

## Reconstructing the Ancient Caravan Route of Darb Al-Arbain in Greco-Roman Egypt: Heritage Value and Tourism Potential

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### ABSTRACT

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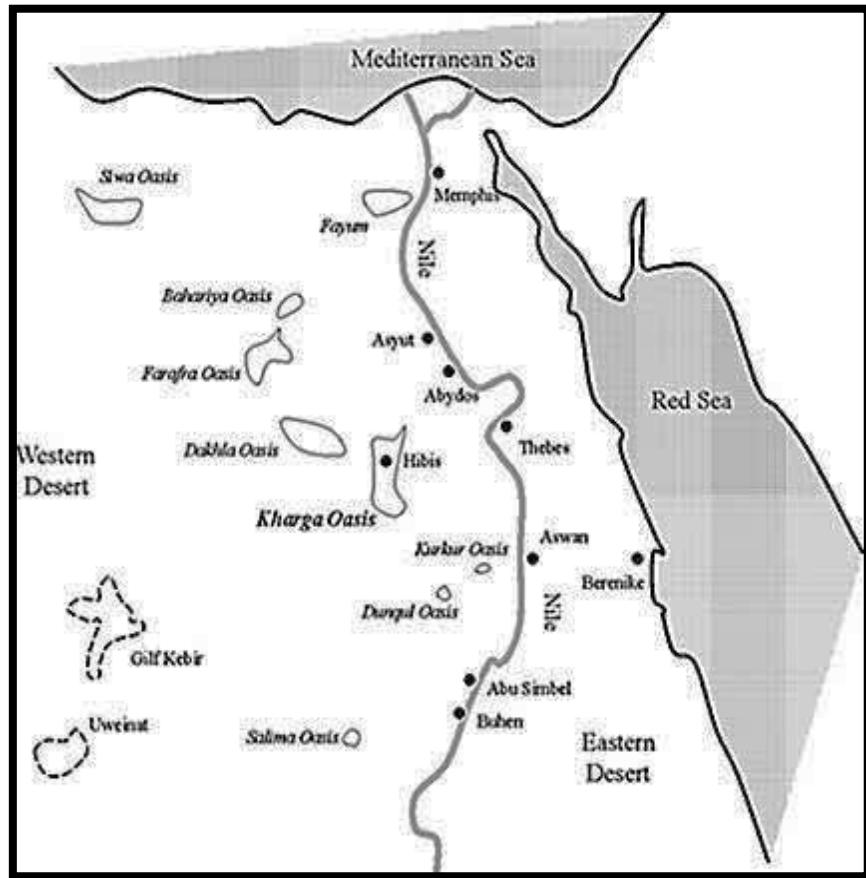
Kharga oasis is the capital of the new valley governorate and the biggest of Egypt western oases. The recent studies confirm the importance of El-Kharga as a desert crossroad during ancient times particularly in the Greco-Roman period. The most well-known route was the north-south route of Darb El-Arbain, which according to Herodotus enabled transportation and trade between Egypt and the heart of Africa. The long route started in Kobbe, moved north out of Sudan to al-Shab, then continued north to El-Kharga oasis, where Caravans were taxed and assessed, finally reaching Assuit on the Nile Valley, with full length of about 1770 km. A lot of artifacts uncovered along the ancient route helped to identify its pathway, such as cairns, the remains of broken pots, sherds belonging to various types of vessels, surprisingly pack animal skeletons and some petroglyphs were found in the north and the east parts of the road, in addition to, the remains discovered of Ptolemaic and Roman water stations. Archaeological evidences proved that the Romans also stationed multiple military garrisons in the Western Desert and along Darb El-Arbain route to defend caravans and valued supplies. Thus, Darb El-Arbain was the most favorable route for the long-running caravans from the 2nd century BC to the 4th century AD. As an invaluable piece of cultural and natural heritage, Kharga Oasis and its vast surrounding desert area were placed among UNESCO tentative list, acknowledging the importance of preserving their heritage of human activities for future generations and preparing them to be nominated to the World Heritage List. This study focuses on an attempt to re-map the old caravan route of Darb El-Arbain, displaying its importance and its role in the north-south trade and upgrading its ranking within the UNESCO tentative list.

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### Introduction

The Western Desert covers more than two thirds of Egypt. Starting from the west bank of the Nile, the desert extends west to Libya and south to Sudan, forming part of the vast expanse of the Sahara Desert. It extends across North Africa to the Atlantic Ocean. The deserts always dry, but there is no lack of water in fact, as occasional rains fill huge underground aquifers beneath the desert, which infrequently break

through to the surface forming springs and wells. Siwa, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhla and Kharga are the major oases in the Western Desert<sup>1</sup>.



The Western Desert Oases (After NKOS Report 2001)

As the capital of the New Valley governorate, El-Kharga oasis is the southernmost and biggest of Egypt's western oases<sup>2</sup>. It lies in an elongated depression, covering for some 160 km long (between N 24° and 26°) and up to 80 km wide (between 30° and 31° E), at about 200 km west of the Nile<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mohamed A. Younes, Hydrocarbon Potentials in the northern western desert of Egypt, Crude oil expedition in the world (Alexandria: ART Press, 2012) p.23.

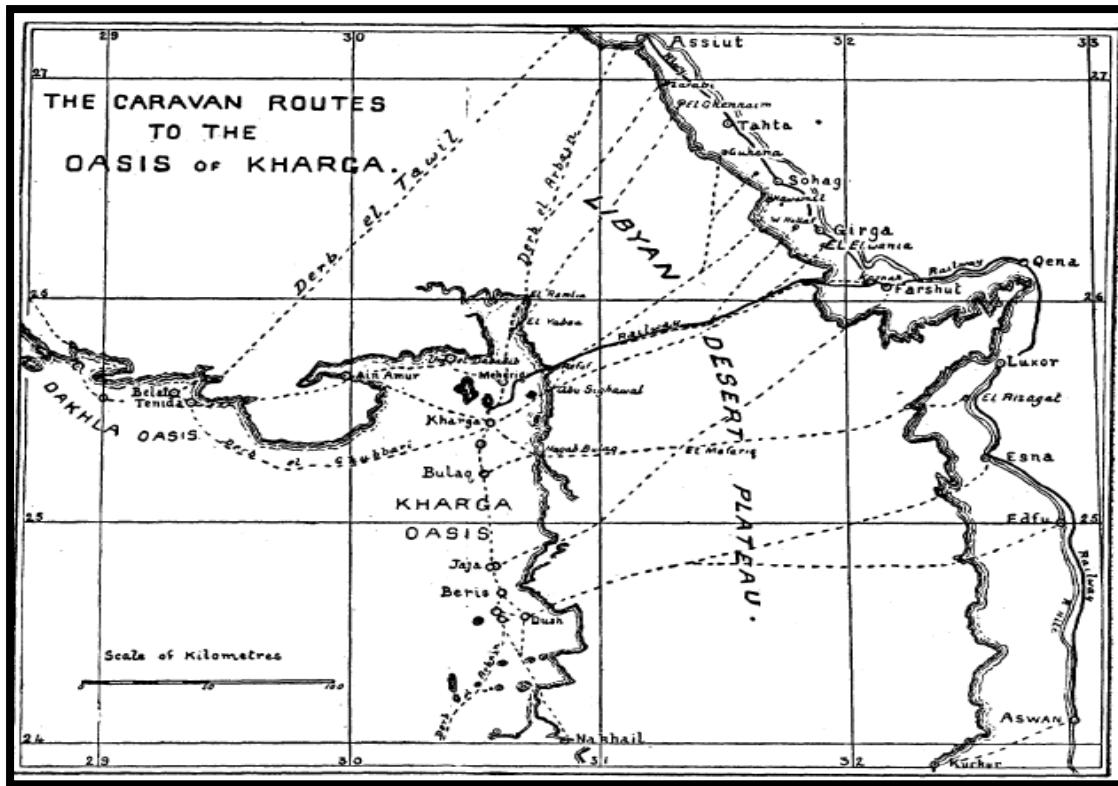
<sup>2</sup> Eugene Cruz-Uribe, "Kharga oasis; late period and Greco-Roman sites" in Encyclopedia of ancient Egypt, ed. Kelly Bard ( New York: Routigles press, 1999) p.487

<sup>3</sup> John Ball, Kharga oasis; its topography and geology (Cairo: national printing department 1900) pp.28-32

Lisa Giddy, Egyptian Oases: Bahariya, Dakhla, Farafra and Kharga during Pharaonic Times (Warminster: penguin, 1987) p. 39.

