

The Siwa Oasis (Arabic: واحة سيوة, Wāḥat Sīwah, IPA: [ˈwæːħet ˈsiːwæ]; Berber languages: Isiwan, ⵉⵙⵉⵡⵏ) is an urban oasis in Egypt between the Qattara Depression and the Great Sand Sea in the Western Desert, 50 km (30 mi) east of the Libyan border, and 560 km (348 mi) from Cairo.[1][2][3] About 80 km (50 mi) in length and 20 km (12 mi) wide,[1] Siwa Oasis is one of Egypt's most isolated settlements with about 33,000 people,[4] mostly Berbers,[1] who developed a unique and isolated desert culture and a language called Siwi; they are also fluent in the Egyptian dialect of Arabic which is called "Masry" meaning Egyptian.[5]

Its fame derives primarily from its ancient role as the home to an oracle of Ammon, the ruins of which are a popular tourist attraction which gave the oasis its ancient name Oasis of Amun Ra.

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Geography[edit]

The Siwa oasis is in a deep depression that reaches below sea level, to about −19 metres (−62 ft).[6] To the west the Jaghbug oasis rests in a similar depression and to the east the large Qattara Depression is also below sea level.

Name[edit]

šḥt jʾmw[7] [8]

Egyptian hieroglyphs

The Ancient Egyptian name of the oasis was šḥt jʾmw, meaning "Field of Trees". The native Libyan toponym may be preserved in the Egyptian t3(j) n ḏrw "t3j on the fringe" where t3 transcribed the local Palaeo-Berber name *Se or *Sa.[9] This name survived in the works of Muslim geographers as سنترية Santariyyah.

The etymology of the word سيوة Siwah is unclear. Champollion derives it from cooyz – a corruption of Egyptian word for "oasis", oꜣꜥz.[10] The additional evidence of the Egyptian source of Siwa's name is another place name in Kharga Oasis that may share the same

etymology – S.t-w3h, modern Deir el-Hagar).[11] Basset links it to a Berber tribal name swħ attested further west in the early Islamic period,[12] while Ilahiane,[13] following Chafik, links it to the Tašlḥiyt Berber word asiwan, a type of bird of prey, and hence to Amun-Ra, one of whose symbols was the falcon.[14] Some classical authors referred to the site as "Ammonium".[15]

History[edit]

Although the oasis is known to have been settled since at least the 10th millennium BC, the earliest evidence of any connection with Ancient Egypt is the 26th Dynasty, when a necropolis was established. Ancient Greek settlers at Cyrene made contact with the oasis around the same time (7th century BC), and the oracle temple of Amun (Greek: Zeus Ammon), who, Herodotus was told, took the image here of a ram. Herodotus knew of a "fountain of the Sun" that ran coldest in the noontime heat.[16] During his campaign to conquer the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great reached the oasis, supposedly by following birds across the desert. The oracle, Alexander's court historians alleged, confirmed him as both a divine personage and the legitimate Pharaoh of Egypt, though Alexander's motives in making the excursion, following his founding of Alexandria, remain to some extent inscrutable and contested.[17] During the Ptolemaic Kingdom, its Ancient Egyptian name was šḥ.t-īm3w, meaning "Field of Trees".[18]

Evidence of Christianity at Siwa is uncertain, but in 708 the Siwans resisted an Islamic army, and probably did not convert until the 12th century. A local manuscript mentions only seven families totaling 40 men living at the oasis in 1203.

In the 12th century, Al-Idrisi mentions it as being inhabited mainly by Berbers, with an Arab minority; a century before Al-Bakri stated that only Berbers lived there. The Egyptian historian Al-Maqrizi traveled to Siwa in the 15th century and described how the language spoken there 'is similar to the language of the Zenata'.[19]

The first European to visit since Roman times was the English traveler William George Browne, who came in 1792 to see the ancient temple of the Oracle of Amun.[1] Bompiani, in her description of the 19th-century explorer Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti, called this site the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon.[20]

Egyptian sovereignty was confirmed on Siwa by Muhammad Ali of Egypt in 1819. In the spring of 1893, German explorer and photographer, Hermann Burchardt, took photographs of the architecture of the town of Siwa, now stored at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin.[21]

The Siwans are a Berber people, so demographically and culturally they were more closely related to nearby Libya, which has a large Berber population, than to Egypt, which has a negligible Berber population. Consequently, Arab rule from distant Cairo was at first tenuous and marked by several revolts. Egypt began to assert firmer control after a 1928 visit to the Oasis by King Fuad I, who berated the locals for "a certain vice" and specified punishments to bring Siwan behaviour in line with Egyptian morals (see next section). Siwa was also the site of some fighting during World War I and World War II. The British Army's Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) was based here, but Rommel's Afrika Korps also took possession three times. German soldiers went skinny dipping in the lake of the oracle, contrary to local customs which prohibit public nudity.[22] In 1942 while the Italian 136th

Infantry Division Giovani Fascisti occupied the oasis, a tiny Egyptian puppet government-in-exile was set up at Siwa. The oasis makes a brief appearance as a base of the LRDG in the 1958 war film Ice Cold in Alex.

