

In Alexander's Footsteps

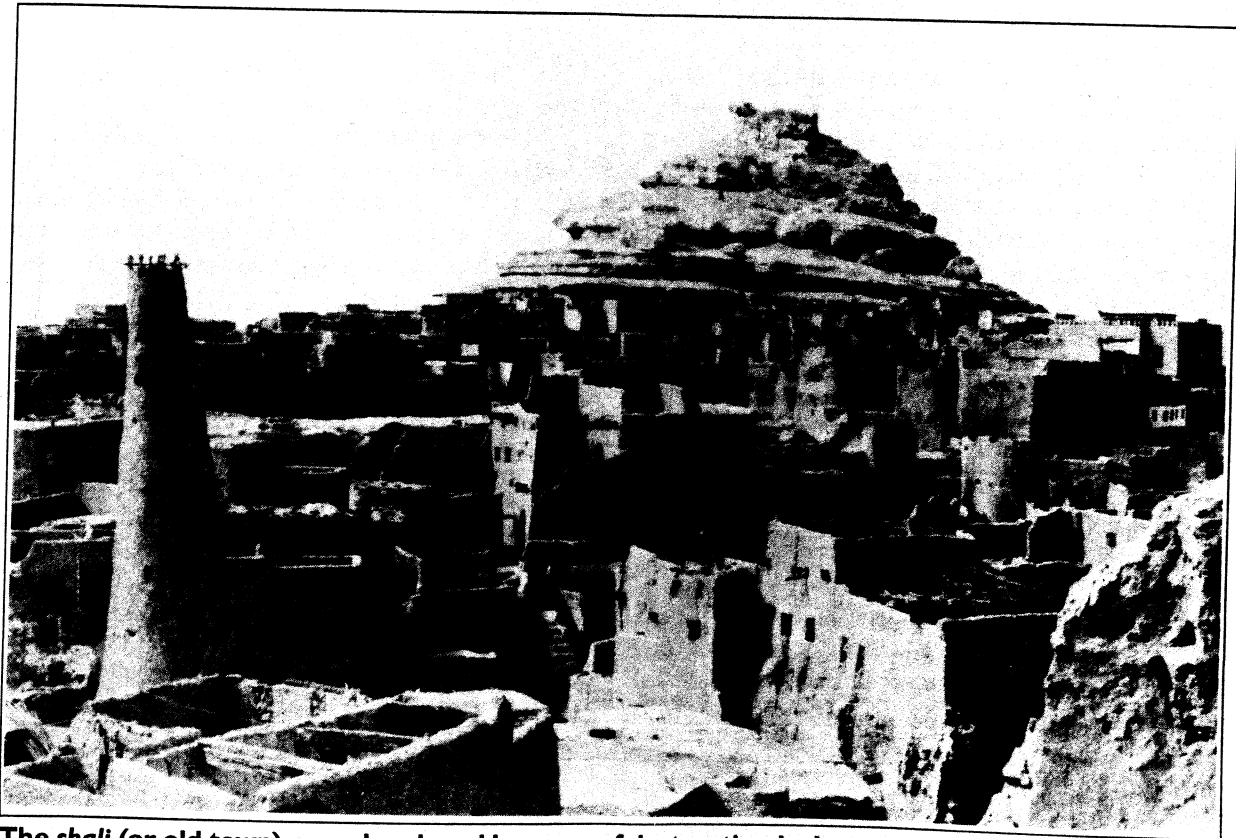
Siwa Today

by David Thorstad

NESTLED IN THE SANDS of the Libyan Desert, 300 kilometers southwest of the nearest town, Marsa Matruh, on the Mediterranean coast of western Egypt, lies a unique place of otherworldly landscapes and fierce cultural pride. Siwa Oasis's character of has been marked as much by its isolation as by its past status as a stopover for slave caravans and pilgrims on their way to Mecca, and by its Oracle of Amun, which made it renowned throughout the ancient world.

