

## THE OASIS PAPERS 7





DAKLEH OASIS PROJECT MONOGRAPH 25

# THE OASIS PAPERS 7

## Studies on Late Roman to Modern Egypt in Honour of Fred Leemhuis

edited by

Gillian E. Bowen, Colin A. Hope,  
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with the assistance of

Bruce E. Parr

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## Editorial Note

The papers in this volume are offered as a tribute to Fred Leemhuis (1942–2021) by his friends and colleagues and cover a diverse range of topics that we hope would have interested him. The volume has been incorporated into *The Oasis Papers* series of the Dakhleh Oasis Project because of Fred's close association with the Project.

It has been numbered 7 in the series to fill a lacuna. With it, The Dakhleh Oasis Project begins a new partnership with Archaeopress to publish its monographs, and which we look forward to being a fruitful one.

The Editors





# Fred Leemhuis

## Biography

Frederik Leemhuis was born on 2 May 1942 in Zuidbroek, a village to the east of Groningen – the jewel of the North – as the eldest of five children. He had three sisters and a brother. Fred lived in Zuidbroek until he was six years old and then moved to Groningen as his father, who was in the military, was posted at the army base in the city. In Groningen, Fred went to a Dutch Reformed primary school. This might have influenced his wish to become a missionary, and his parents allowed him to go to the equally protestant Willem Lodewijk Gymnasium (grammar school) for this reason. At first, he was mostly interested in exact subjects, like chemistry, but later, languages took his attention too.

At the age of fifteen, he moved with his family to another city, Kampen, where he went to the Johannes Calvijn Lyceum (John Calvin), a grammar school with very small classes, between 10 and 20 pupils. There was a possibility to take Hebrew as a secondary subject with a famous Hebraist and Fred liked this subject very much. When he went to the University of Groningen, he chose chemistry, but went on studying Hebrew as a secondary subject. Chemistry quickly became boring to him, because he felt it was expected of him to write reports on experiments according to the textbook and not based on what he saw. He decided to switch to Hebrew, which in Groningen had to be studied along with other Semitic languages like Arabic. This enabled him to apply for a scholarship in Egypt, where he studied in 1964 and the first half of 1965. He enjoyed his time there, during the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser, very much, and made Arabic his main subject.

After returning to The Netherlands, he finished his studies in 1967 *cum laude* and went on to work as an assistant. In 1969, he got a permanent job at the University of Groningen. It was during this period that Fred met his future wife, Vreni Obrecht, who is Swiss, whom he married in 1968. His two sons, Rob and Benni, were born in 1970 and 1972. At the university, Fred started his research for his dissertation. After leaving the first theme he worked on, as all authors writing on the subject appeared to have copied one another, he turned to a grammatical topic, ‘The D and H Stems in

Koranic Arabic: A Comparative Study of the Function and Meaning of the Fa’ala and ‘Af’ala Forms in Koranic Usage’. He obtained his PhD *cum laude* in 1977, when he already worked in Cairo.

Fred worked at the University of Groningen for most of his life, mainly in the Faculty of Arts and, by the end of his career, in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. From the start of the 1980s he was associate professor at the Semitic Institute. In 2003 he was appointed professor by special appointment for Islam, with special attention to the study of the Qur’an. He was, among other functions, a member of the first University Council after the democratisation of the University, president of the Faculty Council and president of the financial commission of the faculty. As the Institute of Semitic Languages was small and had to fight for its survival, his involvement in the administration of the university was a strategic asset when it came to being in the know about developments that might concern the institute.

If asked what the highlights of his career were, Fred would certainly mention his three periods as director of the Netherlands Institute (later: the Netherlands Flemish Institute) in Cairo. The first time he moved with his family to Egypt was from 1975 to 1979, during the presidency of Anwar Sadat and the run-up to the peace accord of Camp David with Israel. He went back with Vreni from 1991 to 1995, when the Institute had grown much, both in the number of staff and of students and scholars who came to study or do research. It was at this time, in 1993, that he made his first trip to Dakhleh, where he would return often later. In 2010 and 2011, Fred went back to Cairo for a few months to replace temporarily the director in charge, who was on leave.

