

A teacher's dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis)

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In February 2006 a team from Columbia University excavating a late-antique residence at Amheida (ancient Trimithis) in the Dakhleh Oasis discovered a poetic dipinto arrayed in 5 columns on a wall of a room situated just to the north of the residence proper. The dipinto offers a unique glimpse of late-antique rhetorical education within a precise physical and cultural setting. The present article offers a description of the archaeological context and a text, translation, and commentary on the dipinto.

A 4th-c. house at Trimithis: the archaeological context (P. Davoli)

The site of Amheida¹ is located in the W part of the Dakhleh Oasis, some 3 km south of the Islamic mud-brick town of El-Qasr. The full extent of the ancient remains is still to be determined, but the area under the control of the Supreme Council of Antiquities extends for c.2.5 km N-S by 1 km E-W. The team from Columbia University, directed by R. S. Bagnall, has focused its efforts on the central urban area and has been excavating three sectors (fig. 1).²

The archaeological evidence collected to date testifies to the presence of a settlement in this area at least from the Old Kingdom to the Late Roman period. The bulk of evidence for the earlier periods comes from the main hill (Area 4) where finds and potsherds of many different periods were found in complex stratigraphy, heavily disturbed in the Ottoman period. A temple dedicated to Thoth on the top of this hill once dominated the settlement; completely demolished, hundreds of scattered blocks testify to its long history.³ Fragments of reliefs belong to temples from three periods: the first of the Libyan period (23rd Dynasty), a second in the Late Period (26th and 27th Dynasties), and the last decorated mainly under Titus and Domitian.

The focus here is on part of a 4th-c. house found in Area 2.1, in which excavation began in 2004 and concluded in 2007.⁴ The house, located in a dense habitation area, is part of a block bounded on the E and W sides by narrow streets, onto which two entrances opened (fig. 2). Its plan was originally square (15.30 m on a side); an extension to the north then connected the house to a room (Room 15 [hereafter R15]) that was originally part of another building (figs. 3-4). The dipinto was found on the wall of this room (see fig. 7). The house was also connected to the north with a courtyard now labelled R9 and R10, as well as with another building used by the owner of the house as a work space. The house itself is composed of 13 rooms, of which one is a staircase, leading to the terraced roof, one is a corridor (R17+R16) leading to the added R15, and two (R7, R12) are entrance rooms. All but 4 of the rooms were covered by barrel-vaults: the main room (R1) had a dome, while R2, R6, and R15 had flat roofs of beams and reeds. The high level of humidity has caused the decay of all the organic materials.

The house belonged to a family of high social status, as the numerous ostraka,⁵ other objects, and the painted rooms indicate. The decoration of the house will be the subject of its own study,

- 1 For the identification of Amheida with Trimithis, cf. R. S. Bagnall and G. R. Ruffini, "Civic life in fourth-century Trimithis. Two ostraka from the 2004 excavations," *ZPE* 149 (2004) 143-44.
- 2 The excavation began in 2004 with O. E. Kaper as associate director; P. Davoli has been field director since 2005. From 2008 onwards the mission is jointly sponsored by New York University and Columbia University. Short annual reports are available at <http://www.amheida.org/>. A summary of the results from the seasons 2004-6 is also given by P. Davoli, "Amheida 2004-2006. New results from the excavations," in O. Kaper and F. Leemhuis (edd.), *Oasis papers 5: Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project (June 2006)*, in press. See also P. Davoli and O. Kaper, "A new temple for Thoth in the Dakhleh Oasis," *EA* 28 (2006) 12-14; R. S. Bagnall, P. Davoli, O. E. Kaper and H. Whitehouse, "Roman Amheida: excavating a town in Egypt's Dakhleh Oasis," *Minerva* 17.6 (2006) 26-29.
- 3 O. E. Kaper and R. J. Demarée, "A donation stela in the name of Takelot III from Amheida, Dakhleh Oasis," *Jahrbuch "Ex Oriente Lux"* 39 (2005) 19-37.
- 4 E. Ball has been the supervisor of the team that worked in this house from 2004 to 2007.
- 5 These will be published by R. S. Bagnall and G. R. Ruffini in a forthcoming volume.