Siwa is not on the agenda of most visitors to Egypt, who are content to spend three or four days whizzing through a few of the Pharaonic-era ruins along the Nile and never meet an ordinary Egyptian. In 1988, only 7,000 tourists made it to Siwa; fewer than 8,000 in 1989. Awesome though the Pyramids and the monumental ruins of Egypt's ancient past are, however, Siwa offers special rewards to those willing to rough it. The oasis is not developed for tourism and is accessible only by bus or car via the road from Marsa Matruh (a five-hour trip). Its few hotels are only a notch above camping out, which may be why it is mostly young people looking for adventure who make it there. Because of its proximity to Libya, a military permit is required. The permit used to take up to ten days to acquire, but with a recent relaxation of tensions can be obtained in Marsa Matruh in fifteen minutes.

The several thousand inhabitants of the oasis are Berbers, not Arabs, and speak their own language, Siwi. Many of their ancient customs persist because of the extreme isolation of the oasis (from 160 AD to 1792, a period of more than 1,600 years, no European set foot there).



The shali (or old town) now abandoned because of destruction by heavy rains

The population was decimated over the centuries by Arab and Bedouin raids, so that when the present-day village of Siwa was built in 1203 AD, only forty men and seven families (approximately 200 people) from the original inhabitants remained. Could that small gene pool explain the frequency with which one sees albinos at Siwa?

The old village is an anthill-like acropolis, known as a *shali*, constructed on a hill out of the salt-impregnated mud that is abundant on the oasis and that is cement-like when dried. Siwa lies eighteen meters below sea level, and since it lacks a modern irrigation system, the water from its 300 or so springs accumulates in shallow, barren lakes, leaching salt from the soil. The *shali*, originally designed as a fortress against marauders, has been largely abandoned today, mainly because of the destruction wrought by the rare rainfalls, which wash the structures away. The last rainfall was in 1985. But the *shali* looms over the town as an imposing relic of its past.

Sexes apart

The traditional sexual customs of the Siwans set them off from most other cultures, including the Egyptian. Strict segregation of the sexes is maintained and male homosexuality (between men and adolescent boys, rather than between adult men or between young boys) is accepted.

Once married, around age sixteen (earlier in the past), a woman is confined to the home; all public activities, including shopping, are done by the males. If a woman does appear in public, she is covered from head to toe, for no man's eyes except her husband's are to see her face. By the time she is eighteen, a Siwan woman may have been divorced more than once.

It is not uncommon to see a woman being transported somewhere by a male family member in a *carreta* (donkey cart), the only way besides walking to get around on the oasis. Only male donkeys are used—female donkeys are kept in a separate place on the oasis

Siwa Oasis at a glance

Population: circa 6,000 (5,169 in the census of 1966)

Race: Berber, mixed with Bedouin and Black African

Geography: 18 meters below sea level
length: 82 kilometers
width: 9 kilometers in the west, 28 kilometers in the east

Main crops: dates, olives

Language: Siwi, Arabic

Religion: Muslim (one Coptic Christian family in 1990)



Siwan youths

in order to prevent women from seeing a male donkey in a state of sexual excitement.

Probably the most striking feature of Siwan sexuality is the traditional practice of men lending their sons to other men. Prior to 1928, this was sometimes accompanied by a written agreement (known as a "marriage contract"), a dowry (much greater than the dowry for a girl), banquets, and celebrations. In that year, however, King Fuad visited Siwa and forbade the practice. Despite the prohibition of both Islam and the state, the practice continued, though in secrecy.

In 1945, King Farouk made his way to Siwa and, according to the archaeologist Ahmed Fakhry, inquired "if it were true that the Siwans still practiced a certain vice." The sheiks of Siwa "bent their heads, none uttered a word; and they left the rest house without receiving any presents."¹

One investigator earlier in the century claimed that male children were preferred because they cost less to raise than girls, and that the boy was "a very fruitful source of profit for the father, not for the work he does, but because he is hired by his father to another man to



be used as a catamite. Sometimes two men exchange their sons. If they are asked about this, they are not ashamed to mention it."²