Marcia Wiseman, Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt (London: Sean 2001) pp.290-294.

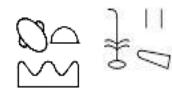
هدى عثمان خليفة. "توزيع المناظر على جدران الواحة الجنوبية منذ عصر الدولة القديمة وحتى نهاية العصر الرومانى" (رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة، كلية الآثار جامعة القاهرة، 2014) ص 21



**The Location Kharga Oasis in the Libyan Desert and its caravan routes.**  
[www.touregypt.com.net/map15.htm](http://www.touregypt.com.net/map15.htm) Accessed September 11, 2019 2:24 PM

### Nomination

The Ancient Egyptian term used for this region was the hieroglyphic “*Whyt rsyt*” which means the southern oasis, as it locates in the southernmost of Egypt's five western oases in the Libyan Desert<sup>1</sup>. Herodotus visited Egypt during the Persian rule and mentioned it as *νησί τον ευλογημένου “Island of Blessed”*<sup>2</sup>. In the Greco-Roman period Strabo called it *η Πρωτης ανασις “e prote Auasis - the first Oasis”*<sup>3</sup>. A Century later the Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy mentioned it as *μεγαλη Οασις “Oasis Megale - the Greater”*<sup>4</sup> because of being the largest of the western desert oases, containing a depression of approximately 160 km long and from 35 to 80 km wide. Olimpiodorus of Thebes in early of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD was the first to refer to the oasis as *Οασις εξωτερική όψη ‘the exterior’*, for its location to the Nile Valley, which corresponds to its current Arabic name ‘*El-Kharga*’!



### Historical Background

The oases in the western desert of Egypt have deeply rooted civilization as their history goes back to the lower Paleolithic time of Man's cultural development,

<sup>1</sup> Giddy, Egyptian Oases, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, Historiae, Trans. Astlon Goldy (London: Cambridge university press, 1946-1950) Loeb. Book III, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo, Geography, Trans. Horace Leonard Jones (London: Cambridge university press, 1968) Loeb. Book XVII, 1.42.

<sup>4</sup> Michel G. Wagner, Les Oasis d'Égypte À L'époque Grecque, Romaine Et Byzantine, D'après Les Documents Grecs, Recherches De Papyrologie Et D'épigraphie Grecques ( Le Caire: IFAO, 1987) P.132.

according to the tools discovered around the springs in the depression ground<sup>1</sup>. This district during the Old Kingdom was no less important than any of the provincial cities in ancient Egypt<sup>2</sup>, as stated in Herkhouf autobiography during the Sixth Dynasty<sup>3</sup>. Text indicated that on his third expedition he followed the oasis route to reach Yam<sup>4</sup>. Nowadays this route has been recognized as the Forty Days Road, Darb-el-Arbain, which crosses through Kharga linking Middle Egypt with Sudan. It was a trading route used for transferring various supplies such as gold, ivory, plants and animals.<sup>5</sup>

During the Middle Kingdom, the oasis of El Kharga was considered a part of Upper Egypt. Its name was mentioned in several inscriptions by King Senusert I officials, reporting that the king sent his troops along Darb El-Arbain route to secure the territory of the Oasis<sup>6</sup>. During the New Kingdom, The kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty divided the oases of the western desert into two groups. The Northern group comprises Baharya and El-Farafra, and the Southern group includes El-Dakhla and El-Kharga. Later, the southern group was attached to the Thinite nome, in the reign of King Tuthmosis III being under the authority of its Nomarch<sup>7</sup>. According to the so called Edfu temple's mineral lists, it seems that the oasis flourished during the nineteenth and twentieth Dynasties due to the great attention it gained as an important district that supplied Egypt with different kinds of minerals and stones<sup>8</sup>.

By the time of Ramses III, as a result of his fight for defeating the Sea People and the Libyans who conquered the Oases, the routes were secured, wells were dug and vineyards were planted<sup>9</sup>. Kharga Oasis during the Late Period was attached to the Theban province. Nectanebo II, the last Egyptian pharaoh, enlarged Hibis temple, which is considered nowadays to be a principal tourist attraction in the oasis<sup>10</sup>.

However the early Ptolemaic kings paid much attention to the oasis, it was deserted and its importance diminished at the end of the Ptolemaic period as there were revolts due to incompetent rulers. The oasis reached its golden age in the Roman period when new settlements were constructed and garrisons were stationed to monitor the trade route, specially the aforementioned Darb El-Arbain connecting Egypt with Nubia and

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<sup>1</sup> William Hayes, "Kharga Oasis in Prehistory" American Journal of Archaeology 57. 2 (1953) pp.117-119. Giddy, Egyptian Oases, p.39.

<sup>2</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature, I (New York: University of California Press, 1975) P. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Harkhuf was a governor of Elephantine and an expedition leader in the reign of Merenra and Pepy II. He journeyed extensively throughout Nubia. For details on Harkhuf see: David O'Coror, "The Locations of Yam and Kush and Their Historical Implications" Journal of American Research Center in Egypt 32 (1986) PP. 27-50. Muarry, George "Harkouf's Third Journey", The Geographical Journal, 131.1 (1965) PP.72-75.

<sup>4</sup> probably located in the elephantine region south to Nubia

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude Caton- Thompson, kharga oasis in Prehistory (London: Athlone press, 1952) P. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Fischer, "A God and General of the Oasis on a stela of the Late Middle Kingdom," Journal of the Near Eastern Studies 16 (1957) PP. 223-235.

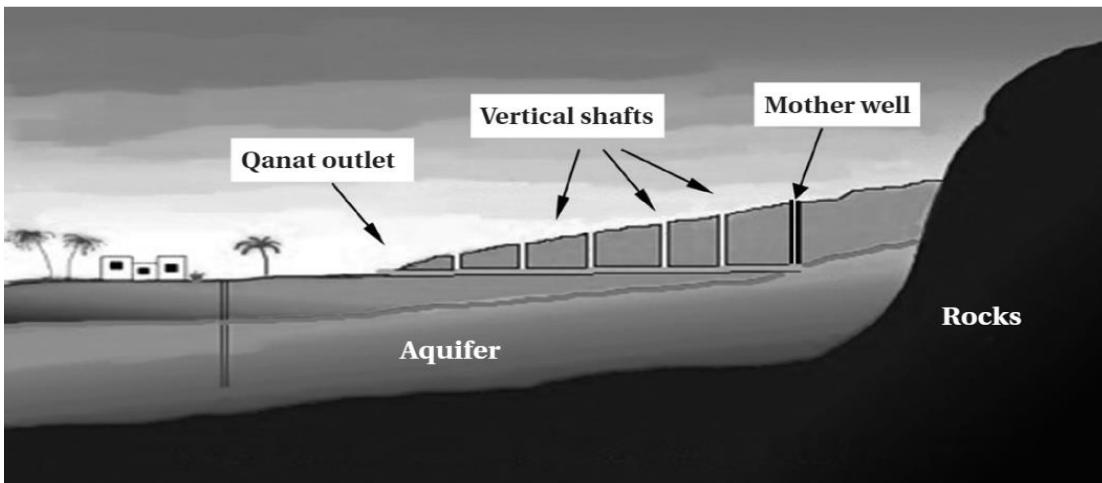
<sup>7</sup> Maged Negm, "A Study of Some of the Egyptian Monuments in the New Valley and their Importance for Tourism" (Master diss., Helwan University, 1988) P. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Helck Wolfgang, Et.al, Lexikon der Ägyptologie, Vol.1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975) P. 908. For more details:James A. Harrell, "Varieties And Sources Of Sandstone Used In Ancient Egyptian Temples", The Journal Of Ancient Egyptian Architecture, 1 (2016) PP. 11-37

<sup>9</sup> Negm, the Egyptian Monuments in the New Valley, P.36.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh J. Beadnell, An Egyptian Oasis (London: Murray, 1909) P. 92.

