
Book Reviews

Colin A. Hope and Gillian E. Bowen, eds., *Kellis: A Roman-Period Village in Egypt's Dakhleh Oasis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 400 pp. 186 illustrations. ISBN: 9780521190329 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781009477512 (softcover), ISBN: 9781009234207 (ebook). \$135.00, \$42.99.

Late antique villages are having a moment. Archaeologists and papyrologists have started to look beyond the urban elite toward villages to understand the social, religious, and economic relationships of the era.¹ These studies have enriched our understanding of Late Antiquity by shining a spotlight on ordinary people and their everyday experiences. *Kellis: A Roman-Period Village in Egypt's Dakhleh Oasis* complements this recent scholarship on late antique villages. Colin Hope, Gillian Bowen, and an international team of experts have been excavating Kellis, analyzing finds, and publishing their results for decades. This book demonstrates why Hope and Bowen have continued to return to the site over the years. Kellis is packed with well-preserved temples, churches, houses, cemeteries, and other structures. The architecture is just the beginning. Archaeologists have also unearthed vast quantities of writing, furniture, textiles, glass, ceramics, tools, wall paintings, plant remains, human remains, and so on. It is a remarkable assemblage of data, and the editors have in turn assembled an equally remarkable group of international scholars to examine it.

The book is divided into five sections: Introduction (chapter 1), The Domestic Environment (chapters 2–4), Aspects of Life at Kellis (chapters 5–8), The Religious Context (chapters 8–12), Burial Practices and

1. E.g., Giovanni R. Ruffini, *Life in an Egyptian Village in Late Antiquity: Aphrodito before and after the Islamic Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Tamara Lewit, "A Viewpoint on Eastern Mediterranean Villages in Late Antiquity: Applying the Lens of Community Resilience Theory," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 4, no. 1 (2020): 44–75.

Population (chapters 13–15). A concluding chapter addresses the abandonment of the site (chapter 16). This volume differs from the multivolume series on papyri from Kellis and the multivolume series of conference proceedings on the Dakhleh Oasis Project, both published by Oxbow Books. Here, the editors have synthesized twenty-five years of excavation and analysis to provide the first comprehensive account on life in ancient Kellis. In addition to the chapters written by Hope and Bowen, fifteen renowned experts on Roman Egypt have contributed chapters.

In his introduction to the volume, Hope situates Kellis within the Dakhleh research environment. He explains how Ahmed Fakhry's mid-twentieth century research inspired Anthony J. Mills to found the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) in 1977.² The goal of the DOP has been to explore the longitudinal relationship between humans and the environment in the oasis. The DOP began its work with a comprehensive survey of the entire oasis. It revealed a significant increase in sites from the Ptolemaic period to the Roman period, followed by a contraction in the Late Roman period. Kellis, which was inhabited continuously from the first to late fourth centuries CE, follows this same trajectory. Its built features also complement the architectural profile of the oasis; it has mud-brick temples, churches, residential areas, cemeteries, at least one bath, and at least one dovecote. The DOP also identified a water feature, possibly a nymphaeum, which currently has no local parallels. Since Kellis was the first large Roman / Late Roman site to be excavated in Dakhleh, their results have influenced all subsequent excavations in Dakhleh as well as further afield. This round of Kellis excavations ran from 1986 until 2010. Hope anticipates future fieldwork at the site.

The next section of the book describes the results of the team's research in the residential areas. Hope initiated a new phase of domestic archaeology in Roman Egypt with this research. Before these excavations, Karanis served as the undisputed cornerstone of Romano-Egyptian domestic archaeology. This hyper focus on one site excavated before more refined techniques became available made it difficult for archaeologists to understand daily life in Roman Egypt.³ The availability of new, refined data on houses from a different

2. Two long-standing archaeological projects in Dakhleh were founded in 1977. The other one is l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, which focused its excavations on Old Kingdom sites at Ballat.