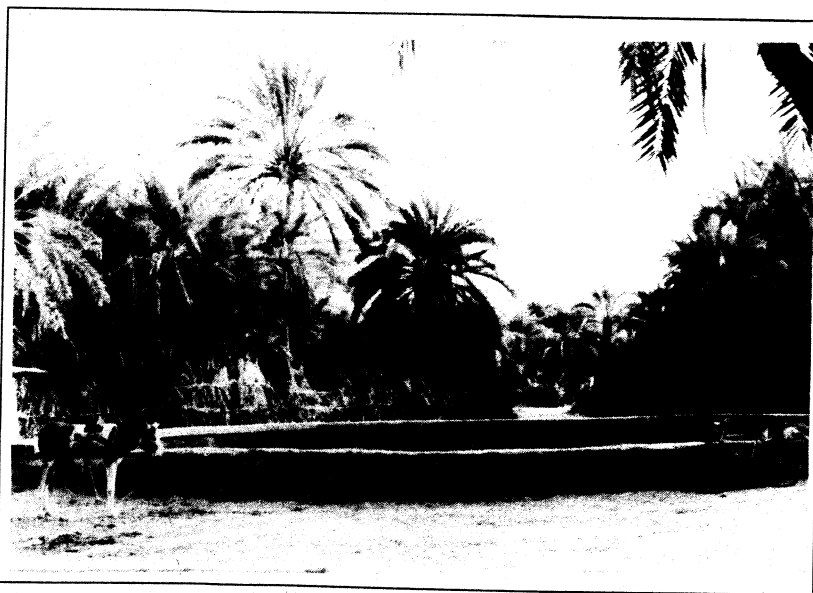
Homosexual liaisons are primarily a phenomenon of the *zaggalah*, a special class of unmarried young laborers between the ages of twenty and forty who work in the fields and gardens of landowners during the day, and served as guards by night. When the *shali* was still inhabited, they slept outside its gates. This enabled them to function as watchmen and prevented them from having sexual access to the women.

The *zaggalah* spend their leisure time partying, singing, dancing, and drinking *labgi*, the fermented juice of the date palm. Fakhry attended many such parties:

Their gayest parties are those held in the evenings when they get very drunk and begin to dance in a circle. Each one puts a girdle around his waist and another above his knees and moves round and round, jerking his body, leaning forward and putting his hands on the shoulder of the man in front of him. The musicians sit in the middle, or at one side, and the dancers are supposed to sing together, but in their excitement one

hears shouts and shrieks as if they were wounded animals. It does not take long before the onlookers observe that some of the dancers come very close to those in front of them and the dance turns into erotic movements.³