Sudan. Furthermore, a new irrigation system (Qanats) was introduced. It should be noted that most of the remains in the oasis date back to the Roman period, like the temples of Dush, El-Nadura and Qaser el Zayan<sup>1</sup>.



**Nature of the Qanat. After [www.touregypt.com.net/map15.htm](http://www.touregypt.com.net/map15.htm)**

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### **Kharga as A Desert Crossroad Over The Millennia**

The southern desert tracks were as much corridors as were the Nile valley. They provided legal and illegal transportation alternatives to the common Nile route that had its issues: the Nile cataracts made navigation impossible and portage was very difficult. Unlike the Nile had a large bend between the fourth and third cataracts and again between Luxor and Qena, the desert routes were more straightforward and shorter. Furthermore, it was necessary to deal with greedy officials who stole goods from cargos along the Nile. Thus, the desert was safer.

Recent studies confirm the significance of El-Kharga as a desert crossroad in all historical eras: a cultural landscape formed by human activities based on its geographic position. The progressive dryness of the area created the basis of the environment and landscape that we see now: population concentrated around the few available water sources, connected by trade and communication routes<sup>2</sup>. El-Kharga oasis played a main role as a gateway between Egypt and Africa<sup>3</sup>: it was a transit zone for products not found in the Valley. The wine, alum, cotton and olive oil were precious oasis' products<sup>4</sup>; as a result, Romans constructed a chain of fortifications along the caravan routes that crossed the oasis to protect it. The principal importance of Kharga throughout history is due to its fresh water wells that supplied the numerous desert caravan paths that traversed through the region. All of El-Kharga's main sites are situated nearby sources of water along desert routes<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Wagner, Les Oasis d'Égypte, P.116.

<sup>2</sup> "Kharga oasis and the small southernoases" Accessed: September 15, 2019, 8:12AM. <http://whc.UNESCO.org/en/tentativelists/6067/> (The official website of UNESCO)

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Fakhry noted "Since the routes of the desert were first used in ancient times, millions of men and animals have trodden there, and so in the course of time they were marked on the face of the desert."

<sup>4</sup> Wagner, L'oases d'Egypte, pp.291–3, 306–9, Bagnall, An Egyptian oasis, pp. 35-46.

<sup>5</sup> Cruz-Uribe, Archaeology of Ancient Egypt, pp.287-290

### The Caravan Routes and the Network Systems

El-Kharga oasis caravan routes were part of the huge road system erected or even greatly advanced in Egypt by the Romans. They built both civil and military roads in their provinces. About 103 roadways were constructed by the Romans, over 4,000 km in Egypt<sup>1</sup>. Travelers and the post used the civil roads, that were wide, paved, and commonly, unlike the military or frontier roads were narrow, had watering stations and post stations and went in a direct line from fort to fort<sup>2</sup>. Several routes run between El-Kharga oasis and the Nile Valley, the other oases and southwards of Sudan. Until very recently overseeing the caravan paths remained an important priority. The well-maintained wells were remarked by the travellers. The only north-south route and the most important one, now generally referred to as Darb al-Arbain, the Forty Days Road, which facilitate transportation and trade between Egypt and the heart of Africa<sup>3</sup>.

Going east-west are Darb al-Ghubari, the Dust Road, is the main route that linked Kharga and Dakhla oases<sup>4</sup>. It crosses east-west from El-Kharga at Qasr Kharga to Dakhla, entering the depression at Tineida and forming the main road through the oasis. This waterless, uninhabitable, remote and difficult passage was about 190 km long<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cassandra Vivian, The Western Desert of Egypt, third printing (Cairo AUC Press, 2000) P.56.

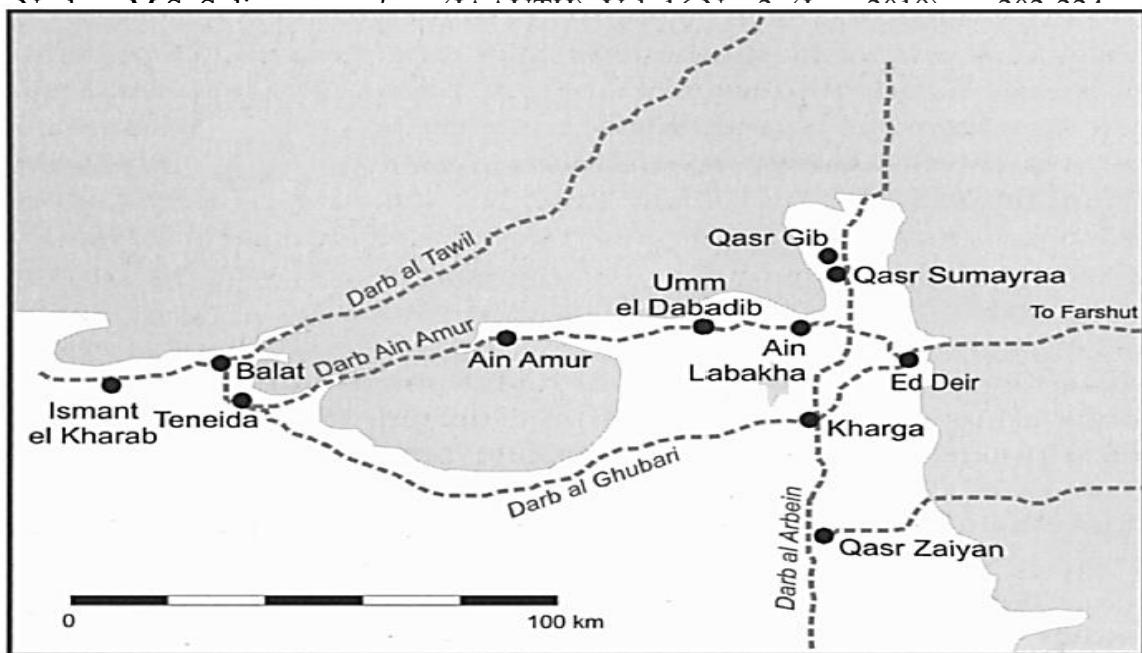
<sup>2</sup> Carrina Rossi, "Controlling borders of the Empire: the distribution of late roman forts in Kharga oasis" (Proceeding of 6<sup>th</sup> international conference of Dakhla oasis Project, Lecce, Universita del Salento, September 20-24, 2009) PP. 331-336.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Roe, "The Old "Darb al Arbein" Caravan Route and Kharga Oasis in Antiquity" Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 42 (2005/2006) PP. 119-129.

<sup>4</sup> وفدى السيد أبوالنصر " الأهمية الدينية والاستراتيجية لصحراء مصر الغربية في العصر الفرعوني " (رسالة دكتوراه غير منشورة ، كلية الآداب جامعة الاسكندرية ، 2008 ) ص 39

<sup>5</sup> Hans Winkler, Rock inscription southern Upper Egypt, vol.ii (London: SEM Press, 1938-1939) P.30.

