

# *Memory and microhistory of an Empire: domestic contexts in Roman Amheida, Egypt*

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*Edited by*

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# Contents

List of Contributors	v
1. Introduction: Memory, archaeology and the historical condition <i>(Dušan Borić)</i>	1
2. The diversity and duration of memory <i>(Alasdair Whittle)</i>	35
3. Happy forgetting? Remembering and dismembering dead bodies at Vlasac <i>(Dušan Borić)</i>	48
4. Forgetting and remembering the digital experience and digital data <i>(Ruth Tringham)</i>	68
5. Layers of meaning: Concealment, containment, memory and secrecy in the British Early Bronze Age <i>(Andrew Jones)</i>	105
6. Constructing the warrior: Death, memory and the art of warfare <i>(Bryan Hanks)</i>	121
7. Memory and microhistory of an empire: Domestic contexts in Roman Amheida, Egypt <i>(Anna Boozer)</i>	138
8. The depiction of time on the Arch of Constantine <i>(Adam Gutteridge)</i>	158
9. Archaeology and memory on the Western front <i>(Paola Filippucci)</i>	171
10. <i>Terra incognita</i> : The material world in international criminal courts <i>(Lindsay Weiss)</i>	183
11. YugoMuseum: Memory, nostalgia, irony <i>(Mrdjan Bajić)</i>	195
12. Memory, melancholy and materiality <i>(Victor Buchli)</i>	204

# 7. Memory and microhistory of an empire: Domestic contexts in Roman Amheida, Egypt

*Anna Boozer*

As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. ... The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand written in the corners of streets, the gratings of windows, the banisters of steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

(Calvino 1972, 11)

People foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further into the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realize that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena.

(Proust 1993, 450)

## Introduction

Within an imperial framework, individuals and groups invoke memories of the past to denote both their social identity and their placement within the empire. An examination of quotidian mnemonic processes offers an opportunity for us to explore the ways in which local peoples negotiated, influenced, and responded to imperial social climates. The Roman Empire provides a salient framework for exploring memory because it was the iconic ancient empire, inscribing its control over a vast range of territories and peoples, each with its own distinct history and identity. The present work explores two Roman Egyptian houses as touchstones for the complex post-conquest conditions that intertwined memory, identity, and empire.

Roman domestic spaces provide an ideal nucleus for exploring identities and memories because the Roman house served as a vessel for the cultural identity and memory practices of its inhabitants. Although Roman houses differed architecturally to varying degrees across the Empire, they retained a similar cultural role. The material residues of these houses provide a compelling visual and

architectural construct of the inhabitants' identity in Roman society because they served as a nexus for reflecting and forging both domestic life and public careers. As the material embodiment of the self, the Roman house signified social and ancestral status to visitors, thereby enabling the inhabitants to affirm or eschew a Roman identity (Hales 2003). Domestic wall paintings, in particular, served as essential ciphers of identities (both of the owner and the visitor) because they often included vignettes that necessitated a classical education. In order to assemble narratives from these paintings, viewers required familiarity with historical events, classical training, and creativity. Individuals outside of this cultural sphere may have had a host of responses to traditionally Roman works that would have been influenced by their ethnicity, gender, age, and so on. The process of assembling narratives from domestic wall paintings was creative and displayed one's placement with respect to Roman culture and education (Bergmann 1994). As such, the narratives deployed in such domestic decoration were deeply embroiled in identity politics, memory practices, and the Roman Empire.



This chapter contextually analyses two houses from Roman Egypt in order to draw attention to the significance of mnemonic practices within the daily lives of individuals who lived within an imperial framework. I first explore imperial frameworks as fertile arenas in which memory practices reinforced signifiers of individual and community identities. I then turn to domestic contexts, which are critical zones for exploring how individuals drew upon memories when performing their daily lives. I then examine two Roman Egyptian domestic contexts from Amheida (ancient Trimithis) in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt. One house was high status and displayed a Roman-Greek heritage in wall paintings, texts, and material culture, while the other house displayed a subdued, hybrid Roman-Greek-Egyptian heritage in the material culture. I offer specific examples of memory and identity from these domestic contexts and the implications these signatures would have when viewed within the greater social fabric of imperial consolidation.

### Conceptions of Memory

Most theoretical expositions of social memory follow the usage originated by Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist, who contended that memory must be understood as a social phenomenon. Halbwachs also founded the concept of collective memory, which denotes a group's shared, constructed, or inherited memory (Halbwachs 1992 [1925]). Subsequent scholarship augmented the concept of a group identity separate from individual memory and described the exploitation of social memory to create and reinforce a sense of individual and community identity (Basso 1996; Blake 1998).

Given the significance of identity within memory practices, it is worth delving into the concept in greater detail. The concept 'identity' expresses the ways in which individuals and groups differentiate themselves in their social relations with other individuals and groups (Jenkins 1996, 4). Identity positioning functions on two different planes: on one hand the greater social milieu defines identities by formal associations and categories; on the other hand, the single subjective

agent experiences many shifting facets of identity throughout the life span (Meskell 2001, 189). Social categories of identity are generally enduring and regenerative while an individual identity includes facets that can be fleeting, fragmented, and contextually contingent. Both individual and group identities comprise multiple influences such as heritage, genealogy, ethnicity, gender, age, economic class, and so forth. Because identities are multiply constructed and maintained they are fluid and contextually dependent and should be considered with reference to an individual's perceived sameness or exclusion and opposition to these multifarious influences.

The multiplicity and permeability of identities produce real challenges for archaeologists, even in contexts that are reinforced by contemporary written sources. The most accessible means of assessing identity archaeologically is through exploring mechanisms of identity construction and maintenance. These mechanisms loosely tether facets of identities to historically understood trajectories and take the form of social, material and memorial practices. A study of memory promises a fruitful approach towards understanding how identities are socially created and maintained. Indeed, memory infuses social meanings into the past, present, and future (Connerton 1989; Fentress and Wickham 1994 [1992]; Fagan 1996; Lovell 1998). Memories of heritage – be they real or mythical – are particularly potent forces in the collective imagination of identity.

Within archaeology, Van Dyke and Alcock describe four converging categories for exploring social memory transmission: ritual behavior, narratives, representations, and places (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003, 4–5). These categories of memory are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The current work engages the last two categories of material memories (representations and places) in an exploration of identity politics. Paintings and other representational media may commemorate past events, such as mythic narratives, and thereby aid the memory process. Material displays of past identities serve as reminders of the past invoked by the present and as incentives that shape the future (Lovell 1998, 14–15). A single synchronic

image can stimulate a host of memories, reforming and coalescing their diversity and contradictions, thereby positioning the past in the present and creating collective images in the present. Places associated with past events or attachments serve as significant vectors for exploring memory because they evoke a spectrum of emotions and memories ranging from mundane, everyday activities to monuments or sites of violence.

