed, a partially preserved cartouche allows for dating its last, Roman phase to the reign of Domitian. Reused stone blocks from the time of Dynasty XXVI, bearing names of Necho II, Psamtek II and Amasis II found at the site, together with sensational material from Dynasty XXIII, confirm that a temple existed here already in the IIIrd Intermediate Period¹⁵. Present also at Hibis, Deir el-Hagar and Ain el-Muftella, as well as, the local necropoli, Thoth is depicted in the usual manner – as an ibis-headed man or a baboon. It is plausible his presence in the oases was meant to overshadow Seth, whom he replaced in the Nile Valley temples of the Late Period.

Of all the „desert gods” proposed by Aufrère¹⁶, the one still relatively unknown is Igai. He appears in the Egyptian sources as early as Dynasty III but short, punning references in Pyramid Texts and, together with Ha, in Coffin Texts do not provide much information.¹⁷ Igai’s association with Western Desert or, more precisely, its oases, can be partly deduced from the aforementioned mortuary texts, the title „lord of the oasis” occurs later on the base of Sesostris III statue.¹⁸ His domain, however, seems to be of a more general nature – not a singular locality but a vast geographical area. There are only precious few occurrences of the god’s name there, most of them discovered in the last ten years¹⁹. Sensational findings at „Djedefre’s water-mountain” confirm the longevity of his cult in the desert, while the newly discovered stela of governor Sa-Igai, proves this god’s temple existed in Dakhla²⁰. He appeared in a human form, with two *w3s*-sceptres, spelling his name, on the head.

Igai’s close associate, the aforementioned god Ha, was known since the Ist

¹⁴ O.Kaper, R.J. Demarée, *A Donation Stela in the Name of Takeloth III from Amheida, Dakhleh Oasis*, *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 39 (2006), pp. 19-37.

¹⁵ R.S.Bagnall, P.Davoli, O.Kaper, H.Whitehouse, *Roman Amheida: Excavating A Town in Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis, MINERVA: The International Review of Ancient Art & Archaeology* 17/6 (November/December 2006), pp. 26-29; O.Kaper, P.Davoli, *A New Temple for Thoth in the Dakhleh Oasis*, *Egyptian Archaeology* 29 (2006), pp. 12-14; Dakhla Oasis Project Reports to the Supreme Council of Antiquities form years 2004-2008.

¹⁶ S.Aufrère, *Dieux du désert égyptien, Ha et la défense mythique des déserts de l’ouest* in: *L’archéologue 11*, *Archéologie nouvelle*, May 1995, p.35-40.

¹⁷ Pyr. 662b, CT VI, 384-386. His cult is confirmed in the titulary of the late III dynasty priest and several examples of the name *Ig3i-htp*.

¹⁸ H.G.Fischer, *A god and a general of the oasis on a stela of the Late Middle Kingdom*, *JNES*, vol. XVI, no. 4, October 1957, p. 223-235.

¹⁹ A.Fakhry, *The Rock Inscriptions of Gabal el-Teir at Kharga Oasis*, *ASAE* 51 (1951), p. 401-434; *JdE* 52478, cf. M.Elebaut, *Stele JdE 52478 aus der Oase Dachla* (forthcoming).

²⁰ K.P.Kuhlmann, *Der „Wasserberg des Djedefre” (Chufu oi/i). Ein Lagerplatz mit Expeditionsinschriften der 4. Dynastie im Raum der Oase Dachla*, *MDAIK* 61, 2005, pp. 243-289; C.Hope, *Report to the Supreme Council of Antiquities. The excavations at Mut el-Kharab, Dakhleh Oasis in 2008*, p. 8-9, 11-14.

Intermediate Period as the „Lord of the West”²¹ and, later, also „Lord of Libians”. Armed with a knife or a bow, he protected Egypt’s boundaries and ruled the desert. During the Late Period, Ha became the personification of the West, as well as, the main deity of the Upper Egyptian VIIth nome. His image – a man with the common hieroglyph sign for the foreign lands on his head– can be found at Hibis, in the first chapel of Ain el-Muftella temple of Bahariya, dated to the reign of Amasis and the local tomb of Bannentiu where he guards the entrance.²² Ha probably played some role in the cult of the dead.