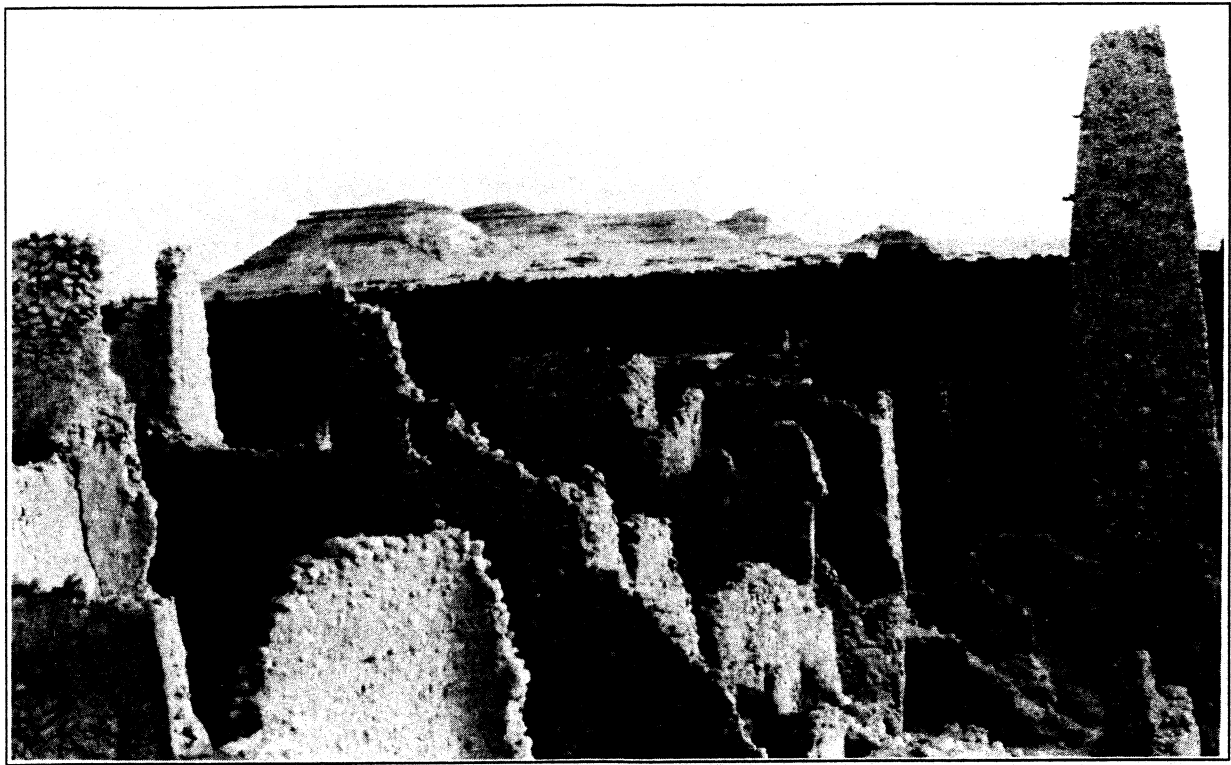
One prominent Siwan I met, a sociologist, told me that both pederastic marriage and the drinking of the intoxicating *labgi* continue to this day, despite the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism in Egyptian society. He warned, however, that if I were to ap-



A natural spring-fed swimming pool and bath at Siwa

"AMONG THE SIWANS of Africa . . . all men and boys engage in anal intercourse. They adopt the feminine role only in strictly sexual situations and males are singled out as peculiar if they do not indulge in these homosexual activities. Prominent Siwan men lend their sons to each other, and they talk about their masculine love affairs as openly as they discuss their love of women. Both married and unmarried males are expected to have both homosexual and heterosexual affairs."

— Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (1951), pp. 131-133



A view of the shali at Siwa



A salt lake on the outskirts of Siwa

proach any of the old men in the village and inquire about homosexuality, they would stop talking to me. Homosexuality may be ingrained in the culture, but it is something the locals neither readily discuss nor indulge in with outsiders.

Nevertheless, one encounter hinted at the homoeroticism that persists. One-and-a-half kilometers from Siwa village is a sunbaked hill known as the Mountain of the Dead. It is an Egyptian-Roman necropolis, where bones poke through the sand and several excavated tombs can be visited. (The top of the hill has been commandeered by the army; because of its proximity to Libya, Siwa has a heavy military presence.)

At the end of my visit, the guard, a man in his thirties or forties who knew a few phrases in English (more than I knew in Arabic), asked if I and my friend were married. We said we were not, that we didn't believe in marriage, and—to make sure he understood that we were gay—gestured that we were married to each other. The guide was not married either. "Marriage is very bad," he volunteered—a surprisingly candid observation to hear in Egypt! I sensed a kindred soul, but the language barrier frustratingly prevented further exploration.

One Egyptian District Commissioner, who spent a long time with the Siwans from 1917 on, wrote: "They are not immoral, they simply have no morals. . . . They seem to consider that every vice and indulgence is lawful."⁴

Siwan males—boys as well as men—are very friendly, but perhaps no more so than other Egyptian males. Younger boys may even seem flirtatious. The boys are attractive, very much at ease with men—after all, public life is a male domain. It was refreshing to be in a place where man-boy contact is considered normal, even when sexual—in stark contrast to the hysteria that labels such contact "child abuse" in the United States!

