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 $h^3st$ 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-

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-

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considering the demonization he underwent in the Nile Valley in the Late Period. Both archaeological and textual sources confirm his presence in the southern oases\textsuperscript{10}, 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 onwards\textsuperscript{11}. 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 redecorated 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.\textsuperscript{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 venereted in the West, was Thoth, considered to be of secondary importance there only to Amon-Re\textsuperscript{13}. He had a temple in the ancient city of Trimitthis (Amheida) in Dakhla, where he


resided as Thoth of št-w3h 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 Neche 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 Period\(^\text{15}\). 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 Aufrère\(^\text{16}\), 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.\(^\text{17}\) 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.\(^\text{18}\) 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 years\(^\text{19}\). Sensational findings at „Djedefre’s water-mountain” confirm the longevity of his cult in the desert, while the newly discovered stele of governor Sa-Igai, proves this god’s temple existed in Dakhla\(^\text{20}\). 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 1st


\(^{17}\) Pyr. 662b, CT VI, 384-386. His cult is confirmed in the titulature of the late III dynasty priest and several examples of the name Igzi-http.


Intermediate Period as the „Lord of the West”\footnote{CT V, 125; CT VI, 386; D. Wildung, Miscellanea Wilbouriana 1 (1972), p.157-159.} 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.\footnote{Cf. Kaper 2003, p. 126.} 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.\footnote{Hawass 2000, p.69-73.} 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 Tapsais\footnote{K.A. Worp, O.Kaper, A Bronze Representing Tapsais of Kellis, Revue d’Egyptologie 46, Paris 1995, p.107 - 118, pl. IX.}. Depicted in the human form or as a sphinx\footnote{Tutu’s complex iconography and numerous aspects are comprehensively discussed in Kaper’s monography of the god.}, 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 agressive but also defensive nature, strenghtened by an arsenal of weaponry and occasionally demon features, made Tutu a perfect protective deity to the city of Kellis. He is
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. 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.

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 demonic nature themselves as the title $\overline{\text{3}}\text{phty}$ 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. 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 Tutu. 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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