

*This book is dedicated to the loving memory
of the dear friends who have shared our
glorious days in Farafra and who are no longer with us,
Giampaolo, Ahmed Gamal, Ahmed Abdurabbo*

SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE DELL'ANTICHITÀ
MINISTRY OF ANTIQUITIES – EGYPT

FROM LAKE TO SAND

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FARAFRA OASIS WESTERN DESERT, EGYPT

edited by

BARBARA E. BARICH, GIULIO LUCARINI
MOHAMED A. HAMDAN and FEKRI A. HASSAN



Front-Cover

Panoramic view of El-Bahr basin. Photo for the courtesy of Carlos de la Fuente

English translations

Erika Louisa Milburn
Sarah Court

Volume published with funds from the Ministry of Universities and Research (Italian National PRIN Programme) and the Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, Sezione di Preistoria e Protostoria, Sapienza University of Rome.

ISBN 978-88-7814-520-7

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Edizioni All'Insegna del Giglio s.a.s

via del Termine, 36; 50019 Sesto Fiorentino (FI)

tel. +39 055 8450 216; fax +39 055 8453 188

e-mail redazione@edigiglio.it; ordini@edigiglio.it

sito web www.insegnadelgiglio.it

Stampato a Firenze nel dicembre 2014

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List of Contributors

DONATELLA BARCA

Dipartimento di Biologia, Ecologia e Scienze della Terra,
University of Calabria.

E-mail: d.barca@unical.it

BARBARA E. BARICH

Dipartimento di Scienze dell' Antichità, Sapienza University
of Rome, and ISMEO.

E-mail: barbara.barich@mcclinknet.it

GIORGIO BELLUOMINI

Istituto per le tecnologie applicate ai beni culturali, National
Council of Research.

E-mail: giorgio.belluomini@itabc.cnr.it

ZBIGNIEW M. BOCHENSKI

Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals, Polish
Academy of Sciences.

E-mail: bochenski@isez.pan.krakow.pl

MARIO CAPPOZZO

Reparto Antichità Egizie e del Vicino Oriente, Musei Vaticani.

E-mail: ao2.musei@scv.va

LANFREDO CASTELLETI

Laboratorio di Archeobiologia dei Musei Civici di Como,
and Dipartimento di Storia, Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte,
UCSC International of Milan.

E-mail: lanfredo.castelletti@gmail.com

MICHELA COTTINI

Laboratorio di Archeobiologia dei Musei Civici di Como,
and ARCO – Cooperativa di Ricerche Archeologiche,
Como.

E-mail: archeobotanica@alice.it

EMANUELA CRISTIANI

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University
of Cambridge.

E-mail: ec484@cam.ac.uk

AHMED G. FAHMY

Department of Botany, Helwan University, Cairo.

MARINA GALLINARO

Dipartimento di Storia, Scienze dell'Uomo e della Formazione,
University of Sassari.

E-mail: mgallinaro@uniss.it

MARIA CARMELA GATTO

School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University
of Leicester.

E-mail: mcg25@le.ac.uk

ACHIEL GAUTIER

Department of Geology and Soil Science, Research Unit
Palaeontology, Universiteit Gent.

E-mail: achiel.gautier@ugent.be

MOHAMED A. HAMDAN

Department of Geology, Cairo University.

E-mail: hamdanmohamed@hotmail.com

FEKRI A. HASSAN

Institute of Archaeology, University College London, and
Université Française d'Egypte.

E-mail: f.hassan@ucl.ac.uk
fekrihassan43@gmail.com

KAZIMIERZ KOWALSKI †

Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals, Polish
Academy of Sciences.

GIULIO LUCARINI

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University
of Cambridge, and ISMEO.

E-mail: gl374@cam.ac.uk

ABDELMONEIM A. MAHMOUD

Department of Biology and Geology, Ain Shams University,
Cairo.

E-mail: a_moneimm@hotmail.com

LUIGIA MANFRA

Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra, Sapienza University
of Rome.

E-mail: luigia.manfra@uniroma1.it

malui47@hotmail.it

EMANUELE MARIOTTI

University of Siena, currently independent researcher.