Sabri Y. Abd el-Rahman, "Amun-nakht fighting against an enemy in Dakhla oasis: a rock drawing in Wadi al- Gemal " BIFAO Publications 111 (Cairo: BIFAO, 2011) PP. 13-22



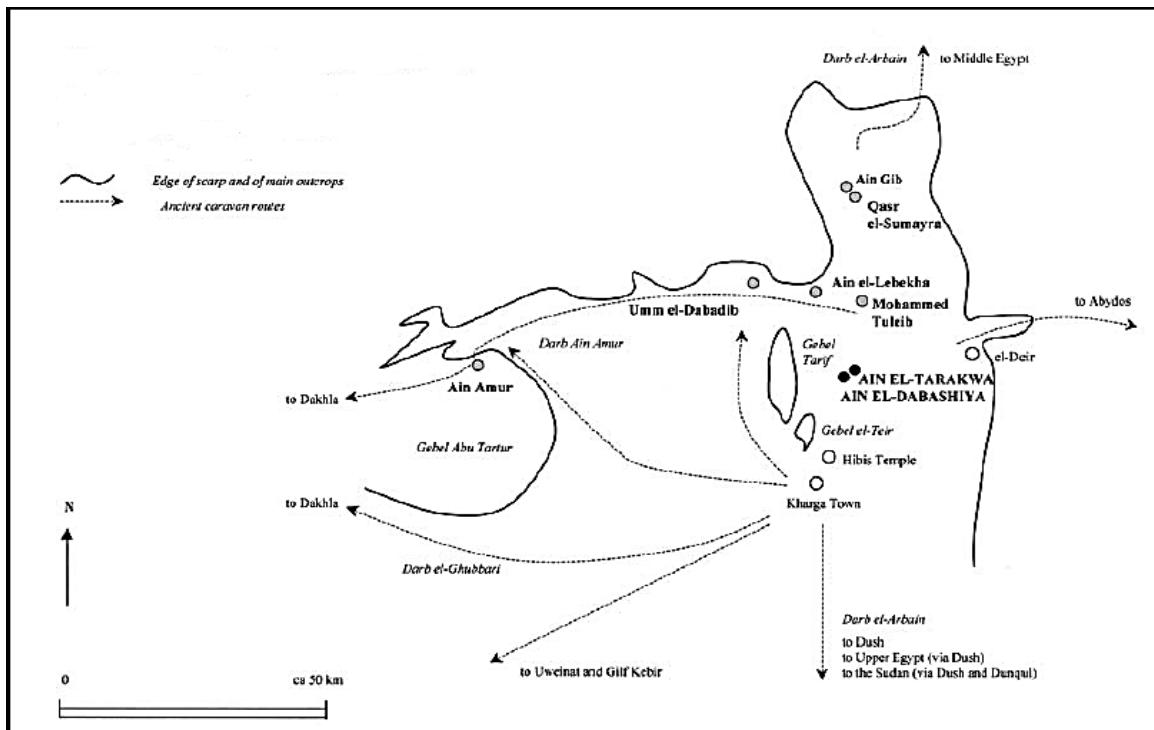
**Caravan routes, settlements, and Roman fortified sites in the area of kharga oasis, After Roe, The Old Caravan Route pp. 119-129**

Darb Ain Amur, the ancient northernmost caravan route connected El-Kharga and El-Dakhla oases with the other western oases; it could have been the western continuation of the Darb al-Arbain, so it reached further west and south-west points into Africa proper<sup>1</sup>. It runs from east to west across the depression ground from Qasr Labeka at the foot of the northern scarp to Ain Umm Dabadib, and Ain Amur, where the only water source can be found halfway throughout the journey. Then through Naqb Tineida into the Dakhla Oasis, and then continues through another Wadi al-Battikha on their way to Tineida. It was an attractive alternative to the longer, 10 km<sup>2</sup>, waterless Darb al-Ghubari, as the logistics of carrying an extra day's water for hundreds of individuals and animals make it easier, but impossible for longer paths<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Carrina Rossi and Salima Ikram, “petroglyphs and inscriptions along the Darb Ain Amur , Kharga Oasis” ZAS 129 (2002) PP.142-160.

<sup>2</sup> Vivian, The Western Desert, P.64.

<sup>3</sup> Carrina Rossi, Salima Ikram, “North Kharga Oasis Survey Report: Ain el-Tarakwa, Ain el-Dabashiya and Darb Ain Amur” IFAO 45 (2004) PP.177-190.



**Caravan routes, settlements and roman fortified sites in the area of Kharga oasis. After Ikram & Rossi, "North Kharga Oasis Survey" P.166**

### The Darb al-Arbain Desert

The entire Sahara is crossed by routes that meet at the scarce water sources, but for two primary reasons Darb al-Arbain an exceptional case. It includes proof of the human and environmental evolution of the last 12,000 years<sup>1</sup>, and the archaeological remains of the well-preserved chain of fortifications that the Romans constructed to safeguard it.

This region is rarely excavated owing to its faraway and inhospitable, so we know little about the Darb al-Arabian, which was described as "*a road Traversed ... in forty days*" by Herodotus in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It was the major north-south track through Egypt's Western Desert<sup>2</sup>.

It covers a total of 1,767 km<sup>3</sup>. Parts of it are sand paved currently. The Darb al-Arbain is the chief caravan route that connects Fasher in the Sudan to Asyut in Egypt. It started at the village of Kobbe in Darfur, moved north out of Sudan to al-Shab<sup>4</sup>, continued north to the core of Kharga Oasis as it enters at Maks Qibli. The route ascends the northern escarpment and traverses the limestone plateau to Assyut and then on to the Nile Valley up to the ancient Palestine and Syria, with long caravans of donkeys bringing wines, precious goods along with them<sup>5</sup>. The route has become a prominent route in the contemporary inquiry of Egypt's southwestern historical and archaeological landscape, specifically in the analysis of Kharga oasis' military infrastructure, settlement and political economy.

<sup>1</sup> Wagner, L'oases d'Egypte, pp.291–393, 296–304, 306–906.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Roe, The Old Caravan Route, P.121.

<sup>3</sup> عبد اللطيف و أكد، واحات مصر: جزر الرحمة وجنات الصحراء، القاهرة، 1957، ص ص 30-39

<sup>4</sup> . The principal watering points thereafter are Laqia, Selima oasis and Al Shab wells before the route enters the Kharga depression from the south.

<sup>5</sup> Vivian, The Western Desert of Egypt, P.36.



**Camel tracks of the Darb el-Arbain disappear under the asphalt of the first modern road that follows the old caravan route in most parts. (Photo: R. Kuper / B.O.S. 1983).**

### **The Economical Importance**

The prominent route of Darb Arbain was used for transporting and trading gold, ivory, spices, wheat, livestock and crops from as early as the Old Kingdom, but reached its peak at the Greco-Roman period. C. Rossi states that "*The Romans constructed a chain of forts along the major caravan routes that crossed the Oasis; at least seven forts or fortified settlements secured the Darb al Arbein from north to south. Historically Darb Arbain is one of the most significant trade routes in Egypt and North Africa*"<sup>1</sup>.

Such claims not only indicates that the Darb al Arbain road was in use during Kharga's Roman occupation, but also suggest that traffic along it was of adequate financial importance in ancient times to warrant the building of several fortifications to protect it<sup>2</sup>. The ancient caravans were like armies crossing the desert; their numbers were larger than anything seen today and their paths more complicated. According to Sudanese historian Yusuf Fadl Hasan, they avoided the track along the Nile for fear of robbery and blackmail of the officials. Imagine a caravan with thousands of individuals. It must have extending from Dush in the south to Ain Geb in the north, through the core of the oasis. It must have taken days to complete customs, weeks to exit the oasis<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Rossi, "Controlling borders of the Empire" PP.331-336.

