

Forgetting to Remember in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt

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Introduction

The corollary to memory is forgetting. When we select certain aspects of our past to remember, we allow other aspects to be forgotten. While remembering may be critical for the construction and constitution of both individual and group identities, forgetting also facilitates the crafting of identities, particularly in situations involving the incorporation of new social groups into a region. Today I will explore evidence of forgetting from a range of Romano-Egyptian sites and documentary sources deriving from the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt. This oasis was the focus of multiple waves of migration throughout its long history as a zone for human settlement and, yet, the origins of these immigrants remain remarkably unclear to archaeologists working in the region. I aim to show that many of the immigrants to the Dakhleh Oases allowed memories of their regions of origin to fade and that this act of forgetting was constitutive for a particular way of existence that these individuals wished to cultivate and maintain in their new locale.

The Dakhleh Oasis contains a dense concentration of remarkably well-preserved material remains dating to the Roman occupation of Egypt. It includes some 200 sites within the 2000 km² radius of the oasis. Most of these Roman Period sites appear to date to the 1st – 4th C AD, although they often rest on top of, or alongside, material from earlier periods, as many of these same sites were continually reused for settlement for at least three millennia. This occupational history appears to have shifted towards the end of the fourth century AD, when there was a general contraction in the presence of sites in the oasis as well as the complete abandonment of some of the major cities in the oasis in favour of other areas. This occupational history leaves us with numerous exposed Roman ruins, often without significant disturbance or subsequent occupation. The high level of preservation in Dakhleh combined with the intensive survey work conducted here in the 1970s and 1980s has provided archaeologists with unparalleled access to settlement data for the Roman Period in Egypt (Churcher and Mills 1995; Mills 1979). New data from ongoing excavations are constantly emerging from this oasis and therefore this contribution serves both as an interpretation of what has already been produced as well as a suggestion for future lines of research in this region.

While the documentary and archaeological data suggest that Dakhleh was the destination of numerous migration waves over many centuries, the material culture of the oasis does not preserve distinct memories of other regions within Egypt or further afield.¹ Rather, in the Roman Period we find an intertwining of Roman, Greek, and Egyptian material culture in combinations suggestive of a specifically Dakhlan way of being. This evidence—and lack of evidence—suggests that the individuals who moved here do not seem to have carried with them strong signatures of their regions of origin and, in so doing, forgot specific regional associations from their past. Such ruptures with the past are perhaps unsurprising, although they are potent reminders that forgetting is a significant component of identity construction and that an exclusive focus on memorial practices reveals only part of the story about how individuals relate to the past. It is well understood that memory cannot be transmitted across

¹ The link between material culture and memory is complicated and often times problematic. Several volumes on material culture address this issue and suggest that objects carry associations with them throughout the course of their life histories. These issues can be explored in more detail in (Borić 2010; Hoskins 1998; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003).

generations without continual revision and refashioning and that this process of revision requires moments of modification and amplification in order to make new meanings possible (Küchler 1993).

The counterpart to this memory crafting is forgetting since individuals have to discard aspects of their personal history in order to amplify other facets of their identity. What emerges from focusing on the forgetting component of memory in Dakhleh is that Dakhlans may have had a flexible attitude to the past and that their relationship to their individual pasts might represent a palimpsest of memories that were continually revised to meet the changing needs of their identities over time. As local Dakhlan concerns became more important than their origins, individuals allowed past regional specificities to fall by the wayside in favour of symbols that expressed their relationship to their current community and locality. These symbols seem to have drawn from a complex array of symbols from Greek, Roman and Egyptian traditions (Boozer 2010), suggesting that ethnicity and status may have been more important than local Egyptian origins among Dakhlans (Boozer 2007). I suggest that forgetting was strategic and that it indicates that individuals viewed their migration as a positive change rather than a coerced diaspora.²