The ancient fortress of Siwa, known as the Shali Ghadi (Shali being the name of the town, and Ghadi meaning "remote"), was built on natural rock (an inselberg) and made of kershif (salt and mud-brick)[1] and palm logs. After it was damaged by three days of heavy rains in 1926[23] it was abandoned for similar unreinforced construction housing on the plain surrounding it, and in some cases those, in turn, have been replaced by more modern cinder block and sheet metal roof buildings. Only one building in the Shali complex has been repaired and is in use, a mosque. Gradually eroded by infrequent rains and slowly collapsing, the Shali remains a prominent feature, towering five stories above the modern town and lit at night by floodlights. It is most easily approached from its southwest side, south of the end of the paved road which curves around from the north side of the Shali. Several uneven pedestrian streets lead from the southwest end of the Shali into it, the ground rent in places by deep cracks. Many of the unreinforced kershif buildings bordering the streets of the Shali are also split by large cracks, or they are partially collapsed.

Other local historic sites of interest include the remains of the oracle temple; the Gebel al Mawta (the Mountain of the Dead), a Roman-era necropolis featuring dozens of rock-cut tombs;[1] and "Cleopatra's Bath", an antique natural spring. The fragmentary remains of the oracle temple, with some inscriptions dating from the 4th century BC, lie within the ruins of Aghurmi. The revelations of the oracle fell into disrepute under the Roman occupation of Egypt.[1]

Climate[edit]

Köppen-Geiger climate classification system classifies its climate as hot desert (BWh),[24] as the rest of Egypt.

hide

Climate data for Siwa

Month Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec Year

Record high °C (°F) 29.3

(84.7) 34.6

(94.3) 41.6

(106.9) 44.8

(112.6) 48.0

(118.4) 48.2

(118.8) 45.2

(113.4) 46.2

(115.2) 42.8

(109.0) 41.9

(107.4) 37.5

(99.5) 29.0

(84.2) 48.2

(118.8)

Average high °C (°F) 19.3

(66.7) 21.5

(70.7) 24.5

(76.1) 29.9

(85.8) 34.0

(93.2) 37.5

(99.5) 37.5

(99.5) 37.0

(98.6) 34.6

(94.3) 30.5

(86.9) 25.0

(77.0) 20.5

(68.9) 29.3

(84.7)

Daily mean °C (°F) 12.1

(53.8) 14.0

(57.2) 17.3

(63.1) 21.9

(71.4) 25.8

(78.4) 29.2

(84.6) 29.9

(85.8) 29.4

(84.9) 27.1

(80.8) 22.8

(73.0) 17.3

(63.1) 13.2

(55.8) 21.7

(71.1)

Average low °C (°F) 5.6

(42.1) 7.1

(44.8) 10.1

(50.2) 13.7

(56.7) 17.8

(64.0) 20.4

(68.7) 21.7

(71.1) 21.4

(70.5) 19.5

(67.1) 15.5

(59.9) 10.2

(50.4) 6.5

(43.7) 14.1

(57.4)

Record low °C (°F) -2.2

(28.0) -1.3

(29.7) 0.3
(32.5) 5.7
(42.3) 7.5
(45.5) 14.0
(57.2) 17.5
(63.5) 15.9
(60.6) 11.7
(53.1) 7.8
(46.0) 2.9
(37.2) -0.7
(30.7) -2.2
(28.0)

Average precipitation mm (inches) 2

(0.1) 1
(0.0) 2
(0.1) 1
(0.0) 1
(0.0) 0
(0) 0
(0) 0
(0) 0
(0) 0
(0) 2
(0.1) 1
(0.0) 9
(0.4)

Average precipitation days (≥ 1.0 mm) 0.3 0.1 0.1 0.2 0 0 0 0 0 0.1 0.2 1.0

Average relative humidity (%) 56 50 46 38 34 33 37 41 44 50 56 59 45.3

Mean monthly sunshine hours 230.7 248.4 270.3 289.2 318.8 338.4 353.5 363.0 315.6
294.0 265.5 252.8 3,540.2

Source 1: NOAA[25]

Source 2: Climate Charts[26]

show

Climate data for Siwa Oasis / Markaz Siwa

Culture[edit]

The traditional culture of Siwa shows many unique elements, some reflecting its longstanding links with the isolated Oasis life and the fact that the inhabitants are Siwi Berbers. Until a tarmac road was built to the Mediterranean coast in the 1980s Siwa's only links with the outside world were by arduous camel tracks through the desert. These were used to export dates and olives, bring trade goods, or carry pilgrims on the route which linked the Maghreb to Cairo and hence to Mecca.[29]

