

James C. R. Gill, *Dakhleh Oasis and the Western Desert of Egypt
under the Ptolemies*

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Review by Andrea M. Berlin

James Gill's 2016 monograph, a lightly modified version of his 2014 PhD thesis, is a terrific example of how to write history from material evidence. His accomplishment is all the more impressive because the evidence in question is pottery derived from excavation and survey, which – as readers of this journal know well – comprises perhaps the most messy, intractable type of material evidence available. In this review article I will first broadcast Gill's big historical conclusions right up front (for the benefit of any ancient historians sufficiently enlightened to be reading this publication). I will then provide a kind of long-form summary of the evidence he has painstakingly amassed to build his case – and, in the process, take him a little bit to task for the way in which he presents this evidence because it creates unnecessary difficulties for anybody wanting to use this book as a guide. I will close by laying out the full array of Gill's conclusions regarding Ptolemaic policies and activities in the Western Desert, as these insights are truly outstanding contributions that bear emphasizing.

In his introduction Gill promises to do nothing less than revisit the entirety of the evidence for Ptolemaic activity throughout the Western Desert, and specifically its oases: Dakhleh, Farafra, Kharga, Bahariya, Siwa, and the several minor oases. By page 144 of his concluding chapter he has done it:

»This study clearly demonstrates the Western Oases experienced a substantial rise in population during the Ptolemaic period, which coincided with the development of new settlements and increased agricultural production. ... [These changes] were the result of a deliberate Ptolemaic strategy aimed at exploiting the agricultural potential of the oases, while at the same time providing both control over long-distance trade routes and military security, particularly against the looming threat of Carthage to the west. This was not an entirely new strategy ... the Persians had been active in the oases, probably for many of the same reasons; however, under Ptolemaic rule, exploitation of the oases intensified ... Given that the exploitation of the Fayum, the development of Cyrenaica, and the expeditions to the Red Sea and Lower Nubia were all the results of policies implemented during the Early Ptolemaic period, it seems likely that much of the development witnessed in the oases began around the same time.«

How does he get here?

Background

In chapter 1, Gill lays out the obligatory, necessary groundwork. He summarizes all previous scholarship on the oases, including literary testimony, archaeological work, and historical syntheses of Ptolemaic activity in the region. This section is actually rather short since, as Gill notes, »The Western Oases feature very little within the published literature« (p. 6). This is due in part to a paucity of epigraphic and historical testimony and in part because much archaeological work has only taken place only in the last twenty-five years – but mostly it is because there has simply been no way to actually recognize Ptolemaic-era material, and therefore no way to recognize Ptolemaic-era activity.

Perhaps the most fundamental issue has been the inclination of historians of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt to draw wide-ranging conclusions based on very small amounts of poorly understood data. Gill explains the problem concisely (pp. 7–8). The site survey index published by the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) in 1999 lists a total of 214 Roman period sites vs. only 17 Ptolemaic period sites. This huge discrepancy »led scholars to propose that the Roman Period in Dakhleh was a time of huge agricultural expansion and population increase« – and, conversely, that there is very little Ptolemaic presence and interest. Gill cites multiple instances of this idea, in works as recent as 2010¹ and 2012². He notes, reasonably, that it is simply »illogical to suggest that the Ptolemies did not see the oases as a source of potential wealth« (p. 11), especially considering that Saite and Persian rulers took interest in this region, that the Ptolemies also controlled Cyrenaica, and were active in Lower Nubia, in the Eastern Desert, and along the Red Sea coast.