### Memory and imperialism

When imposing forces control the present and future, evocation of the past infuses new meanings into places, representations, social identities, and traditions. Rearticulation of this past represents more than mere cultural archaism and nostalgia, it also offers imperial agents and local individuals an arena for social and political expression (Alcock 2001). The construction of the past could do much to symbolically smooth over social divisions, creating a sense of community identity (Basso 1996; Alcock 2002) or, alternatively, promote more restricted and selective identities (Bodnar 1994; Johnson 1995; Bohlin 1998). Within empires, rulers deployed the past in claims of universality and legitimacy, often creatively selecting and transforming both recent and deep pasts (Sinopoli 2003). Likewise, the influence of local areas should not be underestimated since the activities of local and non-elite actors often provoked changes in imperial structure, agendas, and approaches (Deagan 2001).

Since memory performed such an active role in empire building and maintenance one would expect that it would attract scholars of ancient Egypt, a geographical area that was occupied by both conqueror and conquered during its long, interleaved history. Egyptology, however, has provided only a few studies of memory (McDowell 1992; Montserrat and Meskell 1997; McDowell 1999; Richards 1999; Baines and Lacovara 2002; Meskell 2003) and has yet to produce any that address how different groups constructed memories with the framework of empire.

The present work explores memory during the period in which Rome conquered Egypt, although

this conquest was not the first time that this ancient civilization had been occupied. Egypt's long and layered history of foreign domination had potent implications for memory practices under the Romans. When Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 BC, the Persians were the first outsiders to incorporate Egypt within a larger imperial power structure. The Persians did not settle in Egypt and relied on hegemonic imperial practices rather than on territorial integration. Signs of a Persian presence can be found in the temples they dedicated and the water works they constructed, particularly in the oasis region.

The Persians lost Egypt to Alexander the Great in 332 BC. After Alexander's death, the Ptolemaic Dynasty ruled Egypt for nearly 300 years and, unlike their Persian forerunners, focused largely on the development of Egypt. Part of this development included a policy of settling foreign soldiers on the land and creating numerous Greek settlements, particularly in Alexandria and the Fayum region. In order for individuals to advance in society, Egyptians often took on Greek names, learned to write in Greek, and familiarised themselves with Greek culture (Bowman 1986, 122–123). Meanwhile, the Greeks disdained Egyptians as lesser beings with a disorderly nature and a plethora of disreputable traits.

Egypt again became a province within a greater empire following the Roman conquest in 30 BC. By the time the Romans arrived there was a powerful Greek overlay in place, particularly in the forms of government administration and legal systems as well as linguistically, socially, and materially in certain geographic locales. Relatively few Romans immigrated to Egypt in comparison to the many thousands of Greeks that went to Egypt under Ptolemaic rule. This distinction was partially a function of the Roman policy that did not promote immigration to Egypt because of a concern that it might be used for political opposition (Lewis 1983, 16).

Various groups responded to the new social conditions of Roman rule differently. Local interests, social status, ethnicity and other vectors of identity influenced peoples' social choices and opportunities. Although households of

different status levels may have had competing interests, they also had strong community-oriented tendencies. The pressures of Roman rule may have united different status groups in social cohesion against foreign occupation, while other households may have taken advantage of and supported the regime as a means of increasing their own wealth and social position. Still others may have regarded this new regime with indifference and ambivalence. Individuals, communities, and ethnic groups often articulated their alliances through citations of historical and mythological events from the past. Hellenism, in particular, offered a salient means of symbolising alliances with Roman rule. The Greek/Egyptian dichotomy created under the Ptolemies fostered aspirations to Hellenism and local elites, regardless of their ethnic heritage, relied upon Greek cultural symbols in order to promote their status (Lewis 1983, 39). Opportunism during the Roman Period thus involved a complex negotiation of ethnic categories that directly intertwined memory and identity. Remembering the past signified past group identities and distinguished, fashioned, and potentially transformed current connections between individuals and their relationship to society. In this context, representations of the past affected both individuality and the interactions between individuals and groups within society. The radiating influence of Hellenism in the Roman imagination reveals how the configurations of meaning, memory, and identity that defined a Greek heritage were reinscribed on an imperial Roman stage.

### **Memory and domestic contexts**

In Roman Egypt, houses are iconic of these complex post-conquest social conditions. Across the Empire, Roman houses differed architecturally to varying degrees but they retained a similar cultural role. The upper class Roman house served as a nexus that reflected and shaped domestic life and the public careers of individuals. The material residues of these houses provide a compelling visual and architectural construct of the inhabitants' identity in Roman society. The Roman house,

as the material embodiment of the self, could be seen as an affirmation of the inhabitant's Roman identity as well as signifying social and ancestral status to visitors (Hales 2003).

Representational media, such as wall paintings and decoration, provided clues to viewers about the identity and status of the inhabitants. The process of assembling narratives from domestic wall paintings was creative and displayed one's placement with respect to Roman culture and education (Bergmann 1994). In order to unwind the social signifiers within the vignettes, it was essential that viewers have a familiarity with historical events and popular classical works as well as a penchant for creativity. Individuals outside of this classically educated cultural sphere must have had a host of responses to traditionally Roman works and these responses would have varied depending on diverse vectors of identity, such as their ethnicity, gender, age and so on. As such, the narratives deployed in such domestic decoration were deeply embroiled in identity politics, memory practices, and Roman imperialism.

In order to understand the way in which individuals made use of memory in the Roman Empire, I suggest that we draw attention to the place where these memories occurred, teasing out the local specificities and peculiarities that we must gloss over when we employ macroscale models. In so doing, I employ a microhistorical perspective. Microhistories are useful during certain phases of historical research because they underscore the initiative and capacity that historical agents have for mediating circumstances marked by ambiguity (Ricoeur 2004, 187). This approach is particularly suited for assessing facets of identity since an individual's identity is fluid and contextually dependent. By investigating individuals and small groups, microhistorians are able to ascribe a range of potential characteristics to bounded social and historical milieus (Cerutti 1990; Ginzburg 1993; Gribaudi, Levi *et al.* 1998).

By examining individuals, families, or small groups within their social fabric, we become aware of variants that macroscale analyses flatten out in quantitative approaches. Macroscale analyses, which examine the force of structural constraints

exerted over a long time span, are not abrogated by microscale analyses. Rather the macroscale provides the contextual frame for situating and interpreting the array of options accessible and engaged by agents on the microscale. Ultimately, meticulous and broadly applicable histories require variations in scale. The principle inherent in variation in scale is that different scales do not simply generate more dense data about interconnections, but rather they bring to light new connections that were imperceptible in the macrohistorical scale (Ricoeur 2004, 210). Small-scale investigations can indicate innovative directions for future research on the macroscale through the production of novel data. Over time, the aggregates of these studies can provide nuanced and quantitatively viable histories.

Postprocessual archaeology has long attempted to access 'individuals' in the past, that is, to locate and theorise individual agents regardless of how representative these individuals were within their socio-temporal framework (Morris 1993; Bailey 1994; Meskell 1994; Hodder 2000). However, in the process of teasing out much needed theorisations of individuals, the larger cultural matrix has often been left by the wayside. By contrast, a microhistory explores characteristics of social strata for specific social periods through individuals and small groups. Culture reins in the historical and social variability of these individuals, by offering the individual 'a horizon of latent possibilities – a flexible and invisible cage in which he can exercise his own conditioned liberty' (Ginzburg 1993, xxi). The vocabulary that culture provides individuals is at their disposal to articulate their own social variability within their cultural matrix. These microhistories enable us to understand reciprocal cultural exchanges between the dominant social classes and the subordinate social classes (Bakhtin 1965).

