

Local Forms of Ancient Egyptian Divinities in Kharga Oasis of Egypt

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Introduction

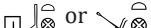

Kharga Oasis is one of the most famous five oases in Egypt's Western Desert. It is located about 150 kilometers west of the Nile Valley. The oasis occupies the eastern side of a great depression that embraces the other oasis, Dakhla, on its western side. Its length is 185 km and its width ranges from 20 to 80 km. Kharga Oasis' most distinctive landmarks are sand dunes, artesian wells, mounts, cultivated fields, and many monuments from every period of Egypt's history [1]. Ancient Egyptians called Oasis  wHAt or "we hat". In Coptic, the name evolved to ouaxe (OuHe). In ancient Greek, it is Ὀασις, which is the origin of the English word "oasis". In addition, the Arabic word for oasis, "oasis", which is واح waHa and the plural واحات waHat are also derived from the Egyptian wHAt. From at least New Kingdom, Kharga Oasis was known as  wHAt-rsyt, the Southern Oasis [2]. During the Graeco-roman period, it was known as Oasis Magna, the Great Oasis. It is called in Arabic as واح خarga Wahet Elgharga, meaning "Outer Oasis", referring to its location at the edge of the Western Desert and its proximity to the Nile Valley [3].

It is generally accepted that Kharga and other oases of the Western Desert were populated in prehistoric times. The evidence of this is found through the rock drawings, which mainly portray cattle and pregnant or dancing women. Yet, the earliest documented mention of wHAt, the "Oasis" is in Herkhuf's autobiography in his tomb at Qubbet el-Hawa in Aswan. He was the governor of Upper Egypt served under the kings of the sixth dynasty in the Old Kingdom. He mentions that he reached Yam via  Hr wAt wHAt, the road of the Oasis [4]. Kharga Oasis was connected with the Nile Valley through a number of routs, the most prominent being Darb el-Abaain (Forty Days' Route) [5]. Throughout history, the region has been governed by the Nile Valley since ancient times. Several pieces of evidence provide support for this claim, including royal stele and inscriptions as well as the sixth dynasty tombs of the governors who held Egyptian titles in Dakhla Oasis. The oasis sometimes served as a refuge for rebellions, and ancient pharaohs

launched campaigns from time to time to tighten control over this area; in late period, it was a place of banishment [6]. In the twenty-seventh dynasty, the Persian kings were especially interested in oases, particularly that of Kharga, where temples bear their names were constructed [7].

The oases region became increasingly important after Alexander the Great visited the temple of Amun-Zeus in Siwa Oasis. As for Kharga, the Ptolemaic kings left many monuments bearing their names, but it was during the Roman period that it reached its apogee of prosperity and prominence. In addition to drilling wells and building towns, temples and forts were also built. Darb el-Abain, the strategic trading route linking the north and the south gave Kharga Oasis major importance at that time. Along this route, several Roman forts were built [8]. At least in the third or fourth century, Christianity first arrived in Kharga Oasis. Christians who fled persecution by the Roman emperors founded Christian communities in the Oasis. Kharga Oasis has many important Coptic monuments, of which the necropolis of Bagawat is one of the most outstanding [9]. Different divinities were worshiped in the Western Desert such as Ha, Igai, Tutu [10], Thoth, Amun-Nakht, and Bes [11]. Kharga is a place where certain Egyptian divinities were worshiped but in local forms. Among the most significant was that of Theban triad consisting of Amun-Re, his wife Mut, and their son Khonsu. The Osirian triad of Osiris (or Serapis), his wife Isis, and their son Horus was also revered heavily in the oasis particularly in the Roman period. Seth, as a principal god of the desert, was also highly honored in Kharga Oasis [12].