E-mail: emanuelemariotti75@gmail.com

ITALO MARIA MUNTONI

Centro Operativo per l'Archeologia della Daunia, Soprintendenza
per i Beni Archeologici della Puglia.

E-mail: italomaria.muntoni@beniculturali.it

GIUSEPPINA MUTRI

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University
of Cambridge.

E-mail: gm461@cam.ac.uk

AUGUSTO PALOMBINI

Virtual Heritage Lab, Istituto per le tecnologie applicate
ai beni culturali, National Council of Research.

E-mail: augusto.palombini@itabc.cnr.it

GIACOMA PETRULLO

Scuola Dottorale di Archeologia, Sapienza University of
Rome.

UMR 7055 - Préhistoire et Technologie, Université Paris
Ouest Nanterre la Défense.

E-mail: minapetrullo@libero.it

BARBARA RZEBIK-KOWALSKA

Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals, Polish
Academy of Sciences.

E-mail: rzebik@isez.pan.krakow.pl

NAHLA A. SHALLALY

Department of Geology, Cairo University.

E-mail: shallalynahla@yahoo.de

ERHARD SCHULZ

Institute of Geography, Würzburg University.

E-mail: erhard.schulz@uni-wuerzburg.de

ZBIGNIEW SZYNDLAR

Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals, Polish
Academy of Sciences.

E-mail: szyndlar@isez.pan.krakow.pl

PHILIP VAN PEER

Department of Archaeology, Katholieke Universiteit
Leuven.

E-mail: philip.vanpeer@ees.kuleuven.be

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Foreword

This volume presents all the data collected during the cycle of research conducted by the Archaeological Mission in the Farafra Oasis between 1990 and 2005, only in part already published in preliminary form in separate articles. The book offers a comprehensive and complete edition of the data illustrated with an ample selection of images, essential for a full understanding. This monograph has been a long time in the making, due not only to the quantity of information and the number of essays that it contains, but also to the need to ensure the conformity of the documentation from our early years of research. The documents accompanying the text consist of a substantial graphic and photographic repertoire (geographical and geological maps, contour maps, stratigraphic sections, plans and distribution maps of artefacts), photographs of the environment, photomosaics of the main settlement, microphotographs of archaeological artefacts (lithic industry, bone and ostrich eggshell tools). Considerable space has been given to the illustration of the archaeological materials, documented almost exclusively using scale drawings. To these we should add the quantitative tables presenting a complete catalogue of the archaeological, archaeozoological, palaeobotanical and anthracological materials found. We are proud that this amount of documents, allowing for a reconstruction of the prehistoric population profile of the Farafra Oasis and in particular the northwestern sector along the Wadi el Obeiyid, is now available to the scientific community. On this basis, the multidisciplinary essays contained in this volume provide a detailed picture of the peopling of the Farafra Oasis, hitherto one of the least well known within the Western Desert but particularly important during the middle Holocene, the period when climate conditions were most favourable, with later brief humid episodes even in the historic periods.

The results of this long-term research cycle, combined with data from the survey of the whole Wadi el Obeiyid still in progress, allow us to identify changes in the peopling of the oasis and to define various occupation phases. The new chronology for the Wadi el Obeiyid is this volume's main achievement and, as demonstrated in the final chapter, is in complete agreement with the main cultural units of other territories in the Western Desert (fig.21.6). On this chronological basis, the contacts between the latter and the peoples established on the Nile are brought into sharper focus. At Farafra, the first trend towards a prolonged presence in the area dates to the middle Holocene, with sites developing inside playa basins and reaching a considerable size. It is at this time that the economic profile of the oasis takes shape, with the first arrival of caprines to broaden the spectrum of resources exploited, hitherto aimed mainly at the management of spontaneous grasses and the consumption of game animals. The use of plants may have shaped the social structure, pushing human groups towards a more stable form of life and contributing to the development of increasing complexity. Contacts over greater distances, through which cultural features may have been transferred from the oasis to the societies of the Nile, date from the

Wadi el Obeiyid B phase (from 5800 cal. BC) onwards. From this point onwards, people moved over greater distances, establishing contacts with the Nile Valley and with depressions further north such as Siwa and Fayum. The occurrence of raw materials that were not locally available, alongside pottery inspired by models from the Nile, suggests a highly mobile pattern, including frequent contacts with the Nile Valley and beyond.