3. Anna L. Boozer, "The Tyranny of Typologies in Romano-Egyptian Domestic Archaeology," in *Material Evidence: Learning from Archaeological Practice*, ed. Alison B. Wylie and Robert Chapman (Malden: Blackwell, 2015), 92–109.

region within Egypt both broaden and deepen our understanding of home life. Thanks to the work at Kellis, we now have an expanded range of house types as well as contextualized and accurately dated finds from individual houses.

Hope and Bowen explore houses from two different occupational phases at Kellis: the Roman-period houses in areas B and C and the Late Roman houses in areas A and D. By drawing together the documentary, material, visual, and architectural data found within each house, the team is able to describe the identities of each household. For example, houses 2 and 3 from area A reveal particular domestic characters, as Hope and Bowen examine here and as Lisa Nevett described in a groundbreaking article a decade ago.⁴ House 2, which is modest in size, appears to have been the home and workplace of a carpenter named Tithoes. The excavators found carpentry tools and two wooden codices, which Hope is cautious about connecting directly to Tithoes. It seems likely, however, that they belonged to him or to a household member since craftwork was usually a household affair in Roman Egypt. Meanwhile, house 3, which is next door to house 2, yielded approximately 2500 inscribed papyri and two wooden codices. Some of this inscribed material attests to a Manichaean community, providing us with unparalleled evidence of the lived experience of this quintessentially late antique religion. Other texts identify Aurelius Pamour(is) as an occupant in the early fourth century. A subset of these papyri also indicates a woman named Tehat, who appears to have run a garment manufacturing business with the help of a male relative, presumably from this house. The archaeologists also unearthed objects from a wide range of categories from house 3 and the other houses, including baskets, furniture, jewelry, textiles, glass, and coins. Experts examine these different material types in subsequent chapters within this section. Livingstone's careful discussion of the textiles (chapter 4.4) is especially welcome given the paucity of soft furnishings and clothing that survive from Late Antiquity.

Because Kellis was inhabited continuously from the first to late fourth centuries CE, scholars are able to study the transition from traditional religious practices to various branches of Christianity and its offshoots, like Manichaeism. The results from Kellis broaden our understanding of

4. Lisa C. Nevett, "Family and Household, Ancient History and Archaeology: A Case Study from Roman Egypt," in *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Malden: Blackwell, 2011), 15–31.

pharaonic religious practices, as described in the fourth section of the book. Far from being a backwater, the Kellis temple complexes and shrines reveal that their priests sustained a deep understanding of the pantheon, consistent with those of priests in the Nile Valley. Local practice was not without its quirks. For example, Tutu, a local manifestation of Amun-Re, was the chief god of Kellis. The site is the home of the only known temple to the god, although representations of Tutu can be found at other temples across Egypt. Depictions of Tutu show him as a striding lion with the tail of a serpent. He usually has a human head, but hawk and crocodile heads are also attested. Like Seth, another prominent god in the Dakhleh Oasis, Tutu was particularly skilled at slaying demons. He could also protect people from nightmares.⁵

The villagers in Kellis seem to have begun to embrace Christianity in the third century CE. By the fourth century, Christianity had already put down roots, as attested by the formal churches that its adherents had constructed out of mud brick. Once again, Kellis offers unparalleled evidence of early Christianity with its refined dating of these structures, as Bowen discusses in chapter 11. The Large East Church, with its purpose-built basilica, is the earliest attested example of Upper Egyptian church architecture.

The documentary evidence of Manichaeism is equally remarkable. One text, P.Kell.Gr. 98, provides a complete account of how and when Manichaeans recited their daily prayers. This is the first evidence of the daily rituals practiced by a little understood religion that in the course of the third century had spread as far east as China and as far west as Morocco. Moreover, because of the way that these texts were excavated, it is possible to study a group of Manichaeans in their social and material environment. The evidence from Kellis suggests that Manichaeans enmeshed themselves within their local community.

The fifth section contributes to our understanding of a shift from native Egyptian to Christian burial practices. Christians included few objects with their loved ones when they buried them. The authors argue that the inhabitants of Kellis in the late antique period continued to view the dead as entangled with the community by placing some of them in and around churches rather than relegating them to cemeteries removed from the settlement. The authors do not discuss purity, health, or spatial availability as

5. Olaf E. Kaper, *The Egyptian God Tutu: A Study of the Sphinx-God and Master of Demons with a Corpus of Monuments* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003).

possible influences on this change in burial patterns, although these theories might be considered.