Harmonizing Forgetting

Social memory has received a good deal of scholarly attention since the 1980s and has grown increasingly nuanced in the scholarship, but few scholars have addressed memory's dependence upon forgetting.³ Forgetting is essential for memory both because it serves as an impetus for individuals to memorialize and also because it makes way for new memories to be forged and rearticulated for current concerns. This dual role of forgetting ensures that it is an important precondition for memory. In addition to recognizing the necessity of forgetting, the distinctions between different types of forgetting can help us to draw attention to different societal attitudes towards the past, the present and the future. I suggest that there are three primary ways in which societies forget the past—passively, violently, and strategically. It is important to recognize the distinctions between these types of forgetting so we can understand the attitudes involved in forgetting as well as choose the most appropriate methodologies to apprehend them. In so doing, I hope to highlight the particular characteristics of strategic forgetting among the individuals who moved to Dakhleh during the Roman Period and worked towards establishing a collective local identity.

Passive forgetting⁴ is perhaps the most self-evident type of forgetting among societies. Forty describes it as the decay of an imprint (Forty 1999:2), suggesting a natural and slow erosional process. In the same vein, Bradley has argued that it is reasonable to suppose that people from pre-industrial societies could not have remembered particular events and individuals more than 200 years deep into the past (Bradley 2002). This process of forgetting is involuntary and occurs naturally among groups with few means at their disposal for accurately and exhaustively recording the past.

The second type of forgetting—violent forgetting—entails an active erasure of past histories in preference for a revised identity in the present. This obligation or compulsion to erase the

² See (Parkin 1999) for the use of mementoes as a coping mechanism in situations of forced migration.

³ There are several key articles and volumes on forgetting that have been particularly useful for the present paper. For example, (Casey 1987; Eckardt 2004; Forty and Küchler 1999; Lowenthal 1993; Ricoeur 2004).

⁴ Freud suggests that forgetting is active and intentional rather than passive, and that the process of psychoanalysis is to uncover buried pasts (Freud 1960:11), but this argument is more well-suited for individuals than societies. The distinction between individuals and societies is important, even if we do not always remember to make that distinction in our discussions of memory and forgetting (Forty 1999:2).

past intentionally and violently removes images and records that do not comport with present understandings. This type of collective oblivion is often a delicate enterprise and involves myriad decisions about what to destroy, how, and why. Some individuals and groups may believe that the collective health of a society depends upon selectively removing signatures of certain pasts (Lowenthal 1999), although not all stake-holders will agree about what should be preserved and what should be expunged (Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2009; Groarke and Warrick 2006). There are numerous examples of collective oblivion from antiquity, such as the iconoclasts who removed images of a pagan or idolatrous history from monuments (Aston 1988:256; Sauer 2003), and the Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae*, which legally and systematically removed the memory of individuals from pictorial and documentary records (Flower 1998; Varner 2004). We also have ample examples from our own recent past, such as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas (Meskell 2002) and the tearing down of Saddam Hussein's statue, thereby fulfilling the suggestion that all successful revolutions end with statues coming down (Forty 1999:10; Lewis and Mulvey 1997). These violent moments of erasure tend to leave deep scars on monuments and in the landscape, often drawing attention to what was forgotten rather than facilitating memory loss.

The type of forgetting I wish to explore in these pages lies between the passive loss of history and the violent erasure of the past. Rather, I explore forgetting as a strategic and positive force that makes way for new memories in order to forge a collective identity among the inhabitants of Roman Dakhleh. Identity is fundamentally bound to a sense of belonging (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005) and therefore an individual chooses to remember and forget specific components of their personal history in order to express and encourage this sense of belonging. Because identity is fundamentally contextual, individuals awaken different aspects of themselves depending upon different social pressures (Given 2004:8-25; Hodder 1982:187), thereby forming a place for themselves in which they can experience belonging in each different setting. Forgetting opens up a space for new memories to be created and implanted among individuals who move to a new locality. In this sense, forgetting can be understood as the requisite discard of certain past memories because it can help groups forge an identity more appropriate to present concerns.