<sup>2</sup> Carrina. Rossi and Salima. Ikram, "Evidence of desert routes across northern Kharga Egypt's Western Desert" in Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and beyond, ed. F. Forester. (Cologne: Heinrich-Barth institute, 2013) PP.256-282, P.270.

<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Maraaten, "Dangerous trade routes: on plundering of caravans in pre-Islamic near east" ARAM 8. 1(1996) PP. 213-236.



**Camels caravan on part of the Darb Al-Arbain (photo taken in Sep. 1978)**

**After Nabil Sayed Embabi, Landscapes and Landforms of Egypt, (Cairo: Elasarty: 2007) P. 119.**

So! What were the goods transported between these fortresses and caravans and routes under the protection of the Kharga Oasis, and the Nile World to the east? Natron, salt, alum and wine are highly possible as specialty produces in the Western Desert. A certain quantity was obtained from salt pans oases in the Western Desert. Salt was essentially for making faience, glass, dried foods such as fish and meat, or making bread<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, natron was absolute imperative for the mummification process. Salt and natron were also normal necessities with bread, beer, oxen, geese and cloth on the Old Kingdom's traditional offering lists. The Kharga Oasis was widely well-known for providing alum in the Mediterranean World<sup>2</sup>. The Kharga oasis was wealthy of its crops particularly the vineyards, the main material for making wine. Although vineyards found all over Egypt, the finest grapes came from the Western Desert Oases<sup>3</sup>.

It was here at the southern Kharga oasis that caravans traveling along the Darb al-Arbain came under control of the Egyptian authorities and were taxed<sup>4</sup>. In Roman times taxes were obligatory from all desert paths. Although we don't have trade goods assessments along the Darb al-Arbain, we have charges for the Coptus tax house leading from the Nile to the Red Sea through the Eastern Desert in 90 AD. It must be assumed that the taxes were similar. According to Naphtali Lewis, the taxes were: "**For a Red Sea skipper, 8 dr.; guard, 10 dr.; sailor, 5; craftsmen, 8; prostitutes, 108; sailors' women, 20; soldiers' wives, 20; camel permit, i obol; seal on permit, 2 ob; donkey, 2 ob; covered wagon, 4 dr; funeral, round trip, i dr, 4 ob.**"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michinori Ohshiro, "Kharga Oasis and Thebes: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle in the Relocation of Amen Worship in the 27th Dynasty" ORIENT. XLIII (2008) PP. 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> Ohshiro, Kharga Oasis and Thebes, P.80.

<sup>3</sup> Vivian, The Western Desert, P.87.

<sup>4</sup> Terence Wlaz, Trade between Egypt and the Bilad as-Sudan 1700-1820 (Cairo: IFAO, 1978) P.25.

Roe, The Old Caravan Route, P.121.

<sup>5</sup> Vivian, The Western desert, pp.85-86.

### **The Military Importance**

The Romans extended their military garrisons in the Western Desert and along Darb Arbain route as they needed troops, not only to defend caravans and valued supplies but also to safeguard the frontier of Egypt from Nubians in the south and Blemmeys in the west<sup>1</sup>. The romans were known to have often erected the Hill-top defenses on the frontiers of the Empire<sup>2</sup>. Some temples in Kharga oasis were reconstructed, extended, reformed and transformed to Roman military outposts<sup>3</sup>.

### **Identifying Darb Al-Arbain Route**

Recently, various kinds of evidences are being used to define Darb el-Arbain. These include watering stations, cairns, remains of broken pots, sherds belonging to vessels containing water that were emptied and abandoned along the route, or transport vessels that broke in transit, some petroglyphs were discovered along the path and astonishingly skeletons of pack animals<sup>4</sup>.

### **Watering Station**

There is durable archaeological proof for systematic and well organized traffic in the roman period between Darfur, Kharga and the Nile valley. In the early of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Winlock traveled and described many old watering stations passing along the Darb Arbain track. These stations were recognized by the concentrations of ceramic material from water storage vessels. Likewise, Beadnell reported that he found many water stations of Roman origin along the route linking the Kharga with Farshut in the Nile valley<sup>5</sup>. The expedition of Caton-Thompson's was able to enumerate five main Roman water depots and numerous other minor ones along the more northerly path of Girga<sup>6</sup>. The Romans went to great lengths to secure water in the oasis. Although little is known about how or when the original bore were prepared, some are over 120m deep and still currently to be used<sup>7</sup>. In the early 1980s geologist Vance Haynes created the term 'Darb al Arbein Desert' to define the hyper arid areas through which the route passes. He added that "No single waterless stage of the route exceeds 280 km". Water sources are separated by two or three days march for the most parts. Therefore it provides a strategic 'channel of least resistance' for traffic across the desert from sub-Saharan Africa to Middle Egypt<sup>8</sup>.

Al-Atrun area is about 400 km south of Kobbe, the starting point of the route of Darb Al-Arbain. There are four wells here: Bir Sultan, Bir Milani, Bir Natrun, and Bir Nakhla<sup>9</sup>.The uninhabited Sudanese oasis has a tiny palm grove and a meter-wide hole in the ground as a watering station. Besides numerous fragments of pottery and sherds found near to the source of water, one of them bears inscription and drawing of a pack animal, donkey<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Rossi, "Controlling borders of the Empire" PP. 331-336.

<sup>2</sup> Michinori, Kharga Oasis and Thebes, PP.77-81

<sup>3</sup> Henry Pynegar, "How Egypt'S Second Cataract Fortresses in Nubia Were Used Primarily to Specify the Local Population" (PhD diss., University Of Birmingham, 2013) P. 4-6.

<sup>4</sup> Rossi and Ikram, "Evidence of desert routes" P. 271.

<sup>5</sup> Ball, Kharga Oasis, PP. 95-97.

<sup>6</sup> Gertrude Caton-Thompson, Wallen Gardner, "The Prehistoric Geography of Kharga Oasis", the Geographical Journal 80 (1932), PP. 369-406.

<sup>7</sup> Beadnell, An Egyptian Oasis, P. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Roe, The Old Caravan Route, P.120.

<sup>9</sup> Vivian, The Western desert, P. 348.

<sup>10</sup> Roe, The Old Caravan Route, P .120.

Al-Shab means the young man. It is 128 km from the last oasis in Sudan and well into Egypt, that the Darb al-Arbain and the Darb al-Galaba part company<sup>1</sup>. Al-Shab is shaded by palm trees and protected from wind by steep surrounding sand dunes<sup>2</sup>. The whole region from Shab to Kiseiba has the same ambiance. There was water here enough for a large caravan to spread out amount the springs to water and rest<sup>3</sup>.

Bir Kiseiba, the Well of Gain, locates 30 km from Bir Takhlis and 70 km northwest of Gebel Nabta. It is bounded by higher ground from three sides. The escarpment in the north, while outlier hills in the east and west are so close, maintaining the south open to the plain called Atmur al- Kibeish. Wendorf and Schild in *Cattle-Keepers of the Eastern Sahara* informed that there are six wells within a 50 km radius around Bir Kiseiba<sup>4</sup>. Nakhla is a little larger Northeast of Takhlis along the Darb al- Galaba, with more date palms. It is approximately 35 km southwest of the region of Nabta Playa, which may attest to be very significant as there is no water at Nabta.

Slightly over 20 km to the next well after climbing the Kiseiba scarp. Currently the road of Bir Tarfawi meets the route of Darb al-Arbain of at Bir Abu Hussein. It is not in a dunes field, but sits with just a few barrel drums on the side of the road to mark its place. No trees, no shrubs, absolutely nothing except the well.<sup>5</sup>.