Fred’s scholarly work gravitated around the study of the Qur’an, the Hadith and Tafsir, the exegesis of the Qur’an, with excursions into curiosities like the Arabic script found on early Italian Renaissance paintings, of Giotto in particular, or a publication on religious guidance concerning *djinn*s. His most important work is undoubtedly the translation of meaning of the Qur’an into Dutch in 1989. This translation is still widely in

use and highly regarded in the Dutch-speaking Muslim community. It was Fred's aim to enable Muslims, in particular second-generation Moroccans, to read the Qur'an in understandable language, while at the same time being dogmatically correct. His work on the translation gave Fred a platform in the media, which he used to increase the understanding of Islam in Dutch society at large. After 9/11, he would often speak out against the growing Islamophobia in the Netherlands. For his role in furthering the dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, Fred was appointed Officer in the Royal Order of Orange-Nassau in 2006.

Besides being a linguist, Arabist and Semitist, Fred had lots of other interests, like drawing and painting when he was young, and wood cutting. Later, he became adept at building musical instruments: he made a little *qanoun*, different fiddles, a kalimba, a cantele and a banjo. His loftiest dream was making a harpsichord, a dream which was never to be fulfilled, at first because of a lack of time and later due to his bad eyesight. He also made furniture, for instance for the 'house' at 'Ain al-Gindi in Dakhleh Oasis. Also book binding was something he liked to do. He sang in choirs in Cairo and Groningen and furthermore, his nasi goreng was very much liked in Dakhleh.

The fact that Tony Mills asked him to work for the Dakhleh Oasis Project in 2001 added a new facet to his life, one which united quite a lot of his interests, and working there on the restoration of mud-brick monuments like *Bayt al-Qadi* made him very happy. And he happened to discover the wall of the Roman fort in al-Qasr! A happy coincidence is that the Dutch meaning of his surname, Leemhuis, translates to clay house or mud-brick house in English. When asked by Dakhlawis why Fred liked working on mud-brick houses, he just replied that his name means *bayt at-teen*, mud house. The Dakhlawis immediately understood.

The opportunity to work together with people of many nationalities in the country which he loved from a young age was very much to his liking. A foundation in his name has been started in order to continue working for the Qasr Dakhleh Project, with his successor, the archaeologist Paul Kucera from Melbourne, Australia, with whom Fred co-operated for many years on the Qasr Dakhleh Project.

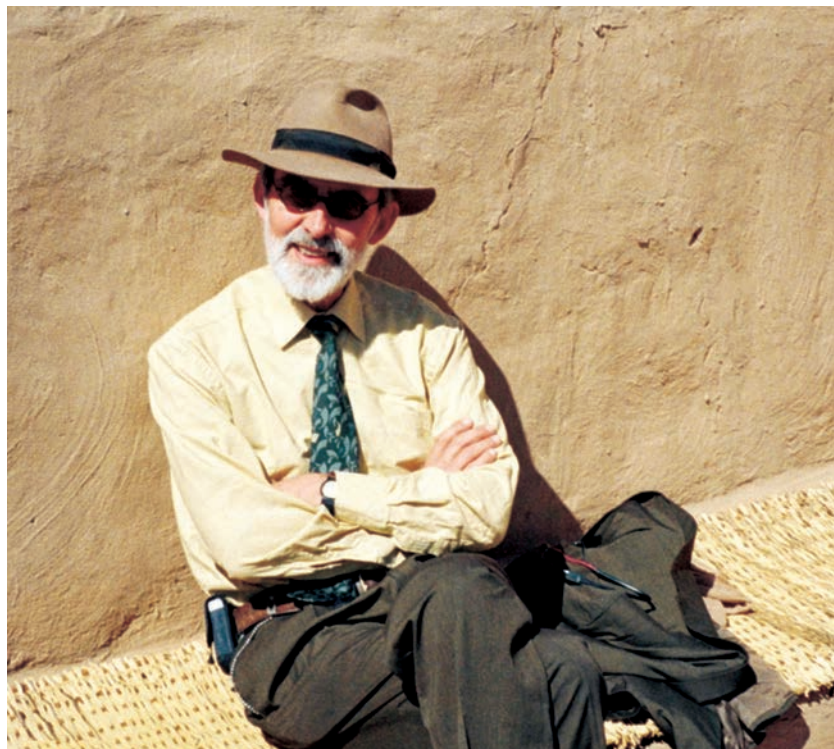
Vreni, Rob and Benni Leemhuis



Fred Leemhuis (© Vreni Leemhuis).