Multifaceted groups, such as individuals living in Roman Egypt, developed traditions that reflected their particular setting within Egypt and developed traditions not found in other areas of the Roman Empire. This variety of social construction involved a complicated interplay of social memory and forgetting along with the reuse and reinterpretation of the material landscape, images, and settings to suit the enhanced multicultural identity found in Roman Egypt. As Ricoeur argues, forgetting should not be seen only in terms of distortions of memory and the effacement of the past but also as paradoxically so close to memory that it should be considered one of the conditions for memory (Ricoeur 2004:426). The complicated intertwining of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman pasts that we find in Dakhleh provides us with a material example of this paradoxical relationship between memory and forgetting, in which certain past histories were discarded in favour of an identity that would promote a strong Dakhlan identity enmeshed within the particular social conditions of Roman Egypt.

Migrating and Forgetting in the Dakhleh Oasis

[SLIDE] Although the Nile Valley has always been the most densely occupied portion of Egypt, the Western Desert occupies two-thirds of the land within Egypt's current national boundaries. A string of oases dotted through this stark expanse represent the only possible areas for sedentary human occupation in this vast arid zone. This landscape held a particular placement within both Roman and Egyptian social consciousness as a result of the extreme environmental conditions of the region (Boozer forthcoming).

The arrival of the Romans in Egypt had a particularly strong effect upon this isolated region, as is indicated by the considerable increase in archaeological sites dating to the Roman Period. For example, there are in excess of two-hundred Roman and Byzantine sites as opposed to the forty-nine sites found to represent three millennia of occupation from the Pharaonic era, and most of which date to the late Old Kingdom (Mills 1993, 194).

It is likely that economic reasons motivated individuals to resettle in the Dakhleh Oasis, because mass migrations are often inspired by changed economic circumstances. Documentary sources corroborate this conjecture since they indicate that Dakhleh was a wealthy locale in Roman Egypt (Bagnall and Rathbone 2004, 262) and would therefore offer a tempting destination for individuals looking to increase their economic standing or to improve upon depressed economic conditions in their place of origin.

Although the Romans left the most imposing imprint upon Dakhleh's landscape, the sources of these colonists is murky. The documentary sources currently known to us do not provide the origins of these colonists and the nascent archaeological data allows only limited conjectures. Some data indicates connections with—and potential migrations from—Thebes for agricultural purposes, but these conjectures are by no means certain. Although it is clear that the Roman rule amplified the long-existing status of Dakhleh as a zone of colonization, Thebes remains the only Egyptian region with any strong ties visible in either in the material or documentary evidence left to us in Dakhleh.

Lacunae in archaeological data provide inherently unstable ground for engineering arguments: one day we may find the evidence to fill these holes and our edifice may come tumbling down as a result. Despite this inherent vulnerability, I suggest that the material and documentary lacunae for Roman oasite origins are critical for understanding conceptions of self among people living in the Dakhleh Oasis during the Roman Period. The lack of data pointing towards the origins of migrants may indicate that individuals focused on cultivating a shared Dakhlan identity that reached beyond the parameters of any of the local origins of the colonists in order to create the new Romano-Egyptian social conditions we find in this oasis. Indeed, the material conditions found in Dakhleh indicate an identity specific to this oasis, which suggests that individuals set aside specific pasts in order to cultivate a Dakhlan present.

Unseen Palimpsests: Forgetting for a Collective Identity

Unlike memory, it may be difficult to find material evidence of forgetting. Violent forms of oblivion, such as iconoclasm, often leave deep scars in the material world, which can be read and interpreted long after their creation. Strategic forgetting, by definition, entails a lack of materiality left behind, so absence must serve as a primary signature of disregard. By examining the material indices of collective identities we may be able to detect the memories that replaced the voids left during the forgetting process. It is this unseen palimpsest of forgetting and re-forging that I wish to explore in order to access the processes and purposes of forgetting. In the Dakhleh Oasis we find strong a strong local identity in the archaeological and documentary records, which indicates that the individuals who migrated to Dakhleh forgot their recent regional pasts in favour of local traditions. The voids of past local identities became filled with a new regional identity that smoothed over differences of origin between migrant groups. I will look at two different components of Dakhlan daily life that show clear signs of localism—houses and religion—in order to suggest that these local signatures reflect the community identity that replaced forgotten pasts.