The Cult of Theban Triad in Kharga Oasis

There was great respect in Kharga Oasis for the Theban triad Amun-Re, his wife Mut, and their son Khonsu. Many of the greatest temples of the oasis are dedicated to them, including that of Hibis, which was the ancient capital of the oasis. It lies on a level plain north of the modern village of Kharga. Hibis is the Greek name for the ancient Egyptian  or  hbt, the "plough". The Persian

king Darius I in the twenty-seventh dynasty started the construction of the temple of Hibis. Darius II continued the work, whilst the final phase was completed by the Egyptian pharaoh Nectanebos II in the thirtieth dynasty. During the Graeco-Roman period, the temple was restored and enlarged. Amun-Re is recognized in the temple of Hibis as 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 imn (n) hbt, Amun of Hibis, represented as a man with a ram's head. In Greek, he was known as *Ἀμέν-ηβίς*, *Amenebis* [13].

In the temple of Qasr el-Ghuita, the Theban triad was also worshiped. The village of Qasr el-Ghuita is located 17-18 km to the south of the modern village of Kharga. It is marked by a mud-brick fort incorporating a stone temple on a small mount overlooking the route of Darb el-Arbain. As early travelers saw the cartouche of Darius I in the sanctuary of the temple, the temple may have originally been constructed in the 27th dynasty. Nevertheless, the existing building was restored under Ptolemy III, whose name is engraved on the doorway. In the outer larger hypostyle hall the walls contain inscriptions and scenes depicting Ptolemy IV, whereas in the inner smaller hypostyle hall they depict Ptolemy X. Thus, Ptolemy III began construction in this temple, and by Ptolemies IV and X it was completed. The title of Amun in this temple is 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 nb pr-wsxt, Lord of the large House, perhaps a reference to the temple or the village nearby. The presence of scenes of imn-nb-hbt, Amun Lord of Hibis in the temple also indicate that the latter also received a cult in this temple [14].

Amun's triad was also honorable in the temple of Qasr el-Zayan. It is located 5 km to the south of Qasr el-Ghuita. The ancient village of el-Zayan dates to at least the Ptolemaic Period. It was known as Tchonemyris, possibly derived from the ancient Egyptian 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 tA-xnmt wrt, the Great Well. Similarly, to Qasr el-Ghuita, this site also contains a Roman stone temple inside a fort made of mud-brick. Here, Amun, however, is worshiped as Amenebis or Amun of Hibis, the great god of Tchonemyris according to the Greek inscription on the gateway of the temple [15]. In addition, there are other indications that Amun was honored in the oasis, as evidence is found in the form of inscriptions and graffiti that bears his name across the area [16]. A few kilometers north of the modern village of Kharga, in Gabal el-Teir, there are inscriptions and drawings prove that fact. Some of them date back to the archaic period. A primitive red ochre drawing of Amun of Hibis is depicted at the foot of the mount in his image as a man with ram's horns and wearing the Atef-crown spearing a wild animal [17]. In the temple of Hibis, Mut, wife of Amun, held the title of 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 Hr-ib hbt, "She who resides at Hibis". A nearby temple, el-Nadura, which dates from the Roman period, is likely to have been dedicated to the goddess Mut. It is acceptable to find a temple of Mut near that of her husband Amun of Hibis. Additionally, the temple scene bears a striking resemblance to that of Mut at Karnak [18].

The Cult of Osirian Triad in Kharga Oasis

Besides the Theban triad, other divinities were also worshiped in the temple of Hibis, such as the Osirian triad consisting of Osiris, his wife Isis, and their son Horus. Doush is among the sites in Kharga