The remainder of Chapter 1 is described as a summary of comparative evidence from the Nile Valley, but it is not actually a comprehensive collection of Ptolemaic activity, settlement, building, or even ceramics. Instead what Gill does here is collect evidence for interaction between the Valley and the oases, via inscriptions and artifacts. Most important in this regard is the famous ›Oasis List‹, a long inscription on the interior of the girdle wall of the temple of Edfu which has been dated to the reign of Ptolemy VII³ or Ptolemy IX⁴. It depicts the king and queen making an offering to Horus, followed by seven identical fecundity figures that personify the oases. Each figure has a caption listing name and relative position, and while not every oasis has been certainly identified, there is consensus that the five major western oases of Kharga, Dakhleh, Farafra, Bahariya, and Siwa are included. Gill notes that the list »demonstrates that during the Ptolemaic period the Egyptians recognized seven distinct oases in the Western Desert, and that these were viewed as part of the Egyptian administration« (p. 13). This text, along with other Ptolemaic inscriptions from Karnak, Esna, Dendera, and Kom Ombo, »regularly identify the oases as important wine-producing regions« – a continuation of activity known from New Kingdom times, from wine-jar labels, oasis amphoras, and wall paintings in private tombs (p. 16). Gill makes the interesting point that while oasis wine was also the primary product in Ptolemaic times, the depictions now occur only in temples, in the context of tribute-bearing scenes, emphasizing the authority and interest of the king, perhaps at the expense of local officials in Upper Egypt (p. 16).

One of Gill's points in presenting this summary of known evidence is to demonstrate the unlikelihood of concluding that the Ptolemies did not care to invest in this region. And yet historians have continually downplayed their involvement here, in large part due to the lack of securely datable Ptolemaic-era remains. This makes excavated, stratified, objectively datable

- 1 E. Cruz Uribe, *Social Structure and Daily Life: Graeco-Roman*, in: A. B. Lloyd (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Ancient History (Chichester, West Sussex – Malden, MA 2010) 491–506.
- 2 O. E. Kaper, *The Western Oases*, in: C. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford 2012) 717–735.
- 3 S. Aufrère, *La liste des sept oasis d'Edfou*, *BIFAO* 100, 2000, 79.
- 4 O. E. Kaper, *Egyptian Toponyms of Dakhla Oasis*, *BIFAO* 92, 1992, 117.

pottery an absolute and fundamental necessity, especially because that pottery could then be used a kind of magic key to help identify Ptolemaic-era vessels from the masses of already collected but previously undatable survey material. In his next chapters, that is what Gill presents: a large corpus of (mostly) stratified pottery from Mut al-Kharab, the site of a temple and sanctuary in the heart of the Dakhleh Oasis, which he then uses as a baseline to re-analyze older survey material collected by the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP). This in turn allows him to completely revise the 1999 site index as well as re-study the published material from the other Western Desert oases, notably Kharga, Farafra, Bahariya, and Siwa. He promises no less than »the first major synthesis of Ptolemaic Period activity in the Western Desert of Egypt, as well as the most extensive study of Ptolemaic Period pottery from the oases to date« (p. 1). And then he delivers it.

Contexts and Pottery

In chapter 2 Gill presents the excavated contexts from Mut al-Kharab. The site comprises a large mud-brick temenos built originally in Dynasty XXVII. A wall surrounds a huge area (180 x 217 m). A large depression in the center marks the location of a Ptolemaic-era temple, although the building is almost completely destroyed. Surviving are two parallel north-south stone walls, about 16 m apart, inscribed stelai and sections of wall reliefs, hundreds of ostraca in both Demotic and Greek, and excavated pottery and small finds, including a foundation deposit (on which see below). Mud-brick buildings in the SE corner of the temenos were probably living quarters for temple personnel, since they contained both cooking vessels and decorated table wares. The ancient settlement that was likely connected to this complex is today completely obscured by the modern town, although scattered Ptolemaic-era cemeteries provide a sense of its extent. The size of the temenos suggests that Mut al-Kharab was the largest and most important temple in Dakhleh, and rivaled the temple of Hibis in Kharga.