Houses, in particular, provide a glimpse into intimate spaces and how individuals materially expressed memories and cultural exchanges. As Bachelard saliently explicated, houses embody our memories, our selves and uncertain, spectral pre-histories (Bachelard 1994, 47). They tug against concrete perceptions and touch upon imagination,

memories, and dreams. The materiality of the house itself can embody continuity of origin (Tringham 2000), or it can serve as a vessel for relics from the past in the form of objects and narratives (Gillespie 2000, 12–13). The house embodies memories of individuals and the specificity of personal histories localised spatially. It provides a sense of continuity and even a sense of origins beyond the lived experience of any of the inhabitants. Memories of individuals, collective memories, and deep pasts converge and reside within the household vessel.

The Roman house provides an evocative example of the home as a *locus* that reflected and shaped the cultural identity of its inhabitants. It was the setting for domestic life as well as the public careers of upper-class individuals and therefore served as a visual and architectural construct of the inhabitants' identity in Roman society (Mazzoleni 1993, 292; Hales 2003, 2). The Roman house, as an extension of the self, affirmed the inhabitant's Roman identity and signalled social and genealogical status to visitors. It was not ethnicity so much as a mastery of Roman culture that shaped an individuals' ambitions and abilities to achieve those ambitions within the Roman Empire (Woolf 2003, 13). Citations of the past were deeply embroiled in domestic identity constructions (Thébert 1987, 407) because adept references to historical and mythological events conveyed an individual's identity and mastery of Roman culture. Commemorating the past through representational media imbued inhabitants with a sense of deep history and transmitted a specific heritage to visitors. In the context of empire, such narratives highlighted the potentially divergent histories of imperialist and local agents while shaping future trajectories and agendas.

Roman Egyptian houses and households have been notoriously under-studied (Bailey 1990; van Minnen 1994; Bagnall 2001; Alston 2002, 45–52), although a few studies do exist (Husselman 1979; Hobson 1985; Bowman 1986, 146–150; Alston 1997). The neglect of these houses is unfortunate since the subtle and everyday aspects of remembering offer fertile grounds for exploration and Egypt offers some of the best-preserved Roman

houses available to us. Indeed, Egyptian domestic contexts from all periods have often been left by the wayside in favour of mortuary and religious contexts. Although there are studies of memory that claim to access Egyptian household contexts (Meskell 2003), they primarily consider ancestral busts and mortuary contexts rather than objects from everyday life. These studies have informed the present work, but I would like to redirect our focus from the mortuary sphere to the domestic, where there is much to learn about the memories and identities of the living.

### **Amheida (Ancient Trimthis)**

The following paragraphs examine two domestic contexts from Amheida (ancient Trimthis), an important city in the Dakhleh Oasis on the periphery of Roman Egypt (Fig. 7.1). Amheida today is remarkably well preserved (Fig. 7.2). It has a long occupational history, and it reached its greatest extent under Roman rule (1st to 4th centuries AD). This historical trajectory offers an excellent example of a locality that developed during a period of social, religious, economic, and political change under the Empire. Preliminary research suggests that the first house retained signatures of both the local past as well as a mythical Greek past that was more in line with the constructed heritage of its conquerors. The second house, discussed in less detail, shows a more complicated fusion between Greek and local memories.

The New York University Amheida Project (directed by Roger Bagnall, Paola Davoli, and Olaf Kaper) has identified and mapped four different sectors of the urban site: Area 1 is both domestic and industrial, Area 2 has vaulted and domed structures that are elaborately painted, Area 3 has an impressive pyramid that is surrounded by vaulted tombs, and Area 4 is a temple mound (Fig. 7.2). Amheida was one of the most important towns in the Dakhleh Oasis during the Roman and Byzantine centuries. Documentary sources indicate that it became a city by the fourth century and was treated on the same level as the neighbouring city, Mothis and the more distant

Hibis in the Khargeh Oasis (Wagner 1987, 191). The substantial above ground remains and surface pottery scattered across the urban center represent dates ranging from Pharaonic to Late Antique periods and the surrounding environs contain evidence of prehistoric lithic scatters, an Old Kingdom site and several cemeteries. Late Antique ruins dominate the visible site surface today.

The historical trajectory of Amheida complements that of the greater Dakhleh Oasis. In the 1970s and 1980s, The Dakhleh Oasis Project surveyed the entire Dakhleh Oasis, revealing a moderate resident population in Dakhleh – a total of forty-nine sites – throughout the Pharaonic period (Churcher and Mills 1995). By contrast, an excess of two hundred sites represents the Roman and Byzantine centuries of occupation. A recent re-evaluation of the Dakhleh ceramics seriation suggests that there are more Ptolemaic sites than originally accounted for in this initial survey, yet it remains clear that the Roman Period is represented in greater numbers than any other period until the present day. The reasons for this enormous expansion in population cannot be found in documentary sources but it is clear that, before the present day, the oasis population expanded to its greatest extent during the Roman Period.

### **Greek memories in Roman Egypt: A microhistory**

Our first house at Amheida is situated in Area 2, an area of the site that, from the surface, appears to have a dense concentration of structures decorated with painted and molded plaster (Fig. 7.2). Immediately south of this house, and sharing a wall, lies another house of similar design and dimensions. Adjacent to the house in the north there is a large open area surrounded by walls and filled with refuse that was used for some unknown function. West of this domestic area, on the highest point of the site, lie the remains of a sandstone temple dedicated to Thoth of Set-wah. This temple has been completely dismantled over time, although the features and cartouches that survive suggest that it was active into the Roman Period (Davoli and Kaper 2005). Southeast of