Bir Murr is located along the Darb al-Arbain about 60 km from the top of the Kiseiba scarp. There are two hollows with a well in each one of them. There is plenty of proves of early peoples at both locations, such as the camels whose tracks are still noticeable along the path, moreover their skeletons. It is suggested that these regions could only have developed once the climate was wet enough to allow vegetation to grow in this site<sup>6</sup>.

El-Kharga enjoys an uncommon source of water (Qanats)<sup>7</sup>. A layer of fossil water is trapped in the subterranean aquifers and this water was the cause of El-Kharga's agricultural wealth, beside the necessity of providing water for the caravans passing through the oasis from and to the Nile Valley<sup>8</sup>. These ancient qanats can be found throughout the oasis and obviously were used widely by the Romans to supply travellers using the major oasis paths with water, to serve their local military installations and to improve Kharga's agricultural resources, such as the Roman fort of Qasr el-Gib, Ain el-Tarakwa, Ain el-Dabashiya, Umm el- Dabadib<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Arbain continues north to Kharga and the latter heads northeast to the Nile via Dunqul and Kurkur oases to Aswan and on to Esna.

<sup>2</sup> Burckhardt tells of a caravan that left slaves who could no longer keep up the grueling summer pace to Asyut here at al-Shab, with enough provisions to last until someone returned for them.

<sup>3</sup> Vivian, The Western desert, P. 358.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Wendorf and Romuald Schild, Prehistory of the Eastern Sahara (New York: Academic Press, 1980) P.38.

<sup>5</sup> Vivian, The Western desert, PP. 358-359.

<sup>6</sup> Vivian, The Western desert, pp. 359.

<sup>7</sup> Beadnell, an Egyptian Oasis, P. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Mohammad, et.al, Institutional Capacity Development of Water Resources Management, (UK: CRC Press, 2010) P.159.

<sup>9</sup> George W. Murray, "Water from the Desert: Some Ancient Egyptian Achievements" Geographical Journal 121. 2 (1955) PP. 171-181.

## Cairns

Cairns made of piles of big rocks appear to have been the most favored and commonly used way of marking paths in the desert. They can be found in two different positions, either in the middle of flat plains or on top of high outcrops, for not being swallowed by the moving dunes. In the first example, it appears that the cairns were used to mark significant desert tracks meetings, one was discovered in the region between Umm el-Dabadib and Ain Amur, and another half-way between Ain Lebekha and Mohammed Tuleib. In the second case, the size of the cairns on top of elevated outcrops differs considerably. Visibility seems to have been the main concern of those who erected them. The best instance of this is a Cairn located north of Ain Gib, and Laqya al-Arbain in Sudan on top of a rock outcrop along the Darb distance visible through the north-western route<sup>1</sup>.



**Cairns North of Ain Gib, Darb Al-Arbain, North of the Kharga Oasis**

**After Rossi & Ikram, Evidence of desert routes, P.271.**

## Pottery and Sherds

Traditionally, Remains of pottery and broken pots mark the ancient paths. The sherds belong to vessels containing water that were emptied en route and abandoned along the way, or transport vessels that broke during transit. As well, Ceramic vessels Concentrations marking the watering stations along the route<sup>2</sup>. However, different kinds of pottery of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC were found, the majority was ceramic material, identified along the route dated from the Roman period to Ottoman times. There is incredibly little ceramic proof except to be way stations, such as south of the Gib and Sumayra and of course at the notable watering station of Qasr el-Gib<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Rossi and Ikram, "Evidence of desert routes" P. 270.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Eichhorn, et.al, "Desert Roads and Transport Vessels from Late Roman-Coptic Times in the Eastern Sahara" Journal of African Archaeology. 3.2 (2005), PP. 213-229.

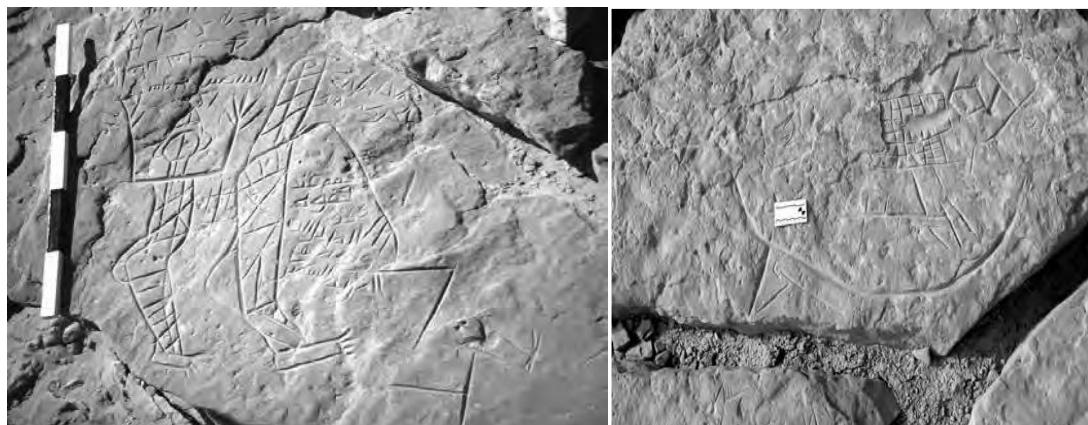
<sup>3</sup>Rossi and Ikram, "petroglyphs and inscriptions along the Darb Ain Amur" P142.



**Close up of storage jar within a rockshelter. After Heiko Riemer," Desert roads and transport vessels from Late Roman-Coptic times in the Eastern Sahara"**  
**Journal of African Archaeology. 3.2 (2005), pp. 213-229.**

### Petroglyphs

There are plenty of Petroglyphs and graffiti to be discovered along Darb Arbain, most of which date back the new kingdom and the Roman period, the most important discovery was situated on chain of sandstone about 10-12 km south-west of Umm Dabadib. The eastern side of this rock was engraved with a serekh surmounted by a falcon, with a title that could be royal. The presence of a royal name is extremely important as it shows evidence of royal activity in the farther reaches of the Western Desert as early as the dynastic period. Surprisingly various kinds of animals were found on the distinct rocks close to Ain Lebekha including more giraffes<sup>1</sup>, antelopes of dissimilar types, canids, and even a few fish, mostly inscribed by travelers from south Africa. The UNESCO recognized it as an inventory of the fauna in this area during ancient times<sup>2</sup>.



Petroglyphs from different periods, including standing figures (To the right) and a boat (To the left) north of Ain Gib, Darb Al-Arbain route. After NKOS report, 2001.

Few petroglyphs were discovered in the north-eastern portion of the depression. The most exciting group was found within the oasis on a rock outcrop at about 3 km north of Qasr el- Gib. The drawings and inscriptions found on this rock belong to various periods; it is visible from a distance, and capable of providing shelter and shade for