The presentation of the excavation is, of course, essential but rather inhospitable to use. I have not seen Gill's dissertation but I suspect this chapter has been little changed from that. It would have been preferable if Gill would have taken a step back and re-arranged this material chronologically, beginning at the bottom with the earliest material and grouping together contexts that in the end comprised a single stratigraphic or constructional episode. This would have allowed the outline of the excavation to be more easily linked to ceramic groups. Instead this is essentially a detailed, illustrated field report, so that, for example, there are repeated instances of contexts described as »rubbish used as convenient fill for foundation packing«, with contents comparable to other individual contexts. This kind of presentation puts the onus of sense-making on the reader, a procedure that is difficult at best and sometimes impossible.

The best example of how *un*-sensibly these contexts are explained is that the foundation deposit – which is the most exciting as well as most coherent of all the contexts – is embedded within the rote list of deposits. The deposit, dating to late Ptolemaic times, comprised a wooden box containing »a collection of molds in ceramic and plaster, some inscribed with Demotic notations, ... used for the manufacture of glass or faience inlays for a monumental image of a falcon-headed god depicted with a tripartite wig, collar, kilt, and outstretched wings, which is probably to be identified as Seth« (p. 33). Also inside the box were a bronze Osiris figurine, a faience plaque with a cartouche of Psamtek, and a plaster sculptor's model of a male head. The dating is secured by stratified finds: in the fill above this deposit were ostraca and a late Ptolemaic coin; in the fill below was Ptolemaic pottery.

In chapter 3 Gill presents all of the pottery from the Mut al-Kharab excavations as well as from other sites surveyed by the DOP. He begins with an overview of previous research and citation of relevant comparative studies from Dakhleh itself, other of the Western Oases, and also the Nile Valley. He notes, correctly, that in the past twenty years there has been a dramatic increase in detailed studies of Ptolemaic-era pottery, and he cites a satisfyingly complete list – although I note the puzzling omission of Herbert and Berlin's 2003 Coptos

publication⁵, which is an unfortunate oversight given the particular relevance of that crucial Upper Egyptian entrepôt.

For most readers of this review, I suspect that the details Gill presents in this chapter will be the most welcome and repeatedly consulted. For this reason, I here provide a certain amount of detail and also editorialize on the form and manner of presentation. Gill begins, sensibly, by discussing fabrics and wares. He is able to rely on a welcome body of petrographic analyses by his DOP colleague M. Eccleston⁶. Eccleston had identified three groups of Ptolemaic fabrics, all iron-rich and ferruginous: Coarse Ferruginous, Mudstone / Claystone / Shale (B3), and Mudstone / Claystone / Shale – Vegetal Tempered Variant (A4) (pp. 47–52), and Gill provides detailed descriptions. There was a marked increase in the use of Mudstone / Claystone / Shale fabric (B3) from earlier to Ptolemaic times, although Gill neither explains nor speculates as to why. This section represents a great deal of careful work that cries out to be shared, for which reason I here make a plea for Gill and Eccleston to please post these excellent descriptions, along with illustrative thin-section photos, on the open-source *Levantine Ceramics Project* website (<https://www.levantineceramics.org>) so as to make this important work easily and widely available.

Following fabrics, Gill then describes three categories of Ptolemaic-era wares – and here I offer a round of applause for the welcome distinction between fabric and ware, with ›fabric‹ being the clay body and its inclusions while ›ware‹ represents the potter's treatment of that fabric, which can include specific types of finishing and surface treatment. This is an especially critical distinction to make in order then to be able to date pottery from survey, since particular wares tend to be more chronologically bounded than specific fabrics. Gill identifies three categories of Ptolemaic wares: plain, cream-slipped, and red-slipped. Probably the most notable aspect of the Dakhleh Ptolemaic pottery is the amount of exterior decoration, which Gill classifies under various rubrics – linear, floral, figural, applied/modeled, incised, impressed. This propensity to design sets the oasis material apart from the great majority of Ptolemaic-era pottery from both the Delta and the Nile Valley. Gill says that the painted decoration is ›one of the more diagnostic features of the Ptolemaic pottery tradition, both in the oasis and in the Nile Valley«. He cites Schreiber's important work⁷ on the latter, and (disapprovingly) quotes me as saying that Ptolemaic period pottery was rarely decorated⁸. But my statement is based on the enormous quantities of undecorated pottery from Naukratis, Coptos (whose publication, as noted above, he seems to have missed), and Elephantine; it's simply not true that painted decoration is frequent everywhere, or even frequent in the Nile Valley. It's hard to know why Gill doesn't acknowledge difference, since it would only enhance the interesting specificity of the oasis material, which – along with Scheiber's Theban material – is *sui generis*: these corpora are odd, not exempla for the entire country. Gill indeed goes on to note the Dakhleh designs are unique and ›seem to have developed locally« (p. 52). Right: the Dakhleh material is not a model or a paradigm. It is special.