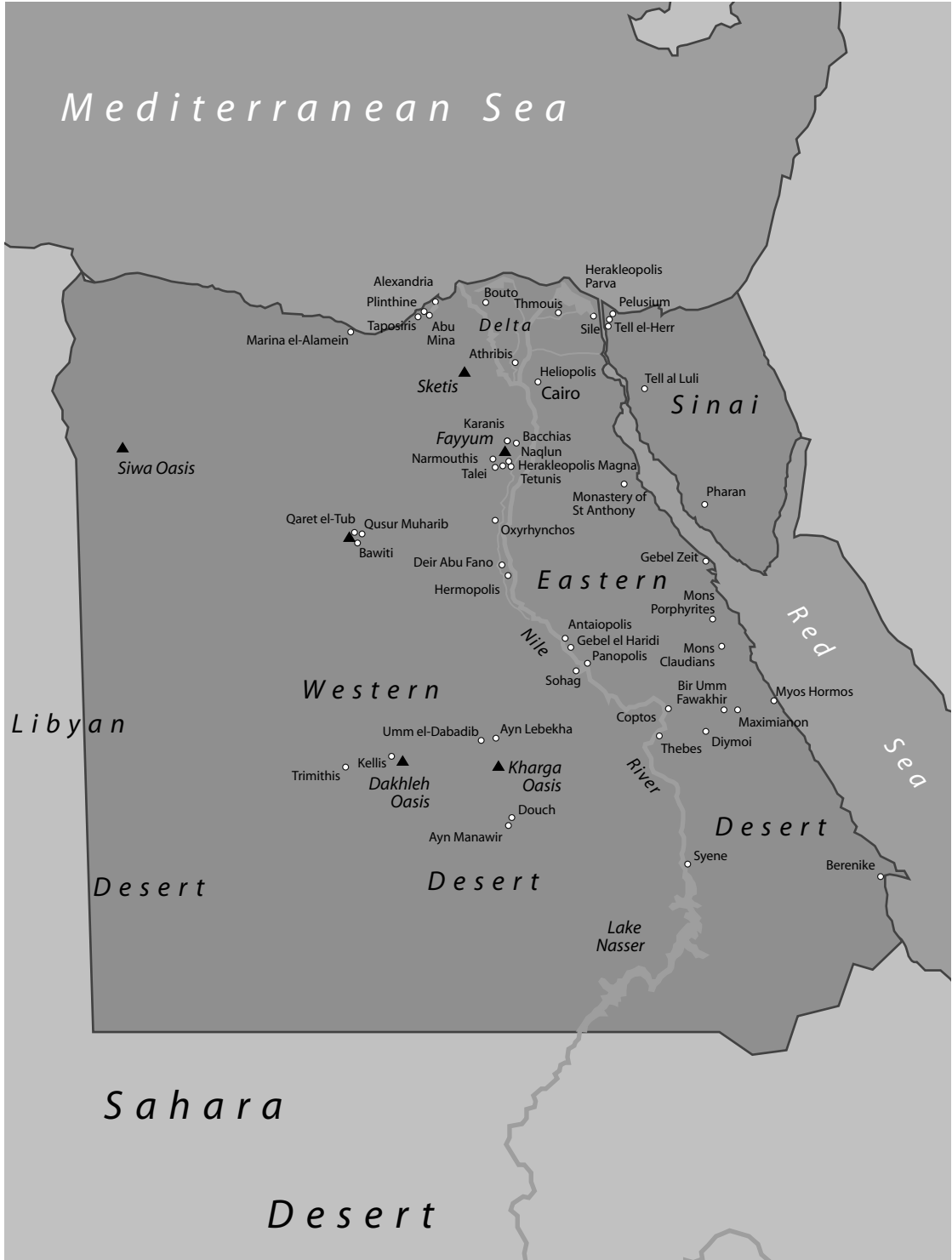


Figure 7.1 Map of Egypt.

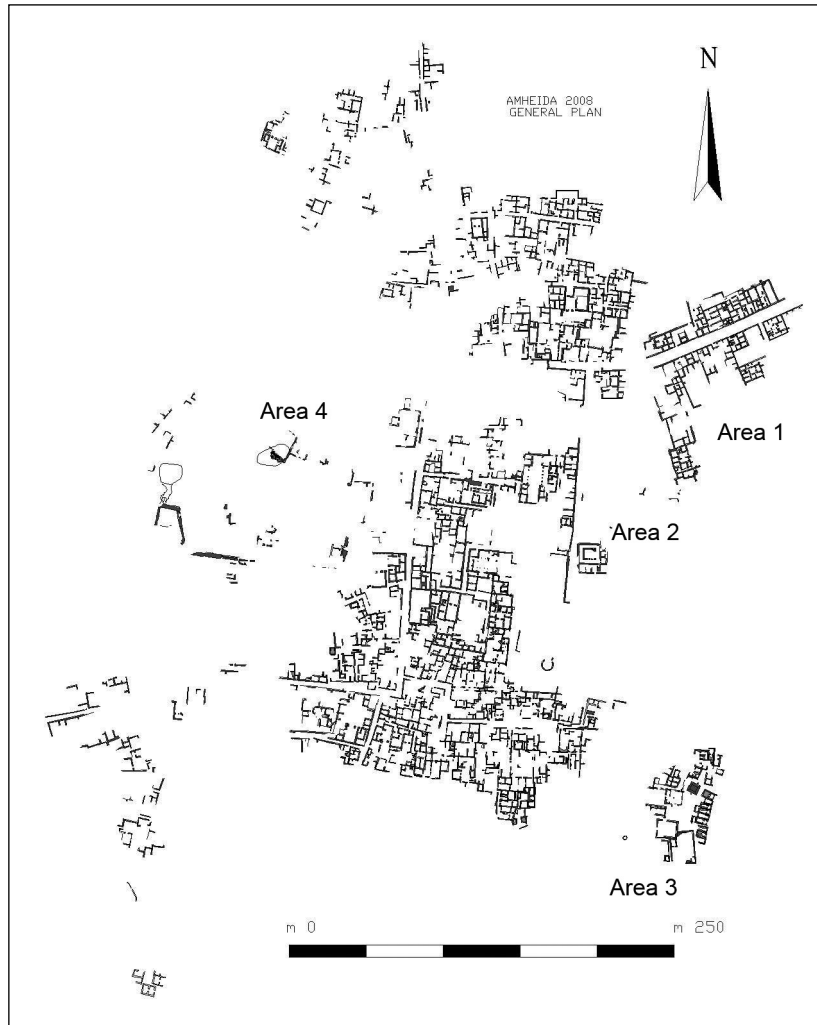


Figure 7.2 Map of Amheida.

the house the terrain flattens out and provides the location for tombs and a Roman Period pyramid that dominates the vista. These principal architectural features complemented by stark sand and an escarpment to the north comprised the visible urban environment of the house.

The Dakhleh Oasis Project took a preliminary look at Amheida in 1979, clearing the upper portion of two walls from a structure in Area 2, an area of the site that has a concentration of vaulted and painted structures. In so doing they

found paintings with Greek mythological figures (Leahy 1980; Mills 1980). These figures were reburied until formal excavations commenced in 2004. At this time, the excavation of this structure is largely complete. Preliminary results from the recent excavations suggest that the structure was a mud-brick, late Roman house dating to the end of the third century with abandonment in the middle of the fourth century. Its basic layout consists of a central room with decorated rooms to the west and south, utilitarian rooms to the north, and

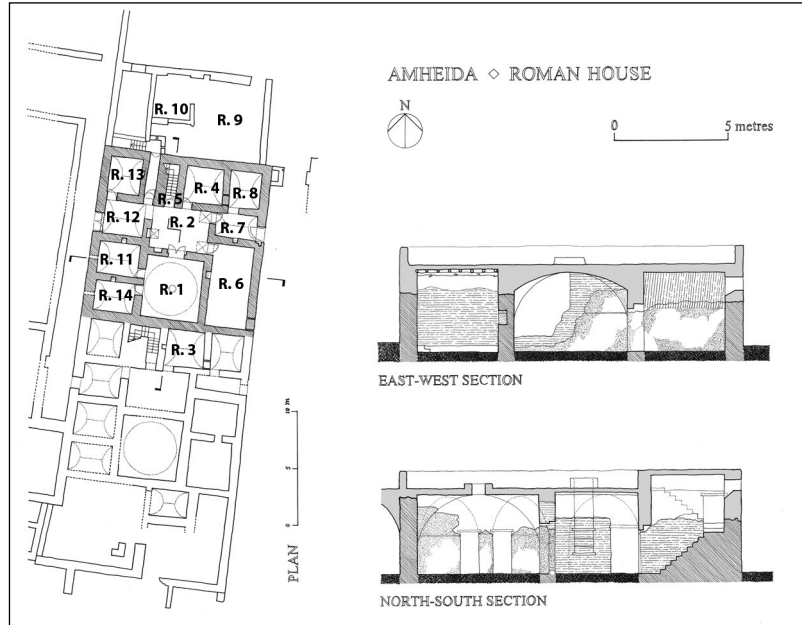


Figure 7.3 Plan of House, Area 2.1.

additional undecorated rooms to the east (Figs 7.3 and 7.4).