Oasis that have been extensively excavated. It is located about 20 km south of Baris, the modern village in the south of Kharga Oasis. Its ancient Greek name was *Κυσεως*, *Kysis*, which was derived from ancient Egyptian 𓂏𓂏𓂏 kSt. Most of the monuments in Doush date back to the Roman period. In addition, it is distinguished by the presence of a mud-brick Roman fort constructed on an eminence to protect the caravan route of Darb el-Arbain. The fort also houses a Roman stone temple which was started by the Roman emperor Domitian and completed under the emperors Trajan and Hadrian. The temple is dedicated to the Osirian triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Here, Osiris is worshiped in the form of 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 Wsir-iwy, the Greek Serapis [19]. Accordingly, the main god of Doush was Serapis, which was originally a Greek version of the Egyptian divinity Osiris-Apis. This is evident from the discovery in 1989 of the treasure of Doush, which was found in a cache in one of the rooms of the fort. The treasure contains jewelry, coins, and plaquettes decorated with figures of Apis bull, the Egyptian form of Serapis, and may have been votives presented by pilgrims. Among the treasure's most interesting pieces is the golden crown decorated with a figure of Serapis in his Greek form, showing him as a middle-aged man with a beard [20]. The site known as aAin Manawer lies about 3 km west of Doush [21]. It is also characterized by a mud brick temple and houses. The temple is in a very poor condition. Nonetheless, the Sait-Persian Demotic ostraca as well as fragments of Ptolemaic ceramics and bronze statuettes of Osiris found there, suggest that the temple was dedicated to him. Also, it is possible that Osiris worshiped here was the same as that worshiped in Doush in the form of Wsir-iwy. It can be evidenced by the discovery of demotic ostraca bearing the name 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 pr-Wsir-iwy, Domain of Osiris-iwy (Serapis) at the site [22].

The Cult of Seth in Kharga Oasis

Seth is originally the Egyptian god of evil and chaotic forces represented in a special heraldic composite animal form or a man with the head of Seth's animal [23]. In addition, he is the principal god of the desert and the oases [24], held the title of 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 st nb wHAt 'Seth Lord of the Oasis'. In the temple of Hibis, in the northeast angle of the hypostyle hall of Darius I, there is an important relief of Seth in which he is represented as a savior god depicted as a man with a falcon's head spearing the body of a great serpent. The scene is accompanied by the inscription which indicates that the god represented here is Seth 𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏 Dd mdw n stx nTr aA pHTt nTr aA hr-ib hbt ir.n.f di anx mi ra Dt "Words to be said by Seth, Great of Power, Great God, Resident at Hibis, who was made, and to whom life is given like Re eternally". Here Seth takes the manifestation of Horus as a protector god defeating evil symbolized by the great serpent [25].

Conclusion

From the above lines, it is apparent that the Egyptian principal divinities were revered in Kharga Oasis, but in a more localized way. Amun-Re is worshiped in different local - let's say - "Oasian" forms; for instance, Amun nb hbt, Amun Lord of Hibis and Amun nb pr-wsxt,

Amun Lord of the large House (Qasr el-Ghuita). In addition, local villages particularly venerated Amun of Hibis, perhaps because it was the ancient capital of the oasis. As an example, in Qasr el-Zayan (ancient Tchonemyris), Amun of Hibis is described as the Lord of Tchonemyris. Furthermore, Seth st nb wHAt 'Seth Lord of the Oasis' also took an unusual manifestation, revealing him as a protective god with a falcon's head spearing the serpent. Additionally, Osiris had a local "Oasian" name called Wsir-iwy, which is identified as Serapis. It is known that Serapis was the head of an Alexandrian triad that also included his wife Isis and their son Harpocrates. They were worshiped by the Egyptians in their original Egyptian forms (Osiris-Apis, Isis and Horus the child). It is unusual, therefore, that a cult dedicated to the Greek form of Osiris could exist in a Kharga Oasis. A possible explanation is that the temple of Doush was built by the Roman emperor Hadrian who also restored the great temple of Serapis in Alexandria and dedicated to it a statue of the god Apis bull, the Egyptian form of Serapis. In this case, it is possible that he was responsible for introducing the Alexandrian cult into Kharga Oasis, which was located a long distance from Alexandria, Egypt's capital at the time. The local forms of these Egyptian divinities in Kharga Oasis require further research to determine the reason beyond their manifestations, localization, and conceptions.

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