As a result of this isolation, Siwis developed a unique natural culture manifested in its crafts of basketry, pottery, silverwork and embroidery and in its style of dress. The most visible and celebrated examples of this were the bridal silver and the ensemble of silver ornaments and beads that women wore in abundance to weddings and other ceremonies.[30] These pieces were decorated with symbols which related to Siwa's history and beliefs and attitudes.[31]

The best known of these pieces is a huge silver disc called 'adrim' and a torc, called 'aghrav' from which it hung over the breast. A girl would give up the disc at a special ceremony in the Spring the day she was married. The jewelry, which was made by local silversmiths, consisted of silver necklaces, earrings, bangles, hair ornaments, pendants, and many rings.[32] For a wealthy woman, the full ensemble could weigh as much as five or six kilos. These pieces are decorated with symbols common to Berber people across North Africa designed to promote good health, fertility and to protect the wearer from misfortune. Some of the same signs and patterns are found on the embroidery which embellishes women's dresses, trousers, and shawls.[33]

Siwi people are very religious so on Ramadan, they tend to close all the shops and stay at home for the whole month.[citation needed]

Art and local customs[edit]

The arrival of the road and of television exposed the oasis to the styles and fashions of the

outside world and the traditional silver ornaments were gradually replaced by gold. Evidence of the old styles and traditions are however still in evidence in the women's embroidery and costume.[34] The material for the "tarfutet", the distinctive all-enveloping shawl worn by women, are brought from outside the Oasis, specifically from the town of Kirdasa, in the Giza Governorate.[35]

Festivals[edit]

Like other Muslim Egyptians, Siwis celebrate Eid al-Fitr (Ifid ahakkik, "the Little Eid") and Eid al-Adha (Ifid azuwwar, "the Big Eid"). Unlike other Egyptians, however, on Id al-Adha Siwis cook the skin of the sheep (along with its innards) as a festival delicacy, after removing the hair.[36] They also eat heart of palm (agroz).[37]

The Siyaha Festival (Eid El Solh - Eid El Hasad), in honour of the town's traditional patron saint Sidi Sulayman, is unique to Siwa. (The name is often misunderstood as a reference to "tourism", but in fact predates tourism.), it is known that there was On this occasion Siwi men meet together on a mountain near the town, Gabal Al - Dakrour, to eat together, sing chants thanking God, and reconcile with one another; all Siwi houses co-operate in preparing and cooking food, in this day Siwian people eat Fattah (Rice, toasted bread and meat), after Dohr prayer (12:00 PM) all Siwian youth gather to set the banquet, nobody is allowed to eat before the caller announces to start eating so they can all eat together, the women stay behind in the village, and celebrate with dancing, singing, and drums. The food for the festival is bought collectively, with funds gathered by the oasis' mosques,[38] celebrations last for 3 Qamari days, and in the early morning of the fourth day, siwian men form a big march, while holding flags and singing spiritual songs, march sarts from Gabal El - Dakrour and ends in Sidi Solayman square - in the center of Siwa - declaring ending of festivals, and beginning of a new year without hatred or grudge, and with love, respect and reconciliation.

Siwi children traditionally also celebrated Ashura by lighting torches, singing, and exchanging sweets.[39] Adults' celebration was limited to the preparation of a large meal.[40]

Relations with the Bedouins[edit]

Siwans are preferentially endogamous, only rarely marrying non-Siwans.[41] Nonetheless, Bedouin brides command a higher brideprice in Siwa than Siwan ones.[42]

According to older members of the Awlad Ali Bedouins, the Bedouin relations with Siwans were traditionally mediated through a system of "friendship", whereby a specific Siwan (and his descendants) would be the friend of a specific Bedouin (and his descendants). The Bedouin would stay at the Siwan's house when he came to Siwa, and would exchange his animal products and grain for the Siwan's dates and olive oil.[43]

Siwa's Berbers are close to 30,000 in number.[44][45]

The hot springs are an attraction to visitors.[46]

Siwan homosexual tradition[edit]

Siwa is of special interest to anthropologists and sociologists because of its historical acceptance of male homosexuality and even rituals celebrating same-sex marriage - traditions that the Egyptian authorities have sought to repress, with increasing success, since the early twentieth century.