Many of the architectural features of this house are typical of local domestic architecture from the Roman Period as can be seen by comparison with recent work by the Dakhleh Oasis Project at Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis), a town located east of Amheida in Dakhleh. Results from these excavations indicate that Roman Dakhleh domestic architecture typically consists of a single-storey structure with barrel vaulted roofs. A staircase provided access to the roof, which was often used as additional work and storage space. Within the house, there was typically a central area surrounded by living and work spaces, a feature signifying more Romanised houses. Walls were mud-plastered and often contained strips of whitewash along rear walls, around doorways, and wall niches (Hope, Kaper *et al.* 1989; Knudstad and Frey 1999). Presumably this whitewash provided illumination of these dark spaces, particularly when lamps were placed in the niches.

The house at Amheida contained decorative features that currently have no contemporary

parallels in the Dakhleh Oasis; Greek mythological wall paintings. We should be cautious in stating that this decoration is of a singular programme since much research remains to be done at Amheida itself as well as other houses further afield. For example, this structure may have been part of a planned *insula*, which contained at least one house of similar layout and dimensions.

As an assemblage, the material culture suggest that the major period of occupation was sometime between the late 3rd through the middle of the 4th century AD. The latest datable coins and *ostraka* that we have date to the reign of Constantius II, which gives us a *terminus ante quem* for the occupation of the house. The ceramic assemblage from the house is similar to fourth century domestic assemblages from nearby Ismant el-Kharab, with many multi-functional vessels represented in the most common local fabric (Dunsmore 2002; Pyke 2005).

The house could be entered from a room on its eastern end, which was doubtless the main entrance into the functional areas of the house (Fig. 7.3, R7). It provided direct access to a central room



AMHEIDA ◇ ROMAN HOUSE

AXONOMETRIC FROM NORTH-EAST

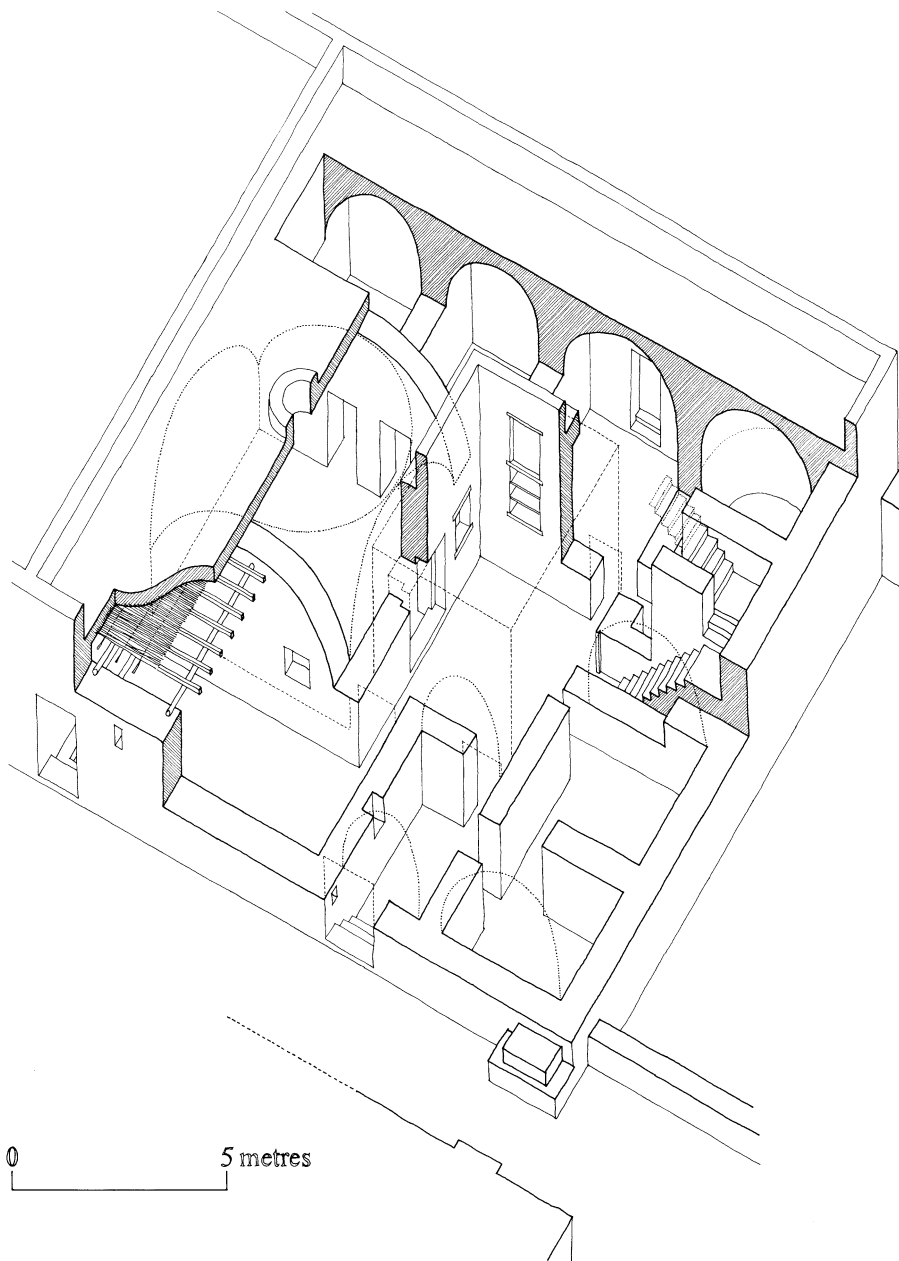


Figure 7.4 Preliminary Reconstruction of House, Area 2.1: Axonomic Plan (Nick Warner).

and a utilitarian room to the north. The entrance itself was a simple, rectangular room with mud plaster walls. It was devoid of decoration with the exception of a small, arched niche with ornamental moulding along one of the walls.

Room 2, accessible from the eastern entrance, functioned as the central axis point within the house (Fig. 7.3, R2). It was necessary to walk through room 2 in order to manoeuvre through the house. It could be entered from a total of six doorways, including a staircase to the roof as well as the eastern entrance. There were several episodes of floor replastering and repair, which suggests heavy usage. As a central nexus for the house, individuals in the household probably used this space throughout the day for transit throughout the house as well as tasks that required more light than the other rooms would have afforded. The walls were covered in mud plaster and were completely replastered at least twice. The first layer of plaster shows traces of red pigment, suggesting that the walls were at least partially painted. The second coating consists of coarse mud plaster. The walls have two large niches with shelves for the storage of *ostraka* (a class of written artefacts using broken pottery as a material), other small, portable objects, and a large pot that was mortared into the corner of one of the niches. The *ostraka* from this room provide crucial hints about the identity of the inhabitants and will be discussed in greater detail below.