*Fred at al-Qasr in front of the Roman wall (© Vreni Leemhuis).*



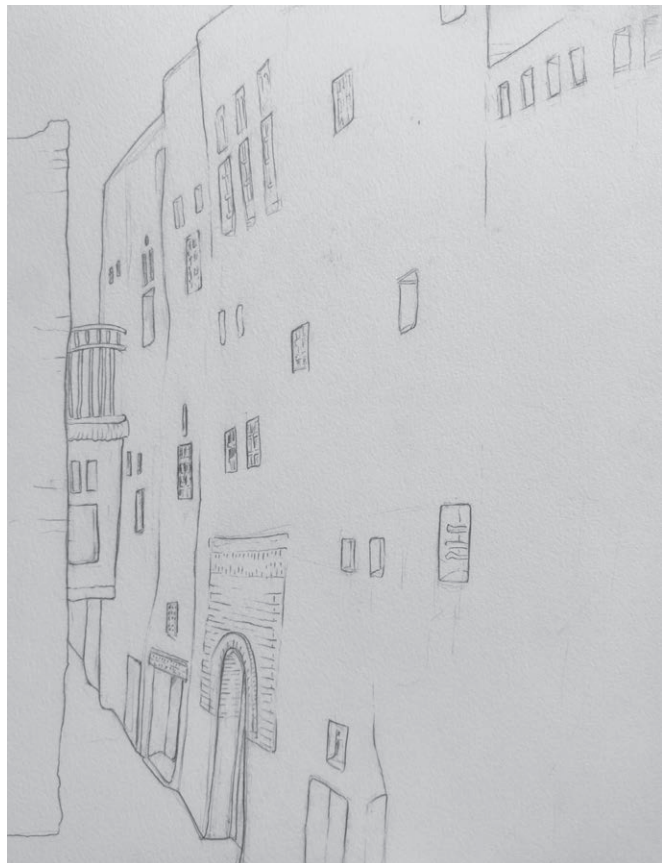
*Fred relaxing at the dig house, 'Ain al-Gindi (© Anthony Mills).*





*'After a difficult day at Bait el Khady',  
al-Qasr, Dakhleh Oasis, 2003*

*Pastel on paper  
John O'Carroll*



*'Bait el Khady',  
al-Qasr, Dakhleh Oasis, 2005*

*Pencil sketch  
John O'Carroll*

## Qasr Dakhleh Project

Professor Fred Leemhuis came to the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) while we were still in Ezbet Bashendi, at the eastern end of the oasis. By the time he joined us annually, we were moved to our present house outside Mut. One of the Netherlands' foremost Arabic scholars, Fred has had a deep interest in Egypt's cultural traditions since he was a student at Groningen University and in Cairo and eventually became Professor of Arabic at Groningen University. Twice for four years each time, Fred was the director of the Netherlands/Flemish Institute in Cairo. He was the first to translate the Qur'an into the Dutch language. It was with our great joy and relief that he offered to undertake restoration works in the medieval centre of the town of Qasr al-Dakhila.

It was immediately agreed that he join the DOP and while he agreed, he maintained a bit of independence by styling his work as 'Qasr Dakhleh Project'. The DOP is interested in all the history of the oasis, from earliest prehistoric times down to the present. A large part of our remit has always been in the whole history and development of the settlement in the oasis, but without a specialist in the latest phase – the Islamic – it had been incomplete. Fred filled this final gap.

Fred remained with us for more than a decade and undertook the restoration of, first the *Bayt al-Qadi* and subsequently, the *Bayt al-Qurashi*, two adjoining buildings in the central part of the older part of the town. The former, with its fascinating complex of rooms, was completely refurbished and views from the roof terraces are quite spectacular. Important documents from the second house have given an insight into domestic and economic life of al-Qasr in the Ottoman period, with a large collection of domestic documents and personal letters.