This type of enterprise can be successful only with the support of research Institutions. We wish to acknowledge the friendship, trust and support received from the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities – now the Ministry of Antiquities under the Minister Mamdouh M. El-Damaty – and to thank the General Secretaries who have succeeded one another over the long period of research documented in this volume. Also fundamental was the support and financial backing of the Sapienza University of Rome with the Dipartimento di Scienze delle Antichità and the Facoltà di Scienze Umanistiche (now the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia), under the aegis of which our research project was carried out. In particular, we thank the staff of the Departmental Administrative Office and especially the Secretaries for their enormous contribution to the successful outcome of our archaeological missions and their administrative support.

No less valuable and concrete was the support received from major Italian Institutions. The Direzione Generale per la Promozione del Sistema Paese at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Universities and Research, accompanied in the early years by grants from the National Research Council, provided annual funding that allowed us to plan and develop our work over the long term, thus ensuring its good progress. From the outset we have enjoyed unconditional support from Italy's diplomatic Institutions in Egypt. We recall with gratitude the attention devoted to our Mission in the Farafra Oasis by the Italian Embassy under the leadership of Ambassadors Francesco Aloisi de Larderel, Antonio Badini and Claudio Pacifico. No less important was the assistance of the Italian Cultural Institute; a special mention goes to the generous help and friendship of the late Carla Burri. Finally, we thank the Archaeological Centre, which after its reopening and under the guidance first of Maria Casini, and later of Rosanna Pirelli, played an essential role in ensuring the presence of Italian Missions in Egypt and was a precious resource for relations with the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Ministry of Antiquities.

We will always remember the support received from the inhabitants of the Farafra and Bahariya Oases who welcomed us warmly and participated directly in our fieldwork. The construction in recent years of a small Visitor Centre in the Qasr Farafra, with the assistance of the Italian mission, will allow the local population, especially schoolchildren, to understand the oasis' important position in Egypt's cultural development and its rich environmental and cultural heritage. We hope that in the future at least a small part of the collections from the Italian excavations, currently in storage at the Antiquities

Storehouse in Dakhla, will be displayed in their original home, inside the Visitor Centre.

In the Farafra Oasis, we have always been able to rely on Abdurabbo Abdel Nour and his family during our fieldwork for both practical assistance and affectionate hospitality, as they welcomed us to their home every year and hosted the equipment for our camp. In Cairo, Mohamed and Ahmed Serwy and their families also helped us in the difficult and laborious process of logistical organization of the missions, in which they have always assisted us with great competence and sincere friendship.

Valuable assistance in Egypt was provided by the International Oil Egyptian Company, Egypt Branch (IOEC) which during the entire research project described here supplied safe transportation vehicles for our travel from Cairo and within the study area for members of our Mission. We wish to thank the Directors who have succeeded each other over all these years and the managers of the Transportation Department, Sharaf Mohamed Sami and Tarek Maarek for their help and collaboration.

Finally, the volume editors wish to express their gratitude to all those whose participation and contribution made our work possible: above all the members of the scientific team, many of whom also took an active part

in our fieldwork and shared its hardships; the representatives in the field of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, now Ministry of Antiquities, who will be acknowledged individually in the volume but of whom we wish here to mention Meher Bashendi and Sayed Yamani, who followed our research from the outset; the students from the Sapienza University of Rome who worked with us in the field; the workmen, guides and drivers.

Our awareness of the importance of the archaeological complex brought to light in the Farafra Oasis and, at the same time, of its fragility, due to its exposure to both the deterioration of the physical environment and uncontrolled human activities makes us fear for its conservation. We ask that the area of the *White Desert National Park*, recently established under the aegis of the Egyptian-Italian Environmental Cooperation (EIECP), be extended to cover all sites of archaeological interest along the Wadi el Obeiyid. We hope that this book, with its complete documentation of the precious nature of the Farafra Oasis landscape and its archaeological heritage may help to promote more effective policies for its safeguard.