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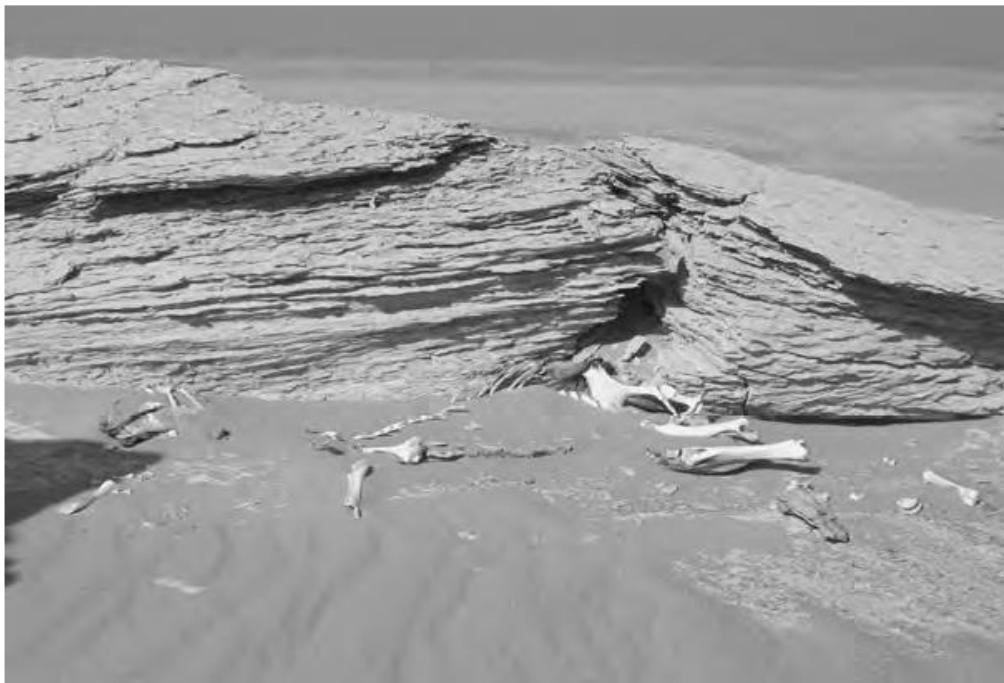
<sup>1</sup> Carrina Rossi, Salima Ikram, "North Kharga Oasis Survey Report: Ain el-Tarakwa, Ain el Dabashiya and Darb Ain Amur" IFAO publication 95(2004) P.177.

<sup>2</sup> Salima Ikram, "Drawing the World: Petroglyphs from Kharga Oasis" ARCHÉO-NIL 19 (2009), PP.67-82.

passing travellers. Based on this clarification it has been suggested that these figures might have been drawn by animist slaves, captured in West Africa and imported into Egypt<sup>1</sup>.

### **Remains of Pack Animals**

Surprisingly few skeletons of pack animals such as donkeys and camels have been found along the route of Darb Arbain. This is curious considering that the Darb Arbain was used over several millennia. NKOS discovered in the northernmost part of the oasis, near the Aqabat Ramliya at least seven donkeys' skeletons and three camels in the oasis, within 12 km of the descent into Kharga<sup>2</sup>.



**One of the donkey skeletons discovered while surveying the north-south route in Kharga. After Rossi & Ikram, Evidence of desert routes p.273.**

### **Mapping the Route**

The gathering proofs confirm the existence and use of the well-known route that runs north-south between Egypt and Africa, Darb Arbain. Currently, travelers use parts of the same track and try to map the route, heading towards the same landmarks, stopping at the same sources of water and under the shade of the same rocks, but it's difficult to identify precisely due to wind-blown sand or moving dunes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ikram, Petroglyphs from Kharga Oasis, PP. 67-82.

<sup>2</sup> Rossi and Ikram, "Evidence of desert routes" P. 272.  
Vivian, The Western desert, P.360.



**Model A Ford cars of the DIAFE XI expedition follow the camel tracks of the Darb el-Arbain from Asyut to Kharga Oasis in autumn 1933 (Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt).**

As declared above, travellers coming from the Nile Valley, principally Asyut regions and points further north, reach to the ‘Aqabat Ramliya where some skeletons of pack livestock were found by NKOS within 12 km of the descent into Kharga depression from north-east corner<sup>1</sup>. Caravans then turned into ‘the Corridor’ leaving Aqabat Ramliya, headed south crossing a tough plateau patch and then on soft topography.



**The descent into the Kharga Oasis on the Darb el-Arbain (Beadnell 1909). On the left the serpentine track of the caravan route is visible.**

Many distinguishable camel paths left there over the centuries. An isolated outcrop at almost 20 km south of the scarp provided a convenient rest-station and a tiny water-

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<sup>1</sup> Rossi and Ikram, “Evidence of desert routes” P. 275

source, where passers obviously spent enough time to carve illustrations and inscriptions on the rock surface<sup>1</sup>.



**In the very beginning, animal paths were likely used by humans as the most visible and easily accessible routes to save travel time and effort at south of kharga oasis (Photo: H. Riemer).**

From here, the path bends for several kilometres slightly eastwards and follows a flat wadi that still demonstrates clear traces of being compressed by feet over a long period of time. A small outpost on top of the so-called ‘Square Rock’, marked by many cairns, at the northern edge of the late-Roman complex of Gib and Sumayra. The site probably functioned as a kind of checkpoint where nomads may head north-east or north-west. The most evident proof of using of these paths during the Roman period is the vast majority of the standing remains of Roman origin throughout the oasis, and they are connected by most paths. Clearly the forts were used to regulate traffic along routes in addition to supply caravans and travelers with water. The whole ceramics that were discovered date from the early 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The Romans may felt the importance to mark the paths with a number of ‘road signals’ more than anyone else in any other historical period. In specific, it may be suggested that a large number of cairns date to the Late Roman period.

The track then descended from a elevation into a rather remarkable landscape made up chains of elongated outcrops alternating with lengthy wadis covered by yellow sand, and proceeded towards a flat plain: here a massive isolated cairn appears to mark the connection of the north-south path with the east-west track that linked the regions of Mohammed Tuleib and Ain Lebekha without crossing by the area of Ain

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<sup>1</sup> On the basis of this interpretation it has been suggested that these figures might have been drawn by animist slaves, captured in West Africa and imported into Egypt across the desert. Additionally, the rock bears an eroded Greek inscription, and several images of feet and sandals.

um-Dabadib<sup>1</sup>. Another cairn was recorded for nearly 13 km to the area of Gebel el-Teir and El-Bagawat; No considerable traces of the route were discovered south of this stage. At a little distance from the sites of Ain el-Dabashiya and Ain el-Tarakwa, the track appears to run along the eastern edge of a chain of dunes at the foot of Gebel el-Teir<sup>2</sup>.



**The ancient crossing road of Darb Al-Arbain by El-Bagawat Necropolis, Kharga oasis.**

Then to the city of Hibis where the caravan provided with plenty of water, later to Dush, about 104 km south of Hibis<sup>3</sup>. It was commanded by a large garrison of Roman troops on a fortress up the mound to monitor the he Darb el-Arbain trade route, provide water for travelers and defend the southern boundary of the Roman Empire from the south<sup>4</sup>. At Qasr Dush, The Darb leaves Kharga. From Dush, as the springs are closer together, the route became easier. The caravans pass through Bir Murr, Bir Abu Hussein, Bir Kiseiba and Al-Shab within 60 km, so it is a very pleasant place and surely the caravans welcomed the hospitable terrain.

The Darb leaves Egypt to Selima in Sudan, about 230 km from Al-Shab. There are hills to the north while Selima sand sheets to the south and west. The uninhabited oasis has a small date palms grove and the water source is a meter-wide hole in the ground of the oasis<sup>5</sup>. The Darb proceeded another 224 km from selima to Laqya al-Arbain. Laqya means finding, so this place is named finding the Forty. One assumes it means finding the route after not being sure exactly where it was.

<sup>1</sup> Francoise Dunand. et.al, Le Materiel Archeologique Et Le Restes Humains De La Necropole Dain El-Labakha, Oasis De Khargeh (Paris: Lemond Press, 2013) P.11

<sup>2</sup> Rossi, Ikram, "Ain el-Tarakwa" PP. 177-180.

<sup>3</sup> محمود أبو الحسن, الواحات المصرية , ص 28-29, محمود الفطاطري, معابد واحاتي الخارجة والداخلة بالصحراء الغربية في مصر في العصرين البطلمي والروماني , دراسة اثرية مقارنة ( رسالة دكتوراه غير منشورة , كلية الاداب جامعة طنطا 2008 ) ص 189

<sup>4</sup> Beadnell, an Egyptian oasis, P. 97.