Two rooms, located in the northern part of the house, were used for utilitarian purposes, such as the storage and preparation of food (Fig. 7.3, R4, R8). The two rooms were once connected, but the door connecting them was plastered over at a later stage. Both rooms had low subdividing walls that created storage spaces. One of these rooms contained a hearth while the eastern room contained instruments for grinding. Both rooms were covered in grey-brown mud plaster with straw inclusions and the eastern room had a whitewash band running along the north wall of the room and partially along the eastern and western walls. The quality of the floors in these rooms was poor and both yielded high numbers of objects, including jar stoppers, animal bones, coins, and *ostraka*. We

also found oasis polished ware vessels that were local imitations of *terra sigillata*, a prestige ceramic that was used throughout the Roman Empire. These ceramics were not utilitarian but rather were employed to impress visitors and cultivate a chosen identity.

The courtyard gave access to an elongated room (Fig. 7.3, R6). This room was unusually large and was once covered with a flat roof, as could be seen by the presence of several decayed beams and mud plaster with palm rib impressions. The presence of a flat roof in a house containing vaults occurs on occasion in the Dakhleh Oasis (Hope 1987; Hope 1988). At Kellis, better-preserved examples reveal that these flat roofs were constructed with palm ribs, tied together as bundles, supported by beams of palm, and then covered with mud plaster and possibly bricks. These Kellis roofs seemed to have been used as storage spaces since numerous pottery vessels and papyri were associated with the roof collapse (Hope 1988). It is possible that the room from the Amheida house served a similar function. The west wall of the room possesses a niche that was once shelved. Grey-brown mud plaster covers the walls and white plaster bands surround both the doorway and the niche. Few artefacts were recovered from the room so it is not possible to determine the function.

Four unexcavated vaulted rooms form the west wing of the structure (Fig. 7.3, R11, R12, R13, R14). Test trenches were excavated in these rooms to determine the presence of painted plaster and what conservation effort would be necessary for the wall paintings when they are excavated. In the course of this preliminary testing it was found that three rooms were completely whitewashed and painted with various motifs that appear consistent with Roman wallpaper style wall painting (Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 23). At this time very little can be said about these paintings since the test trenches were terminated at the top of these paintings. However, one of these rooms displayed the presence of both geometric and figurative motifs in the upper registers of the paintings. No objects from secure contexts were recovered in these rooms because they have not been fully excavated.

In addition to these presumed living spaces there was a large painted room, accessible from room 2 (Fig. 7.3, R1). These paintings are currently unique in the history of Roman wall painting because they represent Homeric mythologies at such a late date. Although preliminary interpretations have been offered (Leahy 1980; Mills 1980), they await substantive study by art historians. However, preliminary dating of these paintings and contextualisation of their placement can be presented at this time.

Some of the scenes from the walls of the painted room are still *in situ* and it is possible to reconstruct some of the upper registers with fragments found from the remains of collapsed wall debris. From *in situ* paintings and fragments, it is clear that the arrangement of the paintings followed a simple plan, with figural scenes positioned above geometric designs representing stonework. Although the wall paintings display the hand of a skilled artist, the materials used were of poor quality, which caused the original paintings to deteriorate during the occupation of the house. The occupants had the paintings repaired in at least two episodes and there is some indication that they may have altered the original motifs slightly in places (Whitehouse 2005). As more structures are excavated at Amheida, it would be useful to compare the quality of materials used to determine if they co-occur with other architectural and socio-economic attributes.

The room originally had a domed roof, supported in the corners by four pendentives, the triangular segments that allowed the rectangular plan of the walls to support the circular shape of the dome. The entire interior surface of the walls, the pendentives and the dome were covered with whitewash and selectively decorated. Fragments collected from the collapsed dome reveal that it was partially decorated, with the central portion holding a colorful geometric design. The pendentives were painted with figures of nude winged female figures with outstretched arms holding a floral wreath in their hands that reached from one figure to the next. Some parallels to these figures, as well as the architecture, can be found in a mortuary context, the tomb of Petosiris at al-Muzawwqa

in the Dakhleh Oasis, although it is notable that these tombs are more strongly Egyptian in design. The Petosiris tomb has similar figures supporting the heavens amid an interesting melding of Greek, Roman, and traditional Egyptian mortuary motifs (Osing 1982; Whitehouse 1998).

Beginning with painting on the northern wall, which divides the painted room from the courtyard, there are several recognisable mythological scenes. To the left of the door leading to the courtyard, Perseus holds the head of Medusa, while he rescues Andromeda from a diminutive sea monster. This scene is distinguished from all other scenes because it has a pale yellow background rather than the white background used for the other painted scenes in this room. All of the scenes have light coloured backgrounds, which were traditionally used during the Late Antique Period in areas that admitted little natural light (St. Clair 2002, 245). Below Perseus and Andromeda is an unconnected and less sophisticatedly painted sub-zone that consists of two panels. The left panel depicts a servant in a decorated tunic standing beside wine jars in a rack and the right panel shows a nude child lounging on a bolster. Helen Whitehouse suggests that this child is a representation of Harpocrates and that it originally featured a snake that was subsequently obscured by a later addition of cherub-like wings (Whitehouse 2005). To the right of the door leading to the courtyard, Eurycleia washes Odysseus' feet while he reclines on an elevated stool covered in sheepskin (Fig. 7.5). A noble woman, presumably Penelope, sits to the right of these figures and looks off into the distance rather than at Odysseus. It is the occasion of his homecoming and the moment where the nurse first recognises his concealed identity. Although the story is well known, the painting is unique in Egypt (Jackson 2002, 295, note 116). An occasion of homecoming raises tempting questions about the homeland of the occupants of this house and why this particular moment in the story of Odysseus was chosen.

The eastern wall of the same room is divided into two horizontal registers containing smaller painted figures than those found on the other walls. Between the two figured scenes, a grey band labels the figures in the scenes in Greek. Beneath



Figure 7.5 Room 1, North Wall, Eurycleia washes Odysseus' feet.

these registers there is an additional geometric zone. Only the lower portion of the upper register and the geometric zone survive *in situ*. A possible temple is represented on the left with four columns and an architrave and the city walls below. To the right of the images of public architecture, a woman labelled as *Polis*, gestures toward the temple with her right hand and holds a golden sceptre in her left (Fig. 7.6). The depiction of public architecture was not uncommon in Roman domestic wall paintings and may have been employed as an analogy to the control the *paterfamilias* had over his own world that, in turn, was represented as high status (Hales 2003, 128–129, 144–145). Lisa Montagno Leahy, in one of the few articles published on the paintings, posits that the figure of *Polis* represents Amheida itself (Leahy 1980, 354), which suggests that the inhabitants included Amheida within the trajectory of Greek and Roman heritage displayed on the walls. Indeed, the personification of cities was a common practice in the Greek and Roman worlds. On the same register of this eastern wall, Aphrodite and Ares are caught in the act of adultery (Fig. 7.7). Hephaistos uses an invisible net of chains to hold them while a group of inquisitive male gods steals a look as the drama unfolds.

