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Florian Plit

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY
OF THE FARAFRA OASIS (EGYPT) BY A TEAM
FROM THE INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES
AT THE FACULTY OF GEOGRAPHY
AND REGIONAL STUDIES OF WARSAW UNIVERSITY

Abstract: During January and February 2004, an interdisciplinary group from the Institute of Developing Countries at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of Warsaw University spent time at the Farafra Oasis in Egypt, observing changes in resource management and transformations in the society. The aim was to compare the results with those of earlier studies conducted in 1993.

Key words: Farafra Oasis (Egypt), interdisciplinary studies, preliminary notes.

During January and February 2004, an interdisciplinary group from the Institute of Developing Countries at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of Warsaw University spent time at the Farafra Oasis in Egypt, observing changes in resource management and transformations in the society. The aim was to compare the results with those of an earlier study conducted in 1993 by a team of population, settlement and agriculture geographers, economists, sociologists and political scientists. Qasr el-Farafra was a small town at the time, in the vicinity of which the first developments in New Valley were just beginning to be realized. Only several years earlier a paved road from Cairo had been built, regular bus service to the capital began and the first tourists started to arrive. Janusz Gudowski directed the research efforts, which yielded a series of publications (in *Miscellanea Geographica* 6, 1994, 185–220, as well as Gudowski, Plit, 1995 and Puchnarewicz 2003).

A second team subsequently visited the oasis only recently, in late January and early February 2004.¹ The short but intensive stay at the oasis

¹ The participants included: Anna Dudek (environmental studies), Zofia Dulcka (geography), Maria Giedz (journalism), Izabella Krajewska (geoecology), Izabella Łęcka (medical geography/geography of the Arab World), Mirosław Mularczyk (settlement geography), Joanna Plit (cartography/geoecology, Polish Academy of Sciences), Florian Plit (arid land management/desertification), Marcin Solarz (political sciences), Ewa Szulc-Dąbrowiecka (geography of tourism/regional geography), Krzysztof Trzciniński (political sciences), Władysław Żakowski (archeology/egyptology).

and work done by two-person crews made it possible to note significant changes but also the persistence of other elements over the last 11 years. This transformation was greatly influenced by the fact that shortly after the study in 1993 Qasr el-Farafra was officially recognized as a municipality and became a significant administrative center of the New Valley Governorate. The observations are as follows:

1. Qasr el-Farafra has enjoyed considerable land area growth, paired with a change in the physiognomy of the settlement. Housing construction is spreading to new areas, exemplified by new buildings such as the seat of the governor's representative, a school, hotels and a fire station. This has caused the shift of the center of activity of the oasis. Currently, the transit road is definitely the main axis of the oasis, while new development projects are planned on the east side of the oasis. This is understandable considering that the development of settlements on the west side of the oasis is restricted by its gardens. The square adjoining the mosque at the edge of the gardens has lost its importance. Apart from holy days, the square has become a peripheral area and the mosque itself looks humble in comparison to other buildings. New mosques and madrasas have sprung up, but they are not large buildings.

2. While the population increase in Qasr el-Farafra itself isn't great (it is not much greater than what could be expected as the result of natural population growth), the number of inhabitants in new surrounding villages has increased considerably. The population of Qasr el-Farafra is currently 4 000 inhabitants (compared with 2 400 in 1986), but for the entire oasis, that figure is currently at 17 000 inhabitants. Qasr el-Farafra is a center from which people emigrate from Qasr el-Farafra to large cities, but now there is a greater immigration from cities such as Cairo, because jobs are being created in the administration and service sectors. The newly arrived constitute an increasingly large segment of the population. No serious conflicts were observed, which is most likely due to the following factors: a) there is no shortage of jobs for the locals, b) the locals own farmland in the oasis and thus retain their privileged status, c) the services provided by the new arrivals improve the standard of living for the locals (esp. concerning health care and schooling). Yet, it isn't rare to come across prejudice against the newly arrived.

3. The number of people in Qasr el-Farafra having more than one source of income is increasing. Clerical workers, and even a hotel owner, own farms outside of the traditional garden district, roughly 5 to 15 km outside of Qasr el-Farafra. Farmers meanwhile take up clerical jobs, a nursing attendant works on the side as a folk musician giving spur-of-the-moment performances, a few families work on the side crafting souvenirs etc. This development of occupational diversification makes contacts between different groups of people in Qasr el-Farafra possible.

4. Tourism, which in 1993 was only in its initial stages, has developed tremendously in Qasr el-Farafra. The increase in the number of tourists has contributed to the creation of new jobs (estimated at roughly 100, including part-time employment) and the development of entrepreneurial activity, as

well as an increase in the affluence of the inhabitants. On the other hand however, it seems that the tourists live somewhat at the margin of the oasis community. Most often, they pass through it while in transit, stopping there for one or two nights at most. They visit a museum run by Badr, a local artist, and make a trip to the White Desert. In 1993 there were much fewer tourists, but they visited longer, sat at length at the local eateries and spent a lot of time in the palm gardens from which they are nearly absent today.

5. One can observe a definite breaking down of the oasis's isolation. This is tied on the one hand to the fact that many new communities and even individual homesteads are being created on the newly-irrigated land in the vicinity, and on the other hand to the fact that establishing contact with "the rest of the world" is becoming easier, as evidenced by the improved state of the public roads, the increased number of cars, phones, mail services, satellite television and even public toilets and the internet.

6. The revolutionary changes in Qasr el-Farafra have brought about the construction of new electrical generators providing electrical energy around-the-clock, as well as the still ongoing construction of a water and sanitation system.

7. Agricultural practices in the traditional garden area near the mosque have not undergone significant changes. Resource management and agricultural organization have remained almost unchanged. The small foggara east of Qasr el-Farafra is also still functioning. The same small piece of land which it irrigates is still being cultivated, although its days appear to be numbered, as the lands marked for development are encroaching upon it. The surrounding area has undergone enormous changes however. Groundwater has been tapped there, new irrigation systems have been constructed, new villages have been built and new land has been taken into cultivation. Transience is often the feature of these farm fields however – in many cases, excessive irrigation causes the soil to become marshy and salty. In effect, some fields come to be used as pastures while others lie fallow, what is immediately compensated by taking new land into cultivation. Fields at the edges of marshy areas, as well as by the branching canals outside of the main garden complex, also serve as pastures. The emergence of pastures has resulted in the increase of cattle stock.

All in all, one should conclude that the changes which have taken place over merely 11 years are very considerable and significantly greater than what had been expected. The results of the observations conducted in the Farafra Oasis are currently being analyzed and will be published in the future.

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