Richard Wilkinson, The Complete Temples of Egypt (New York: Tames & Hudson press, 2000) P.238.

<sup>5</sup> Roe, The Old Caravan Route, p.120.

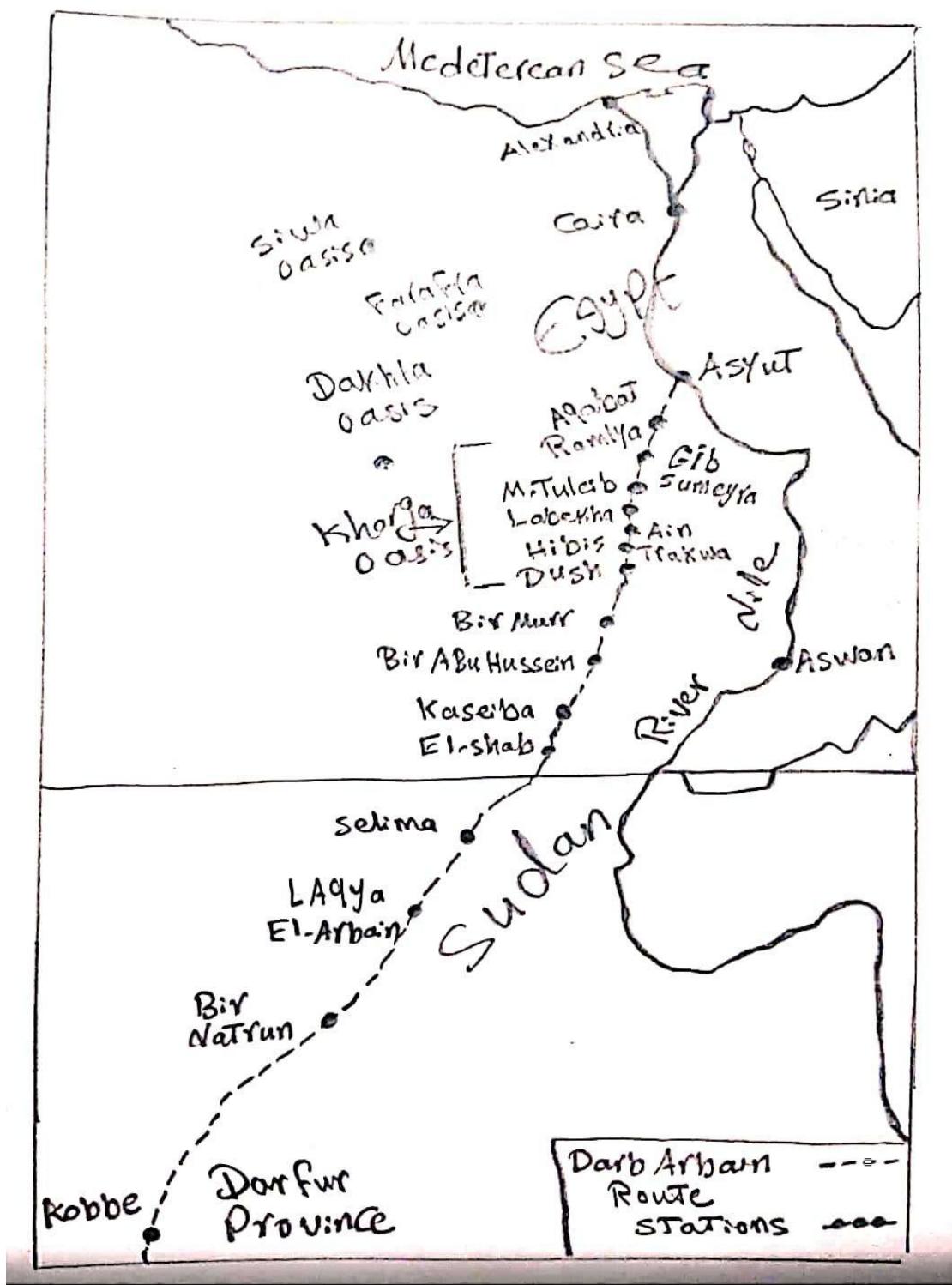


**The Darb el-Arba‘in approaching Selima Oasis in the background (photo: F. Jesse).**

The path runs nearby 400 kilometers to the south from Bir Natrun to Kobbe. It is a very pleasant residence and the caravans certainly welcomed the hospitable terrain after the hundreds of kilometers of desolation they had already crossed and the hundreds more to come, due to the accessibility of water from the four wells which discovered in this region<sup>1</sup>. The Darb al-Arbain ends at Kobbe in Darfur where the inscriptions and engravings of the slavers still exist, only one well was recognized in Kobbe, and furthermore the travelers use other connecting tracks to reach the core of Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Vivian Western desert, p.348.



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# مجلة اتحاد الجامعات العربية للسياحة والضيافة (JAAUTH)

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## إعادة ترسيم طريق القوافل القديم – درب الأربعين – في مصر اليونانية الرومانية: القيمة التراثية والإمكانيات السياحية

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### معلومات المقالة

#### الكلمات المفتاحية

الواحة الخارجة هي عاصمة محافظة الوادي الجديد وتعتبر أكبر واحات مصر الغربية، والجدير بالذكر هو تأكيد أحدث الدراسات على أهمية الخارجة كمفترق للطرق خلال العصور القديمة خاصة في العصرين اليوناني والروماني. يعتبر أكثر الطرق شهرة هو طريق درب الأربعين الذي يربط بين الشمال والجنوب - وفقاً لما ذكره للمؤرخ اليوناني هيرودوت - كما ساعد على تسهيل عملية النقل والتجارة بين مصر وقلب إفريقيا. بدأ الطريق الطويل في كوبا بالسودان، ثم اتجه شمالاً خارج السودان إلى الشاب، ثم استمر شمالاً إلى واحة الخارجة بمصر - حيث تم تحصيل الضرائب من القوافل التجارية - وتنتهي رحلته أخيراً في مدينة أسيوط، بطول يبلغ حوالي 1770 كم. ساعدت اللقى الأثرية التي تم اكتشافها على طول الطريق القديم في تحديد مساره، على سبيل المثال العلامات الصخرية التي كانت تستخدم لتحديد معالم الطريق، وبقايا الأواني الفخارية المكسورة، والهياكل العظمية للحيوانات، والنقوش الصخرية التي تم العثور عليها في الأجزاء الشمالية والشرقية من الطريق، بالإضافة إلى بقايا محطات المياه البطلمية والرومانية. أثبتت الأدلة الأثرية أن الرومان قاموا أيضاً بوضع العديد من الحاميات العسكرية في الصحراء الغربية وعلى طول طريق درب الأربعين لتأمين خط سير القوافل التجارية. وهكذا، كان درب الأربعين هو الطريق الأكثر ملائمة للقوافل الطويلة منذ القرن الثاني قبل الميلاد إلى القرن الرابع الميلادي. وباعتبارها تلك البقعة جزءاً لا يقدر بثمن من التراث الثقافي والطبيعي، فقد تم وضع الواحة الخارجية وطريق درب الأربعين ضمن قائمة اليونسكو المؤقتة، إقراراً بأهمية الحفاظ عليها من الأنشطة البشرية وتحقيق عنصر الاستدامة بالمحافظة على حق الأجيال القادمة في العلم والمعرفة وتأهيلها لتصبح ضمن القائمة الرئيسية لليونسكو لموقع التراث العالمي. وفي هذا الصدد ترکز الدراسة على محاولة إعادة ترسيم طريق القوافل القديم – درب الأربعين – وإبراز أهميته ودوره في التجارة بين الشمال والجنوب ورفع ترتيبه ضمن قائمة اليونسكو المؤقتة.

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