The west wall of the room is only partially preserved. Like the east wall it is divided into horizontal registers by a black register line and only the lower register survives *in situ*. Individual scenes



Figure 7.6 Room 1, East Wall, Polis.

on the lower register seem to be subdivided by a vertical black line. Beneath the scenes a geometric zone appears again, just as it did on the eastern wall. The figured scene portrays a family at dinner (Fig. 7.8). Four figures, three adult males and a woman, recline on a couch and listen to the music provided by a figure to their left. A smaller figure, a male child, stands next to the musician. It is tempting to view these figures as the family that inhabited this particular house but there are no means of verifying such conjectures. Three large detached blocks from this wall display mythological material comparable to myths encountered on other walls in this same room. These scenes include Orpheus charming the animals with his lyre; a chariot scene featuring a male figure in military dress standing beside a female figure at ease; and a group of figures, including a woman, restraining another figure, who wields a sword. Despite the incomplete state of these blocks, many related fragments have been identified amongst the smaller detached pieces,



Figure 7.7 Room 1, East Wall, Gods and Aphrodite.

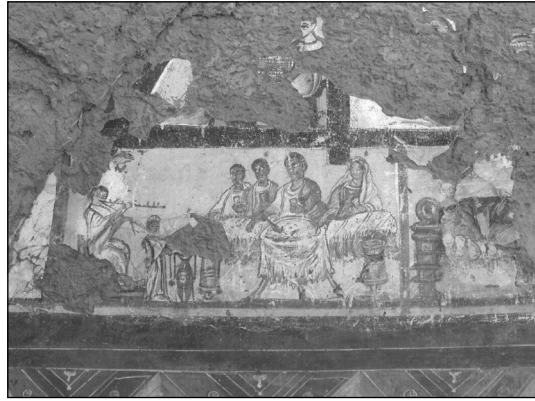


Figure 7.8 Room 1, West Wall, Family at Dinner.

and reassembly should aid specific identification of the myths recounted in these images (Whitehouse 2005).

The south wall of the room is the most poorly preserved wall of the painted room. It contained a large niche that may be partially responsible for the collapse. To the right of this niche there remains *in situ* only a horse's head above a reclining woman wearing a turban. The details of this figure recall scenes in which an emperor rides in victory above prostrate barbarians however the *in situ* paintings and the associated fragments cannot yet verify such an identification (Whitehouse 2005).

The use of representational media to commemorate past events is one of the most accessible means for archaeologists to retrieve memory. Wall paintings are particularly helpful media for understanding memory because the social behaviours that accompany them have a long history of study in the Roman context. As Bettina Bergmann has argued, educated Romans learned proper attitudes for approaching the narratives displayed in decorated houses. The entire process of manoeuvring through the house involved a creative association between the scenes displayed and memories of mythologies from the Greek and Roman past (Bergmann 1994, 226). Mastery of Roman culture, regardless of one's origin, was an important component of patronage and privilege. Being or becoming Roman entailed a participation in a cultural system that was composed of material culture, habit, and social *mores* common to the

empire (Woolf 2003, 238–249). Furthermore, knowledge of mythology became an effective status marker that unified the elite across the Roman Empire (Cameron 2004, 218).

The visitors and inhabitants of this house would have interpreted the deployment of Greek mythological scenes within the context of the Roman Empire, even if some visitors did not understand specific cultural references because they were missing from their own educational repertoire. The material manifestations of narrative anchored memories and bestowed them with tangible and long lasting associative aspects within their contexts of usage and display. For example, Edward Said has demonstrated that narratives are significant components to the intertwining of culture and imperialism. Narratives within imperial or colonial contexts enable the expression of identity and expound the existence of divergent histories for colonists or colonised peoples (Said 1993, xii). Material indices of narrative, in particular, enable palpable and residually potent memories both within the initial context of their creation and in the long-term.

The Amheidan wall paintings recount a large number of Homeric myths and the painter of these scenes rendered iconic moments that emphasised the textual component of myths, rather than the ways these myths were traditionally represented in art at this time. This choice to emphasise the text links the individual identities of the inhabitants into historically understood categories

and provides a potent representation of a classical identity. Elite efforts to carry on the Roman tradition throughout the empire symbolised their participation in the greater Empire and buttressed their prestige locally (Thébert 1987, 329). Since Homer was the cornerstone of a proper Greek education, the scenes at Amheida not only cite a deep mythological past but they also emphatically declare that the occupants possessed the education and creativity associated with elite members of the Roman Empire. Within an imperial context, such memories take on great significance because they maintain a particular lifestyle and embody a set of cultural *mores* (Said 1993, 66). Through the citation of both recent and deep mythological pasts, these wall paintings promoted a sense of continuity between the past and a civic identity at Amheida. Furthermore, the representation of *Polis* tempts an interpretation of these paintings as a declaration that Amheida itself, a *polis*, was a descendent of its classical civic ancestors. Along with this *polis*, the household inherited its proper social position as part and parcel of this Roman social context.

It is unclear who would have had access to these paintings and at what times. Glimpses of these paintings would have been possible from most rooms in the house yet it is unlikely that everyone would be provided admittance. Indeed, the privilege of viewing the paintings may have been a subconscious marker of status within the household, as was often the case in Roman houses. Romans often used decoration in order to underscore differences in social distinctions. Sometimes the decoration itself mattered less than the contrast between decorative types or between the presence or absence of decoration (Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 47). The individuals who visited and occupied this space may have viewed the room differently depending upon divergent vectors of their identity, be it age, sex, ethnicity, or even class.

These ostentatious displays of Roman traditions are complemented by other strands of evidence. For example, all but one of the *ostraka* were written in Greek and a few identify a city councilor named Serenos, who was probably one of the owners of

this house (Bagnall and Ruffini 2004). In addition to these letters, a large number of *ostraka* refer to businesses related to wells, which have always been the real measure of wealth and importance in the oasis (Giddy 1987; Mills 1998). These texts affirm that the owner of the house was probably of an elite status with a margin of control over local civic affairs (Bagnall and Ruffini 2004). Since the man who commissioned the decoration of his house typically held the decisive role of determining the themes and perhaps even the way they were carried out (Thébert 1987, 393), it is likely that these paintings were commissioned and planned by Serenos or one of his ancestors. Furthermore, all of the names represented in the *ostraka* have strong Greco-Roman associations, affirming that individuals with Greco-Roman public personae comprised Serenos' social realm. A more mundane affirmation of an elite, Romanised identity can be found in the presence of oasis polished ware ceramics. This house thus manifests a confluence of heritage displays in a high-status house.

There was a general lack of material left behind, suggesting that the departure from the house was slow and planned. The occupants most likely removed valuable and personal items at this time and therefore there is little that remains with which to reconstruct the lives of individual inhabitants beyond that of an elite male, Serenos, and the associated status of his role in society. As of yet, we have not recovered identities of other individuals inhabiting the house and we have only scant yet tantalising hints of the identities of potential visitors to the house from the *ostraka*. We are left with questions regarding who else would have inhabited this space and how their interpretations would have shifted during the course of their own life spans and in reflection of their gender, status, and ethnicity.

The representational media in this house enhance our understanding of the individuals that occupied this space since they commemorate Greek and Roman heritage through mythology. The citation of this heritage links the identities of individuals in this house to historically understood categories of ethnicity where Hellenism was vital for inclusion in the upper echelons of society.