5 S. C. Herbert – A. M. Berlin, Excavations at Coptos (Qift) in Upper Egypt, 1988–1992, *JRA Suppl.* Series 53 (Portsmouth, RI 2003).

6 M. A. J. Eccleston, Appendix 1: Macroscopic and Petrographic Descriptions of Late Period Keg and Flask Fabrics, in: C. A. Hope, Kegs and Flasks from the Dakhleh Oasis, *CCE* 6, 2000, 211–218. – M. A. J. Eccleston, Technological and Social Aspects of High-Temperature Industries in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt during the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Monash University 2006.

7 G. Schreiber, Late Dynastic and Ptolemaic Painted Pottery from Thebes: 4th–2nd C. BC (Budapest 2003); G. Schreiber, Early and Middle Ptolemaic Funerary Art at Thebes (ca. 306–88 BC), in: Z. Hawass – T. Bács – G. Schreiber (eds.), Proceedings of the Colloquium on Theban Archaeology at the Supreme Council of Antiquities, November 5, 2009 (Cairo 2011) 105–139.

8 A. M. Berlin, Something Old, Something New: Native Cultures under Ptolemaic Rule, in: N. Fenn – C. Römer-Strehl (eds.), Networks in the Hellenistic World According to the Pottery in the Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond, *BARIntSer* 2539 (Oxford 2013) 230.

On to forms. Everybody who works on pottery must make an essential, basic decision when confronted with a body of material: shall I use standard, readily understandable shape names such as bowl, plate, jar, etc. – even though the names may mislead? Or shall I use project-specific code, which lends itself to databases but may be unintelligible to outsiders? Gill chooses neither, opting instead for an approach that I do not recall ever seeing before. He uses names – but only two: ›bowl‹ to refer to all open shapes; and ›jar‹ to refer to all closed shapes (p. 63). He explains that he wanted to avoid real-world terms such as ›plate‹, ›casserole‹, ›baking dish‹, etc. because he believes that »terms like these lead to a preconceived notion about the function of different vessel forms, which is not always correct and hinders our ability to examine the material objectively« (p. 63).

But pottery is not objective data. It is the product of human manufacture, intended for practical use. Vessels had functions, and while we all know that the functions could be multiple and also different from the intentions of their makers, it remains the case that when somebody made a clay vessel, she or he had one or more specific uses in mind, ranging from the very specific such as brewing brew, raising bread, or parching beans, to more general, such as holding any liquid or dry good. If we hope to use ceramic evidence to move from vessels to behavior, and from artifacts to the larger questions they may inform, then we must do our best to figure out and say plainly what things seem to have been used for. Of course we must also be honest about the evidence and its limitations, honest about what we are more or less sure about, and honest about what we surmise. But our job is to try to make human sense of the objects we recover so as to help readers of all sorts develop their own ideas and questions.

In addition, there's something fundamentally un-collegial about not acknowledging or referring to terms that are long established, well understood, widely used, and intrinsically meaningful. Gill's Form 4a, which he calls a shallow bowl, and further describes as having a modeled rim and ring-base (p. 64), is the well-known rolled rim plate. It's disingenuous and actually also unhelpful not to use this term or even refer to it. In order to recognize that the Dakhleh potters made their own version of this originally Attic-inspired and very widely emulated form, a reader would have to bring a fair bit of knowledge to his or her reading here. What is the advantage in creating such difficulties of access and understanding? That is surely not the intention of scholarly publication, and I don't believe it's Gill's intention either. But it is a result of the choice he makes here.