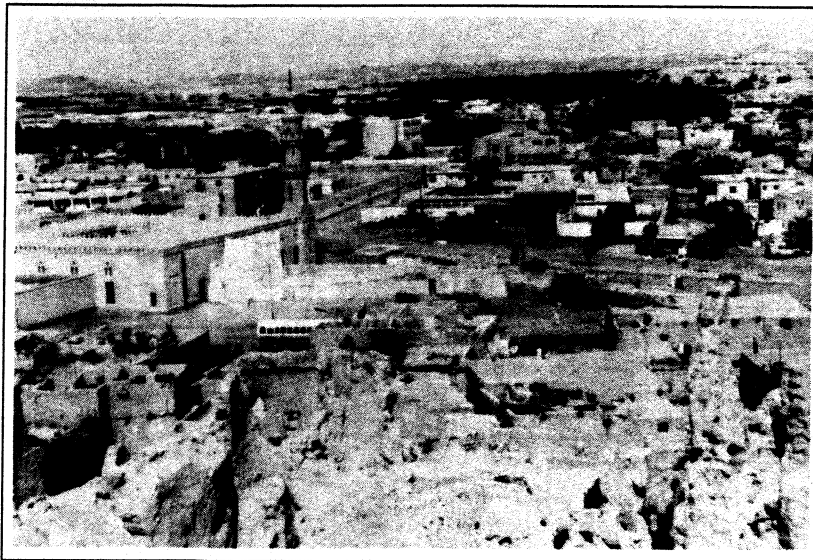
Everywhere boys are involved in productive activity. They can be seen transporting material or people by *carreta*. One boy in his *carreta* spontaneously assumed a sexy (almost campy) pose for his photograph. A young man, obviously mentally retarded, who was having trouble getting his donkey to drink when it was clearly thirsty, was gently and cheerfully aided by other males—Siwa is a society where everyone can make a contribution.

Alexander the Great was here

Siwa's most illustrious moment in history came in 331 BC, with a visit by Alexander the Great. Alexander had recently conquered Egypt, and had just laid the foundations for his namesake city Alexandria. He had long had a reverence for the Oracle of Amun in Siwa. His mother had told him that he was the son of the god Amun, who had come to her in the form of a serpent.

The Temple of the Oracle in Aghurmi, four kilometers from Siwa village, was built in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (663-525 BC). Today it is in ruins, but the walls still stand. Much excavation remains to be done.

According to Callistenes, Alexander's court historian, the young king met alone with the oracle, telling his retinue to wait outside. What he asked is not known. He wrote to his mother that he had received certain private answers, which he would relay to her when he saw her again. But he died eight years later, in 323 BC,



A view of Siwa from the *shali*



The Temple of the Oracle at Aghurmi. Alexander the Great visited it in 331 BC

at age thirty-three, without having seen her. He took his secret with him to the grave. No other ruler of Egypt was to visit Siwa until 1904. The worship of Amun continued in Siwa until after the sixth century.

Shortly before his death, Alexander had requested that he be buried near his father Amun in Siwa. But was he?

This much is known: he died in Babylon, was taken to Egypt and mummified in the Egyptian manner. His body was met in Palestine by Ptolemy, his satrap in Egypt. But by the time the procession reached Memphis, Ptolemy insisted that Alexander be buried in Alexandria, the city he had founded. He had a stela erected at the temple in Siwa, which was still standing when Pausanias visited in the second century AD.

But his body has never been found. In the summer of 1989 Greek archeologists were digging in Siwa in hopes of finding it. If it is ever discovered, it would be one of the richest finds in archeological history.

Near the Temple of the Oracle are the ruins of another Amun temple, dedicated to the ram-headed deity closely associated with Egypt's sun god Amun and with Zeus. Only part of one wall remains standing after an Egyptian official blew up the temple in 1897 and cannibalized its stones for the staircase of the police station and for his own house.

The future?