B.E.B.

G.L.



The members of the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Farafra Oasis – Year 2006.

Editorial note and Acknowledgments

The **dates** used in this volume are all absolute dates mainly, though not exclusively, obtained with the radiocarbon method. Throughout the book these are indicated homogeneously as uncalibrated conventional radiocarbon dates (bp) to allow for immediate comparison with the major literature on the Western Desert, which has always presented dates in this form. The conventional date is almost always accompanied by the calibrated BC radiocarbon date calculated with IntCal09 (Reimer *et al.* 2009). For all the available dates, the calibrated BC values with a confidence interval of 1 σ , and 2 σ are reported in full in table 17.1.

For the **toponyms** of the areas investigated we have used the most reliable versions within the sometimes fairly wide range used locally; these are identical in all the various chapters.

Unless otherwise specified, all the **photographs** belong to the Archive of the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Farafra Oasis.

The original illustrations in chapters 6, 10, 15 (geostratigraphic sections and photos) and figs.18.3-5 are by M.A.Hamdan; fig.12.2 by A.G.Fahmy; fig.14.1 by A.Gautier; fig.19.6 by I.M.Muntoni; figs.20.1 and 20.2 by M.Cottini.

We wish to thank the following for their original images: C. de la Fuente (figs.1.4, *a-b*; 1.17 and front cover); R.R. Gebhart (fig.11/1.1); S.Oboukhoff and G.Petrullo (figs.11/8.1, 8.2, 8.3);

We also thank: Farafra Visitor Centre (fig.1.19, *a-b*); K.Wasylikowa (fig.3.11); K.Nelson (fig.3.12); M.M.A.McDonald and K.Walker (fig.3.13); M.M.A.McDonald (fig.3.14); E. Chassinat (fig.4.1); M.Gallinaro (fig.11/1.22); J.R. Harlan (fig.13.2, *f*); A.Siliotti (fig.21.2).

The **drawings** of archaeological finds are the painstaking and expert work of Giovanni Carboni of the Sapienza University of Rome and of Massimo Pennacchioni, Ente Cartografico dello Stato and University of Roma Tre, and we thank both for their exceptionally accurate and faithful drawings.

The archaeological materials are usually presented at a scale of 2:3 unless otherwise specified in the captions.

Massimo Pennacchioni and Fiorenza Piazzi (the latter free lance) were responsible for the digital reprocessing of the distribution maps of archaeological features and stratigraphic sections using the recordings made in the field.

They also reprocessed the materials initially produced by Luciano Narisi of the Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, of the Sapienza University of Rome.

The **topographical survey** of the El-Bahr and Hidden Valley areas are by Giulio Fratini and Francesco Moriconi (both of the Acanthus Company), Emanuele Mariotti (at that time University of Siena), and Augusto Palombini (National Council of Research, CNR).

We thank Ulisse Fabiani (at that time Sapienza University of Rome), for the processing of the overall topographical map of the Wadi el Obeiyid area.

The Farafra Oasis Mission's **GIS platform** was developed by Ulisse Fabiani, Marina Gallinaro and Sabatino Laurenza (the two latter at that time Sapienza University of Rome).

The graphic edition of all the illustrations and the preparation of the tables included in this volume were by Massimo Pennacchioni and Fiorella Piazzi, under contract to the Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, Sapienza University of Rome.

The English texts were translated and revised initially by Sarah Court and later by Erika Louisa Milburn, both under contract to the Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità. We want to address a particular thanks to Erika Louisa Milburn who worked with us for longer, collaborating on the preparation of this volume with the utmost care and professionalism.

We thank Marina Gallinaro and Ilaria Venir (at that time both Sapienza University of Rome), for their preliminary work on the editing of the texts.

The **publication of this volume was financed by the funding provided to the research group directed by Barbara E. Barich by the Ministry of Universities and Research (Italian National PRIN Programme) and the Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, Sezione di Preistoria e Protostoria.**