Further, Gill himself effectively undermines this bowl/jar approach to naming by regularly identifying functional uses and their logical names in the descriptions. So his Forms 47–49, which he calls »Two-Handled Bowls«, are described as follows: »bowls with a modeled rim, a rounded base and two horizontal loop-handles applied just below the rim. The rim has been modeled to form an internal ledge, which is designed to support a lid. It is clear from the shape, fabric, and surface wear that such vessels were used as cooking pots« (p. 76). If it's so clear, then why not call them cooking pots? Why invent so misleading a term as »two-handled bowls«? Why classify Forms 91–93 as ›jars‹ and then go on to admit in the description that they are really flasks? By the end Gill has himself given up: about Forms 100–101, he says straight out that they are stands (pp. 91–92). Right.

Within the presentation of forms, Gill illustrates a single example of each, along with some parallels. He provides a full list of find-spots in a table in the appendix, and lists more parallels in another appendix table. The separated lists are frustrating and unnecessary.

Ptolemaic Sites and Activities

In chapters 4 and 5 Gill goes on to reap an incredibly satisfying harvest of historical data. Using his detailed analyses of the Mut el-Kharab pottery, he re-examined the large collection of material from the DOP survey – and completely transformed our understanding of Ptolemaic activity in the western desert. The original survey site index listed 17 Ptolemaic-era sites; Gill brings the total up to 72 – a significant increase that, in one fell swoop, undermines pretty much every historical conclusion yet reached about Ptolemaic interests in the western desert.

He shows that these sites are spread throughout the oasis: 23 sites in the west, 33 in the center, and 16 in the east.

Gill does more than simply identify the sites. He also categorizes them as one of four types: settlement (large-scale domestic activity with multiple buildings); occupation (small-scale domestic activity, such as an isolated farmstead); temple; and cemetery. He then plots these sites in Dakhleh and finds compelling evidence for a pattern of 13 clustered groups, with each group comprising two to ten sites within a two km radius. Each group contains a major settlement, one or more small occupation sites, one or more cemeteries, and (generally) a temple. Unsurprisingly, the distribution of these groups corresponds to areas of modern settlement, probably because both ancient and modern populations required similar conditions for subsistence: access to springs and land that is low and level for irrigation.

Gill makes the insightful observation that the range of settlement types and diversity of burial types likely correlated to a range of social strata and positions, which suggests that Ptolemaic Dakhleh had a »complex and stratified society«. He then situates the Ptolemaic settlements within the longer arc of settlement in the oasis from Old Kingdom through Roman times. He shows that from the Late Period through the Early Roman era, the number of settlements increased by 106 %, and from Ptolemaic through early Roman times the increase was even more marked: 178 % – almost double – the number of sites (p. 123). This all suggests that the population increase »was the result of a deliberate strategy of settlement and agricultural exploitation that was implemented by the Ptolemies« (p. 123).

Gill next turns to a re-examination of the evidence from the other oases in the Western Desert. Here he is operating at something of a disadvantage, since he had generally to rely only on what has been published. This makes for uneven knowledge – yet here too Gill's patient and determined investigating has upended our understanding of Ptolemaic activity in this region. He presents a discussion oasis by oasis: Kharga, Farafra, Bahariya, Siwa, and then the minor oases. Gill was able to re-date a number of sites by comparison with the pottery from Dakhleh, and he brought his understanding of the patterns he encountered there to the evidence from these other places. He makes a strong case for seeing these places within a regional frame.

Conclusions

Gill's concluding chapter is a deeply satisfying read – both because he offers so many large and persuasive insights and also because they all rest on his painstakingly careful amassing of ceramic data. For those of us committed to the study of pottery, this monograph demonstrates how substantial the pay-off for such study can be.