Siwa is a fragile culture on the brink of momentous change. It is now possible to make in six hours the same trip that took Alexander eight days. Daily bus service links the remote oasis with Marsa Matruh. The paved road makes it much less likely that one will get

“ONE INFORMANT SAID, ‘All normal Siwan men and boys practice sodomy.’ The investigator, Walter Cline, reported that his informant, after questioning some sixty Siwan men, found that fifty-nine had engaged in homosexual activity.”

—Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (1976), p. 31



lost or buried in a sandstorm—a common danger in the past, when entire armies were swallowed up by the shifting sands. Siwan males are now exposed to the outside world through military service. Even women sometimes make the trip to Marsa Matruh. Television has arrived. The skill of making silver jewelry—so crucial to marriage observances—has already been lost. The jewelry is now imported from Alexandria.

In nearby Dakrou village, there is electricity (two or three bulbs for the entire village), but the generator goes off after 8 or 9 pm. The nighttime desert sky there, which stretches from horizon to horizon, is spectacular.

Siwa's greatest challenge may come from a new road that is being built across the desert from Giza (outside Cairo). This will eliminate the two or three day detour via Alexandria and Marsa Matruh, and make Siwa into a side trip from the capital. As of January 1990, only seventy kilometers remained to be built. If an upscale hotel is built, Siwa will no longer be the same.

In addition, with improved relations between Egypt and Libya, Libyans are also arriving. Some Siwans fear

that by paying baksheesh to the Egyptian authorities, Libyans may begin to buy up the land in Siwa. Families have lived on the land for hundreds of years with no paper title, which makes them vulnerable to corrupt schemers in a society where cor-

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ruption is a way of life from the highest levels on down.

The Siwan sociologist considered the Siwans trapped in a police state against which they were too weak to defend themselves. Referring to corrupt Egyptian officials, he claimed that "According to the Koran, you should cut off the hand of anyone who steals, and if he does it again, you should cut off the second hand. If this procedure were followed, none of the Egyptians would have hands."

One can only hope that in the face of the encroachments of the outside world, the Siwans will manage to preserve their unique culture. If they fail, it will be humanity's loss as much as theirs. ♦

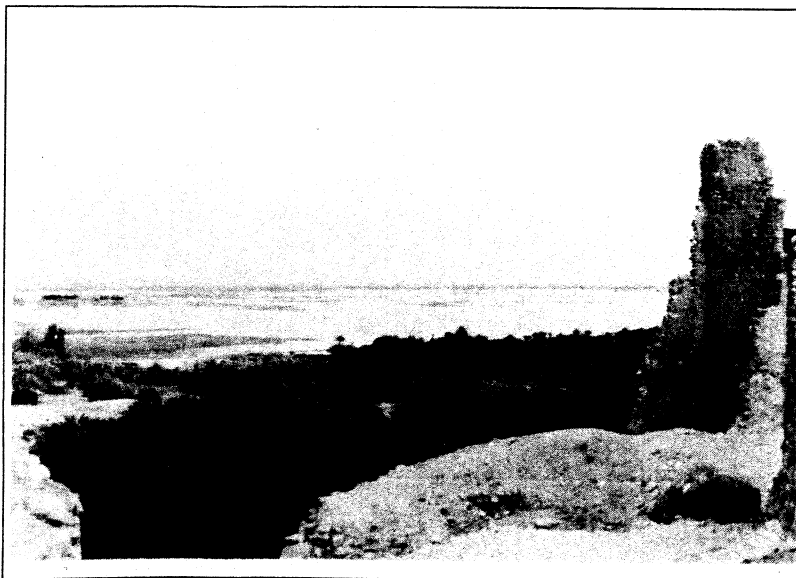
Notes

¹ Ahmed Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt* (Vol. I: *Siwa Oasis*) (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1973 [reprinted in 1982, but again out of print]), p. 122.

² Mahmud Mohammad Abd Allah, "Siwan Customs," *Harvard Africa Studies*, I (1917), p. 7.

³ Fakhry, p. 43.

⁴ C. Darlymple Belgrave, *Siwa: The Oasis of Jupiter Amon* (London: 1923), pp. 149, 150.



A salt lake seen from the shali at Aghurmi