The bodies of the deceased also reveal a great deal about life, as we learn in chapter 15. For example, the sand-laden winds that lashed Dakhleh led to lung conditions among its long-term occupants. Repetitive daily chores involving squatting and agricultural labor also left their mark on the bodies of women and men. Even the habit of carrying heavy loads on the head, as women still do in rural Egypt, left its imprint on their remains. Tosha Dupras and her colleagues also trace other social practices, such as the weaning of infants and the pattern of childbirth, through human remains. Their vivid descriptions of these and other remarkable findings add poignant evidence to suggestions made in earlier chapters. For example, Roger Bagnall describes the fluctuating presence of men in Dakhleh (chapters 5 and 6.1); they appear to have traveled frequently to other regions in Egypt for extended periods of time, leaving the oasis inhabited primarily by women, children, and the elderly. Did their seasonal returns create the baby booms that can be read from the human remains?

In their coauthored conclusion, Hope and Bowen tackle the evidence for the final years of occupation at Kellis as well as its eventual abandonment. This subject is a difficult one. It is unclear if there were environmental causes, such as the drying up of local wells or the salinization of fields, or if there were other factors that catalyzed the pervasive shift in settlement practices documented at Kellis and the oasis more broadly. They describe these theories astutely and leave much for future researchers to consider and test at other sites.

Although Hope and Bowen do not dwell on the methodologies used in the excavation at Kellis, their approach underpins the entire volume. Only modern standards of excavation allow us to discern this level of detail about the everyday lives and happenings of villagers at home, in worship, and in death. Their standard of excavation and analysis will contribute significantly to our ability to make use of legacy data from villages such as Karanis in the Fayum. For, although researchers have an enormous quantity of data from Karanis at our disposal, we still struggle with understanding basic questions about its chronology and the character of individual households. While new projects, such as the Harvard and Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar Excavations at Karanis, aim to resolve some of these issues by reexamining Karanis itself, the careful excavation of additional villages such as Kellis will also be necessary to help us to make sense of the site.

Hope, Bowen, and the other contributors to the volume are often too modest when describing the impact of their work at Kellis. This site informs not only our understanding of Roman and late antique Dakhleh but also of regions and cultures well beyond its reaches. Kellis has much to tell us about themes that continue to impact people across the globe, such as changes in religious beliefs and practices, strategies for adapting to changing environmental pressures, and the challenges of coping with the absence of adult men for extended periods of time.

The book is well illustrated, including photographs, maps, plans, and charts, many of them in full color. Additional illustrations were meant to be available online, though I could not access these using the web address provided. Specialists in the study of Egypt and Late Antiquity will find the chapters of the book accessible. While the chapters are well written, undergraduates, entry-level graduate students, and scholars working further afield may struggle with some of the content without additional scaffolding. I hope that they make the effort since Kellis and these experts have much to teach us, specialists and nonspecialists alike.

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Laura S. Lieber, *Staging the Sacred: Theatricality and Performance in Late Antique Liturgical Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 424 pp. ISBN: 9780190065461 (hardcover). \$137.00.

Laura S. Lieber's *Staging the Sacred* is a pioneering book in several respects. First, it is a study with the rare focus of liturgical poetry, particularly hymnody. Second, it approaches its subject—the question of the experience of late antique liturgical poetry's performance—through a comparison of Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan traditions that is masterful, effective, and unprecedented in its scope. Most radically, Lieber's book "constitutes an appeal to . . . the imaginations of those who composed, performed, and beheld these texts in antiquity, but also the imaginations of those who read them in the present" (396). Given the erudite and myriad skills (linguistic, papyrological, paleographical, archaeological) required to be a historian of premodernity, seldom do we scholars allow ourselves to deal in educated speculation. Lieber's work demonstrates why scholarly imagination is so