Houses are important for exploring questions of individual and community identities because households are the result of the interaction between larger social forms and the individual (Cowgill 1993; Dobres and Robb 2000; Johnson 1989). Houses provide an invaluable lens for exploring the intersection between individuals and the broader community because they interpenetrate with other social institutions in communities. As such, they can serve as highly responsive barometers of social processes, explaining the forms and consequences of broad social changes on the microscale (Hendon 2004:279).

Since the 1980s archaeologists have excavated a range of Dakhlan houses (Hope 1988) and nascent data provide substantive evidence of daily life in the oasis. This growing body of data suggest that Roman Dakhleh cultivated a locally specific housing type that combined Egyptian with Roman Mediterranean housing traditions [SLIDE]. For example, results from excavations at Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis) indicate that Roman Dakhleh domestic architecture of the second, third and fourth centuries AD typically consisted of a single-story structure with barrel vaulted roofs and a central room that was often partially or completely unroofed (Hope 2006:29).

This housing type is different from the majority of houses that were found in the Fayum, which remains the most comprehensive source for Romano-Egyptian houses. The University of Michigan thoroughly excavated several towns in this region in the 1930s and the ample data that they and other projects have produced have made this region into the cornerstone of Romano-Egyptian housing studies (Boak 1935; Boak and Peterson 1931; Davoli 1998; Gazda 1983; Husselman 1979). Because these houses are well-known to archaeologists they are often held up as the paradigm for Romano-Egyptian housing, but it is important to recognize that there was a spectrum of housing types in Roman Egypt and not all regions conformed to the Fayumic standard. Houses from the Fayum are typically multi-story structures with linear paths of access between rooms (Davoli 1998:53, 85), rather than the clustered plan evident in Dakhleh. This linear layout reflects more traditional Egyptian housing styles than does the clustered plan.

Houses in the Khargeh Oasis, near Dakhleh, appear to be situated between these two ends of the Romano-Egyptian domestic spectrum. For example, the unexcavated Roman houses of Umm el-Dabadib are laid out in regular blocks and consist of at least two storeys of barrel-vaulted rooms (Rossi 2000:335, 341-342). Likewise, the North Kharga Oasis Survey revealed that most domestic units were multi-storey (at least a ground and a first storey) with barrel-vaulted roofs. A central room appears to have been a particular characteristic of this architecture (Ikram and Rossi 2004:80-81), which provides some overlap with the domestic forms found in Dakhleh. This range of domestic styles reflect local traditions within a general housing spectrum, with Dakhlan houses reflecting more classical origins while the houses of the Fayum are more linear and traditionally Egyptian in style. Like most Mediterranean cultures, Dakhkans adapted classical styles to their own locality and Egyptian characteristics are evident within the structures.

The decorative motifs found in Dakhlan houses complement this architectural data. A growing number of excavated houses in Dakhleh reveal decorated zones that reflect Greek and Roman traditions to a greater extent than Fayumic houses, which tended to be more informally executed and relied on a significantly darker palette than that found in Dakhleh (Husselman 1979:35-36). These Dakhlan decorations include a range of styles, most of which are wall-paper motifs that were common in the Roman Empire but not attested elsewhere in

Egypt (Boozer 2010; Hope and H.Whitehouse 2006:317; Hope 2003:238). House B1, from Amheida, is the most elaborately decorated house exposed thus far because it displays figural scenes that recount Homeric myths (Boozer 2010; Leahy 1980; Mills 1980). Indeed, Homer appears to be a prominent focal point among the elite in the oasis (Boozer 2007; Boozer 2010) and new evidence produced by Colin Hope's team at Kellis has revealed lines from Book 1 of Homer, strengthening this argument (Hope 2010).