The German Egyptologist Georg Steindorff explored the Oasis in 1900 and reported that homosexual relations were common and often extended to a form of marriage: "The feast of marrying a boy was celebrated with great pomp, and the money paid for a boy sometimes amounted to fifteen pounds, while the money paid for a woman was a little over one pound." [47] Mahmud Mohammad Abd Allah, writing of Siwan customs for the Harvard Peabody Museum in 1917, commented that although Siwan men could take up to four wives, "Siwan customs allow a man but one boy to whom he is bound by a stringent code of obligations." [48]

In 1937 the anthropologist Walter Cline wrote the first detailed ethnography of the Siwans in which he noted: "All normal Siwan men and boys practice sodomy...among themselves the natives are not ashamed of this; they talk about it as openly as they talk about love of women, and many if not most of their fights arise from homosexual competition....Prominent men lend their sons to each other. All Siwans know the matings which have taken place among their sheiks and their sheiks' sons....Most of the boys used in sodomy are between twelve and eighteen years of age." [49] After an expedition to Siwa, the archaeologist Count Byron de Prorok reported in 1937 "an enthusiasm [that] could not have been approached even in Sodom... Homosexuality was not merely rampant, it was raging...Every dancer had his boyfriend...[and] chiefs had harems of boys". [50]

In the late 1940s a Siwan merchant told the visiting British novelist Robin Maugham that the Siwan women were "badly neglected", but that Siwan men "will kill each other for boy. Never for a woman", although as Maugham noted, marriage to a boy had become illegal by then. [51] The Egyptian archaeologist Ahmed Fakhry, who studied Siwa for three decades, observed in 1973 that "While the Siwans were still living inside their walled town, none of these bachelors was allowed to spend the night in the town and had to sleep outside the gates...Under such circumstances it is not surprising that homosexuality was common among them....Up to the year 1928, it was not unusual that some kind of written agreement, which was sometimes called a marriage contract, was made between two males; but since the visit of King Fu'ad to this oasis it has been completely forbidden...However, such agreements continued, but in great secrecy, and without the actual writing, until the end of World War II. Now the practice is not followed." [52]

Despite the multiplicity of sources for these practices, the Egyptian authorities and even the Siwan tribal elders have attempted to repress the historical and anthropological record. When the Siwa-born anthropologist Fathi Malim included reference to Siwan homosexuality (especially a love poem from a man to a youth) in his book *Oasis Siwa* (2001), [53] the tribal council demanded that he blank out the material in the current edition of the book and remove it from future editions, or be expelled from the community. Malim reluctantly agreed and physically deleted the passages in the first edition of his book, and excluded them from the second. [54] A newer book, *Siwa Past and Present* (2005) by A. Dumairy, the Director of Siwa Antiquities, discreetly omits all mention of the famous historical practices of the inhabitants. [55]

Economy[edit]

Agriculture is the main activity of modern Siwa, particularly the cultivation of dates and olives. Handicrafts like basketry are also of regional importance. [1]

Tourism has in recent decades become a vital source of income. Much attention has been given to creating hotels that use local materials and display local styles.[56] One of the main attractions is the use of eco friendly materials and practices in the design of hotels throughout Siwa.

Archaeology[edit]

In the mid-20th century, Egyptian archaeologist Ahmed Fakhry worked at Siwa (and elsewhere in the Western Desert).

In 1995, Greek archaeologist Liana Souvaltzi announced that she had identified one alleged tomb in Siwa with that of Alexander the Great. The claim was put in doubt by George Thomas, then general secretary of the Greek Ministry of Culture, who said that it was unclear whether the excavated structure was even a tomb or its style Macedonian, while the fragments of tablets shown did not support any of the translations provided by Souvaltzi.[57]

An extremely old hominid footprint was discovered in 2007 at Siwa Oasis. Egyptian scientists claimed it could be 2–3 million years old, which would make it the oldest fossilized hominid footprint ever found. However, no proof of this conjecture was ever presented.[58][59][60]

In late 2013, an announcement was made regarding the apparent Archaeoastronomy discovery of precise spring and fall Equinox sunrise alignments over the Aghurmi mound/Amun Oracle when viewed from Timasirayn temple in the Western Desert, 12 km away across Lake Siwa. The first known recent public viewing of this event occurred on 21 March 2014 during the spring Equinox.[61]

In popular culture[edit]

Siwa Oasis is an official map for Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory which belongs to North Africa Campaign.[62] The fifth mission from the game Sniper Elite III takes place on the Siwa Oasis.[63] Siwa is prominently featured in Assassin's Creed: Origins and is the birthplace and home of protagonist Bayek.[64] In British author Anthony Horowitz's Alex Rider series, the ninth and eleventh instalments Scorpia Rising and Never Say Die feature Siwa.

Gallery[edit]

Panoramic view of Siwa Oasis

Mud-brick houses in the old town of Shali

Clay houses of old Shali town

Old walls near the temple

Siwa salt lake

Cleopatra's bath (Cleopatra's pool)

Mosque at Aghurmi

Desert rock formations on the outskirts

View through the Temple of the Oracle of Amun to Gebel el-Dakrour

Sand dunes in the desert near Siwa Oasis

A panoramic view of the Siwa Oasis in 2005

See also[edit]

List of cities and towns in Egypt