Unlike Ha and Igai, both obscure deities of lesser importance, god Bes, also mentioned by Aufrere, was a well-known and highly popular member of the Egyptian pantheon. His presence in the oases – small figurines found in the houses and tombs, graffito in Shrine IV of Ismant el-Kharab or a painting in the Ain el-Labakha fort shouldn’t surprise if not for the fact he had an actual temple there. Discovered accidentally in Bahariya in 1988, it is unique as no other Bes temple has been unearthed in Egypt so far.²³ Dating from the Ptolemaic Period and in use till the IVth AD, it served the god in his joyous aspect – as patron of grapes and vine making. A well-preserved statue of Bes from the site, shows him in the usual manner. Interestingly, one of the chapels of the XXVI Dynasty Ain el-Muftella temple was apparently also dedicated exclusively to this deity, confirming the popularity of his cult in the oasis. Protective nature of Bes, frequently depicted in the Late and Greco Roman Periods as a menacing, usually winged or armed creature could be a reason for such popularity, a trait shared with another god – Tutu, who resided in Dakhla.

His main cult centre was at Ismant el-Kharab where a Roman temple, which oldest parts dated to the reign of Nero, functioned till the VIth AD. He is accompanied there by his mother Neith and consort – local deity Tapsais²⁴. Depicted in the human form or as a sphinx²⁵, always powerful and victorious, Tutu was called the „master of demons” over which he had absolute control. Especially curious is his association with Amon-Re, iconography from the Ptolemaic Period onwards seem to suggest Tutu was considered a manifestation of the Theban god’s dangerous and royal aspects. His aggressive but also defensive nature, strengthened by an arsenal of weaponry and occasionally demon features, made Tutu a perfect protective deity to the city of Kellis. He is

²¹ CT V, 125; CT VI, 386; D.Wildung, *Miscellanea Wilbouriana* 1(1972), p.157-159.

²² Cf. Kaper 2003, p. 126.

²³ Hawass 2000, p.69-73.

²⁴ K.A.Worp, O.Kaper, *A Bronze Representing Tapsais of Kellis*, *Revue d’Egyptologie* 46, Paris 1995, p.107 - 118, pl. IX.

²⁵ Tutu’s complex iconography and numerous aspects are comprehensively discussed in Kaper’s monography of the god.

present in the local cemetery of el-Muawwaqa and in Deir el-Hagar as well.

As for the other members of Egyptian pantheon, two temples in Kharga, at Manawir and Kysis belonged to Osiris, who naturally frequents local necropoli.²⁶ Numerous figurines of the god were discovered in the region. The very name of the Farafra Oasis suggests the existence of goddess Hathor cult, however archaeological evidence has yet to be found. In fact, there are numerous sites in the oases still to be examined, that could provide new insight into the subject of local religion, while some remain a mystery – like an unknown deities of Nadura or Umm el-Dabadib.²⁷

Generally, the nature of the gods venerated in the oases did not differ in a significant manner from what can be seen in their temples elsewhere. One can easily spot though the preference for protective or even warlike deities. They are curiously predominately male, armed and in control of demons or even of demonic nature themselves as the title ϵ_3 *phty* suggests. As the Egyptians considered the desert to be home for mysterious, dangerous creatures, the local gods could take the appearance of a lion, while both Seth and Amon-Nakht were shown in Dakhla being followed by one.²⁸ Together with Tutu they are a particularly menacing group, often pictured triumphant over their enemies. Aufrère went as far as to distinguish a whole class of the „desert gods”, including Igai, Ha, Bes, Montu and Tutu²⁹. However, only the first pair seem to have an exclusive relation with the region while the rest, as well as the others also found there, show traits of being a „desert god” only sporadically, in specific epithets, forms or iconography. The true master of the West was Amon-Re, whose cult in time overshadowed that of his main rival to the title – god Seth, though the latter’s veneration continued far into the Roman period.

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²⁶ M. Wuttmann, B. Bousquet, M. Chauveau, P. Dils, S. Marchand, A. Schweitzer, L. Volay, *Premier rapport préliminaire des travaux sur le site de ‘Ayn Manaewir (Oasis de Kharga)*, BIFAO 96, pp. 121 - 181 and plate 3.

²⁷ On Nadura cf. PM, vol. 7, p. XXX; D. Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, 1998, p. 267; Umm el-Dabadib cf. C. Rossi, *Umm el-Dabadib, Roman settlement in the Kharga Oasis: description of the visible remains: With a note on ‘Ayn Amur*, MDAIK 56, 2000, p. 335-352.

²⁸ S. Aufrère, *L’univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne*, BdE 105, Cairo 1991, p. 142.

²⁹ S. Aufrère, *Dieux du désert égyptien, Ha et la défense mythique des déserts de l’ouest* in: *L’archéologie 11*, Archéologie nouvelle, May 1995, p. 35-40.