Gill shows that the population in the Western oases rose substantially during the Ptolemaic period. There were new settlements and increased agricultural productivity, which – considering the locale – is most probably due to deliberate Ptolemaic investments. The Ptolemies would have had several compelling reasons to invest resources here. First, new settlements here would produce more food and, especially, wine. Second, new settlements would serve as points of control over long-distance trade routes. Gill proposes adopting the terminology proposed by Joseph Manning⁹ and understanding the new settlements as »gateway communities«. They would help in the administration and control of trans-Saharan trade, especially the acquisition of gold, ivory, semi-precious stones, and wild animals (pp. 151–154).

9 J. G. Manning, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt. The Structure of Land Tenure* (Cambridge 2003) 33–34; J. G. Manning, *The Last Pharaohs. Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305–30 BC* (Princeton, NJ 2010) 106–107; J. G. Manning, *Networks, Hierarchies and Markets in the Ptolemaic Economy*, in: Z. H. Archibald – J. K. Davies – V. Gabrielsen (eds.), *The Economies of Hellenistic Societies, third to first Centuries BC* (Oxford 2011) 303–304; J. G. Manning, *The Capture of the Thebaid*, in: P. F. Dorman – B. M. Bryan (eds.), *Perspectives on Ptolemaic Theben. Papers from the Theban Workshop 2006, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations 65* (Chicago, IL 2011) 6.

Third, the Western Oases provided a military buffer zone against uprisings from within and threats from without (pp. 155–159). The new settlements offered housing for military units and so maintained security, particularly against the rising threat of Carthage to the west. Gill notes that »this was not an entirely new strategy ... the Persians had been active in the oases, probably for many of the same reasons; however, under Ptolemaic rule, exploitation of the oases intensified ... Given that the exploitation of the Fayum, the development of Cyrenaica, and the expeditions to the Red Sea and Lower Nubia were all the results of policies implemented during the Early Ptolemaic period, it seems likely that much of the development witnessed in the oases began around the same time« (p. 144).

Gill uses the evidence of the site patterning he uncovered in chapters 4 and 5 to explain the mechanism of Ptolemaic settlement here, specifically the function of temples. He cites recent studies¹⁰ that see Ptolemaic temple construction here as limited (in large part because most were made of mud-brick and undecorated, and so are poorly represented in the physical landscape) and a kind of incidental by-product. But the settlement clusters are strong counter-evidence to this interpretation. Gill advocates for reading the Ptolemaic temple foundations as deliberate attempts to establish control over existing temple estates and their associated settlements, in order to provide a strong administrative base from which to launch new settlement and land development programs« (p. 149). Gill also postulates that temples provided housing for soldiers. In later Roman times there were fortresses built in the oases; but no such facilities have been found from Ptolemaic times. In those years, soldiers were likely stationed inside temple precincts, whose sizeable mud-brick temenos walls would have secured the men along with their supplies. Soldiers would have functioned as local police and desert guards, regular reminders of connections with and dependence on the king and the larger political enterprise he stood for.

All of these conclusions bear directly on several larger historical issues: how the Ptolemies continued, extended, but also modified the Persian models they inherited; what patterns and parameters they bequeathed to the Romans; the character, extent, and development of Ptolemaic administration, infrastructure, and social norms; and the character of interaction between the Western Desert and the Nile Valley. This is a very important book, full of necessary new information, ideas, and syntheses. It is the best kind of pottery study, because it makes of that mundane material historical testimony.

10 e.g. J. C. Darnell – D. Klotz – C. Manassa, *Gods on the Road. The Pantheon of Thebes at Qasr el-Gheita*, in: C. Thiers (ed.), *Documents de Théologies Thébaines Tardives 2. CENiM 8* (Montpellier 2013) 1–31; O. E. Kaper, *The Western Oases*, in: C. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford 2012) 717–735.