Serenos's presentation of Hellenism would have enhanced his social position and was possibly even the standard for individuals of a similar placement in society. This microhistory catalyses questions that may help guide future work on the houses at Amheida, Roman Egypt, and beyond.

Indeed, this close examination of Serenos's house helps highlight possible interpretations for incomplete material from other houses at Amheida. For example, a thick fragment of wall-plaster with a heading in large letters and four lines of Greek poetry was found on the surface of an elaborate, potentially domestic structure north of the one currently under excavation (Bagnall 2005). This fragment probably originates from the same structure as the fragments of a metrical text discovered at Amheida prior to excavations at the site (Wagner 1976). These fragmentary texts have Homeric associations and appear to have been part of the wall decoration of this house. Signifiers of a classical education may prove to be an important theme at Amheida among wealthier inhabitants. Poetry has been found elsewhere in Dakhleh, suggesting that a Greek education may have been an important component of daily life in Roman Dakhleh. The means of expressing a classical education may vary – be it through texts, paintings, architectural signatures, or portable artefacts – but its potential omnipresence is notable, particularly the emphasis on Homer.

### **Hybrid memories in Roman Egypt: A microhistory**

Another excavated house from Amheida provides some effective facets of contrast with the previous house, particularly with respect to the proposed intersection between status and heritage mnemonics. This second house is from Area 1, in the northern portion of the site, where there is a concentration of industrial and vernacular domestic architecture (Fig. 7.2). With dimensions of 11 × 11 meters, this second house is much smaller than Serenos' house and is approximately square in plan view (Fig. 7.9). Although the building itself was considerably eroded by the strong sand-laden wind in this portion of the site, the material culture

and botanical remains were preserved to a higher degree than the house in Area 2. The ceramics and associated texts suggest that the second house might be of a slightly earlier date than Serenos' house, with an occupation falling largely in the mid to late 3rd century AD.

This house offers a more complicated association with memory and heritage than our previous house. The general architectural layout draws upon a Romanised model, with a central courtyard through which individuals accessed most of the rooms. Aside from the architectural layout of the house, the inhabitants did not present a clear preference for either a Roman or an Egyptian ethnicity. The occupants may have had either an ambivalent view towards ethnic heritage or a mixed heritage. For example we recovered a number of objects associated with traditional Egyptian practices, such as an amulet of the Egyptian god Bes, who was a protector of children, childbirth and women. Another faience amulet represents a hybrid animal of an Egyptian nature and also probably had an apotropaic function. Emmer wheat glumes that we recovered also point towards an Egyptian heritage since Egyptians traditionally consumed this type of wheat during the Pharaonic periods but it has been virtually unattested, until now, during the Roman Period (Walter 2005). This uncommon usage of traditional foods suggests that at least some of the inhabitants in this house were Egyptian.

The material culture from this house was not uncomplicatedly Egyptian, however, since we have recovered a number of objects that drew upon Greek and Roman traditions. For example, we recovered a statue fragment that emulates Greek design standards. The body is nude and rendered naturalistically in conformity with Greek and Hellenistic ideals rather than Egyptian or even Roman traditions, both of which favoured clothed male bodies. Unlike the previous house, there were no ceramics from this house that imitated the high-status ceramics used within the greater Roman Empire. Simple, coarse vessels with practical uses for cooking and storage were favoured here (Pyke 2005).

These individuals were not poor by any means as

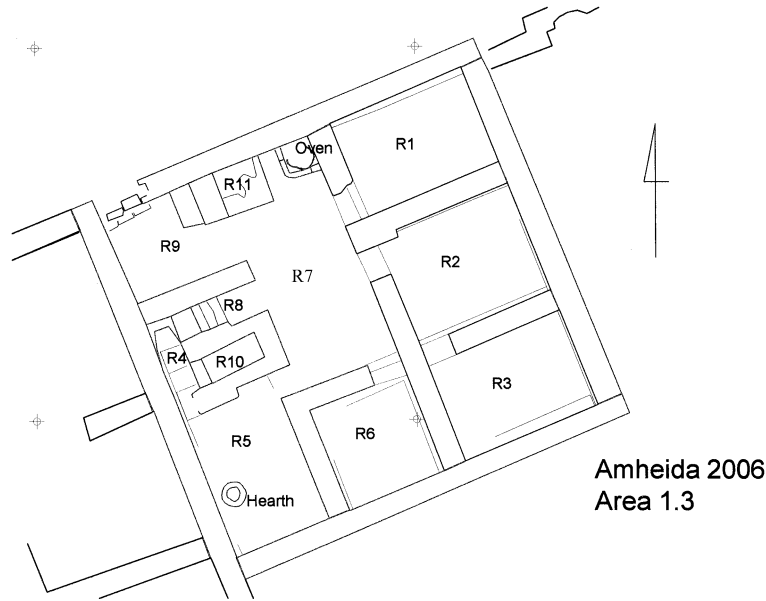


Figure 7.9 Plan of House, Area 1.3.

we can see from a few of the other objects that we have recovered. For example, we recovered a gold glass bead that must have derived from Alexandria since it was made with typical Alexandrene techniques. We found other modest jewelry as well, including several simple bronze rings, which could have been used in economic transactions as well as for adorning the body.

We catch a few glimpses of this family's daily occupations through the textual residues of their everyday lives. The *ostraka* from this house show a prevalent use of Greek and make it clear that the occupants were involved in trade of some kind and possibly even lower level estate management, perhaps for an individual such as Serenos, who lived in the previous house (Ruffini forthcoming). Beneath the floors of this structure we found demotic texts that suggest that there was once a native Egyptian settlement located nearby. Although these texts cannot illuminate the identities of the inhabitants of this house they may reveal a deep past for this family as indigenous occupants of the region.

Unlike Serenos' house, this house displayed its

heritage in ambivalent and muted ways, picking and choosing aspects of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian culture. We find a family transitioning into a mixed heritage between multiple traditions and we gain insight into how ordinary people experienced and remembered the tangled social changes brought about by Roman rule.

### Conclusion

Memory and heritage are critical components of identity formation and continuance. Within the context of empire, the display of heritage reinforces and informs connections between individuals and their relationship to society. Our two Roman Egyptian houses provide illustrative microhistories of the post-conquest conditions that intertwined memory, identity, and empire. The first house examined here provides us with the image of Serenos that he wanted to display; an elite male with an element of control over local civic affairs, a definite signature of Hellenism and a penchant for Homer. The *ostraka*, architecture, and material culture affirm this identity emphatically.



Our second house showed a family that migrated slowly and intricately to a fusion between Egyptian, Greek, and Roman traditions with different family members choosing different signatures, potentially at different times. Importantly, traditional Egyptian practices could be found most potently in the common goods in everyday life, such as protective amulets and food remains. By contrast, we find that more grandiose objects tended to be Greek or Roman, such as architecture and statuettes. These divergent microhistories expose a protracted process of remembering the past that proves much more complicated than what we can describe with binary categories such as resistance and compliance or Romanised and un-Romanised.

These incremental changes, aggregated over numerous families, create a pixelated image of how individuals remembered the past within an imperial system. Close studies of these memories will help us understand who crafts these memories, how, where, and why. Comparisons between additional microhistories will illuminate the Roman Empire as a complicated, multifaceted force of social change in individual lives, rather than a seamless whole.

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