The evidence from houses suggests that Dakhlan domestic architecture follows locally-specific housing traditions that adapted to Roman rule more acutely than regions such as the Fayum or the neighboring Kharga oasis. Dakhkans may have employed classical motifs because they pervaded the Roman Mediterranean at this time and would appear more geographically neutral than regionally specific housing norms from within Egypt. The prominent use of Homer among some of the Dakhlan elite likewise signals incorporation into the broader Roman Mediterranean and draws from a literary background that would also be regionally neutral for migrants from other regions within Egypt. This data may suggest that individuals migrating to Dakhleh gave up their own locally specific house designs and decoration in an attempt to blend in with other groups in the oasis.

The second line of data that reveals practices of forgetting depends upon the religious landscape of Roman Dakhleh. Religious and commemorative practices are important events that integrate communities by providing links between individuals who may normally unite along different lines (Bakhtin 1965; Meskell 2003). By cross-cutting other social institutions, religious practices can promote community identities in a strong and cohesive manner. These unifying practices can be particularly significant in sites of migration as they can unite the disparate groups that have little else to unite them. Recent excavations have shown that Roman Dakhleh sustained a strongly regionalized identity with respect to its religious pantheon and festivals, which may have served to promote a local identity.

The local cult topography of Dakhleh suggests that the temples within this oasis are strongly interrelated and self-centered, because they almost exclusively depict local Dakhlan deities (Kaper 1997a:213; Kaper 1997b:51). The pictorial emphasis upon local gods provided temples with an inventory of local deities, which potentially may have served to complement a festival in which all of the gods of the region participated (Kaper 1997a:211-212; Kaper 1997b:52). The known history of the temple cults in Dakhleh and Khargeh suggests that the second century AD may be understood as the high point of usage in these cults (Kaper 1998:151-152). Moreover, most of the devotional dipinti found on these monuments appear to have been added during the second century AD during major religious festivals (Kaper and Worp 1999a:237). The dating of these temples would place them in the early stages of the population expansion that occurred in this oasis. This data suggests that inhabitants of the Dakhleh Oasis promoted self-contained religious and festive practices much like other regions in Egypt (e.g. the Nile Valley and the Fayum) in order to reinforce their own regional identities. In this manner the temples and festivals reinforced a cohesive regional identity among Dakhkans.

The gods worshipped in Dakhleh included locally-specific gods as well as local gods who tapped in to broader Egyptian mythologies. For example, the god Amun-nakht appears to be unique to the Dakhleh Oasis. Amun-nakht made his first appearance in Dakhleh under the reign of Ptolemy IX (lived *c.* 143-81 BC) and appears to have remained popular for at least two hundred years. According to local mythology found on the temple walls at Ain Birbiya, Amun-nakht pursued the enemies of his father Osiris across the desert (Kaper 1997a:208) and

had a great deal of power over the ‘inundation’ of the oases (Kaper 1997b:81). Amun-nakht’s mythology links the god to the particular locality and fertility of the Dakhleh Oasis, thereby reinforcing geographical ties to gods, but also linking him to one of the most pre-eminent gods in Egypt. The god Seth is another prominent local deity, although he was certainly well-known in the Nile Valley. The cult of Seth, god of chaos and confusion, persisted in the temples and tombs of Dakhleh long after its demise in the Nile Valley from at least the Third Intermediate Period into the Roman Period (Kaper 1997a:210-211; Kaper 1997b:55-65; Osing 1985: 229 n.2; te Velde 1977:115-116). Seth’s defensive attributes were particularly pronounced in Dakhleh, and most especially with respect to his defense of the sun god, Horus (Kaper 1997b:65). Seth, like Amun-nakht, helped Dakhleans to promote their particular regional landscape with gods emblematic of the oasis, but also drew from the well-established cults of the Nile Valley, which would have been more broadly familiar to immigrants.

Architecturally, the temples from Dakhleh conform to a regional type found in the Great Oasis (Dakhleh and Kharga) in which the temple plan is somewhat elongated and contains a line of mostly vaulted chambers replete with painted plaster (Kaper 1997a:204). This regionalism in terms of temple design is reminiscent of the regionalism found in housing forms—there is recognizable continuity between forms in Egypt but also strong regionalism found within this spectrum.⁵ Of particular interest is that both the domestic and the religious landscape show greater continuity between Dakhleh and Khargeh than with other regions in Egypt, but that each oasis still maintained its own norms (Kaper 1998).

By exploring the domestic and the religious spheres of Dakhleh it becomes clear that locals focused on traditions embedded within this oasis rather than further afield. These traditions embraced the particular geographical emplacement of Dakhleh but also reached towards the greater Mediterranean through the use of Classical motifs and designs and towards the Nile Valley through the local pantheon. Together, this evidence suggests that locals gave up past traditions in order to promote a strong regional identity within the Dakhleh oasis and that broader Roman and Egyptian traditions helped to buttress these new local traditions. This process of forgetting appears to have been successful in uniting the populace because it is difficult for archaeologists to delve deep into the past to determine the origins of the migrants to this oasis.

Conclusions

I have argued that the process of forgetting enabled immigrants to the Dakhleh Oasis to develop stronger links to one another and to cultivate a local identity instead of holding on to their place of origin. This type of forgetting served as a positive force within the local community and therefore it did not leave visible scars in the material world that archaeologists find easy to read. The major problem with exploring instances of strategic forgetting is that we must rely upon an absence of scars and material culture in order to construct our arguments. The archaeological and documentary evidence are already replete with lacunae, which makes the task of seeking out voids of forgetting a difficult undertaking. I have suggested that a potential way forward would be to examine the traditions that filled these voids so we can understand the objective of forgetting among the immigrants. In other words, what did immigrants to Dakhleh forget *for*?

⁵ For example, the temple of Deir el-Haggar was dedicated to the Theban triad but the order in which these deities were presented shows local adaptations of this norm (Kaper 1997a:206).

I suggest that the immigrants to Dakhleh came from a range of Egyptian (and potentially more distant) regions and that the evidence from houses and temples suggests that individuals were willing to forget their divergent pasts in favour of cultivating a strong group identity. This new collective identity relied upon idiosyncratic local traditions paired with neutral, pan-Mediterranean and pan-Egyptian traditions. Together these new traditions reinforced a strong identification with the physical locality of Dakhleh, but they also tapped into more broadly understood and recognized traditions, which would have felt familiar to many individuals living across Egypt—and further afield—during the Roman Period. In situation of forced migration, mementos serve as an essential coping strategy for individuals to hold on to their pasts (Parkin 1999). The lack of mementoes in the archaeological record suggests that the migration to Dakhleh was voluntary rather than coerced and that immigrants saw their transition to Dakhleh in a positive light, perhaps due to the economic incentives to be found there.

Today the Dakhleh Oasis has approximately 70,000 inhabitants and rising. This population density is nearly twice what it was in the 1970s and represents the effect of the New Valley scheme in which the Egyptian government attempts to relieve population pressures from the Nile Valley by resettling families to the oases in the Western Desert. Despite the abrupt rise in Dakhleh's population density, the inhabitants of this oasis continue to have a unique identity in Egypt. Nile Valley inhabitants continue to view the desert with significant apprehension and the Dakhlans continue to carry out somewhat different architectural, dress and social traditions. Perhaps they have also set aside their own recent pasts in favour of their current local identity, mirroring the last time Dakhleh experienced great waves of immigrants.

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