During this restoration, Fred began training a restoration assistant, Rizq Abdalhay Ahmad, who became the restorer for the Coptic and Islamic branch of the Antiquities Service and who continues to act as such. In addition, Fred discovered, by way of friendly chatting, a group of workmen who remembered how these houses were made and they became a specialist team engaged as foremen in the restorations. Fred's

background included several family members who were organ builders and quite a number of the north German and Dutch churches were fitted with organs built and installed by them. These instruments require a great amount of detailed fitting and Fred was, by breeding, a man with a capacity for great attention to detail as well as practical skills.

Al-Qasr is famous for a series of carved wooden lintels. These lintels are found over the entrances to well over a hundred of the buildings and date from the 16th to 19th centuries. Locally carved, these announced the name of the house owner together with a religious text. Fred found a carver who could still cut these inscriptions and had one made to fit over the entrance to our dig house, a lasting memorial to his participation with the DOP. Fred always had had the ambition to see the two restored houses re-inhabited. He added a water supply to the buildings which had never had running water in the past. This requires special building techniques as the usual construction in al-Qasr is in mud brick, a material easily attacked by water. This Fred accomplished, although local people are still reluctant to inhabit buildings with such alterations. However, the problem was overcome because the entire site is classified as an ancient monument and in Egypt nobody is permitted to dwell in a listed ancient monument.

Fred's exploration of this older part of al-Qasr paid another major dividend one day when he was looking at some architecture behind the two restoration houses project. Some of the bricks exposed at the surface of the ground did not seem quite right to Fred. They were a bit too large and fat for his medieval domestic builders. Indeed, they turned out to be Roman bricks and sections of walls in which they were used were identified elsewhere the site. This was the undiscovered Roman frontier fort, *ta kasta*, which had been known from classical texts for several years.

Fred was a 'good camper'. As soon as we settled at 'Ain al-Gindi in our present house, Fred established himself in a pair of rooms – one for sleeping and one for work – in a convenient place converting them to his purpose. His participation in the communal aspects of camp



*The Carved Wooden Lintel above the Entrance to our Dig House; designed and installed by Fred Leemhuis  
(photo: Paul Kucera).*

life were also popular and we all looked forward to his evenings of nasi goreng, a filling Indonesian dish, which he made, bringing various exotic ingredients from home or from Cairo. His supply of jeneva seemed limitless, particularly Ketel 1, and he was always generous with it. Fred will be greatly missed. His happy

manner, knowledgeable conversations, his creative additions to our camp, but principally his deep knowledge of Arabic and the history and customs of Egypt have been a revelation. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have had him as a colleague.

Anthony J. Mills

## Remembering Fred Leemhuis

In November 2021, the Dakhleh Oasis Project lost one of its longstanding and much cherished researchers, Professor Fred Leemhuis. He passed away at the age of 79 after a short period of illness. As scholar of Arabic and Islam, Leemhuis was a faculty member at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands throughout his career, the first three decades as Associate Professor of Arabic at the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East and since 2003 as Professor of Islam and Qur'anic studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. During this lifetime of research, much of Leemhuis' academic and personal areas of interests revolved around Qur'anic studies, in the widest sense of the word. His publications covered topics from Qur'anic linguistics to the origins and forms of Qur'anic exegesis, as well as Biblical figures in the Qur'an.

In the Netherlands Leemhuis gained recognition on two fronts in particular. First of all, he translated the Qur'an into Dutch. This translation has been praised for its readability and its faithfulness to mainstream works of Qur'anic exegesis. It was published by Het Wereldvenster in 1989 as *De Koran: een weergave van de betekenis van de Arabische tekst in het Nederlands* and has been reprinted numerous times since then. As expert on the Qur'an, Leemhuis also gained a reputation as an interpreter of Islam for the Dutch media. Especially in times of heated debates between Islamophobic politicians and Dutch Muslims, Leemhuis was often called on for calm and objective statements about the Qur'an. This much needed societal engagement went hand in hand with research into more obscure and at times frivolous topics, such as the Islamic legal conundrum as to whether one can marry a jinn (see for example, *Épouser un djinn? Passé e present, Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 11, 1993: 179–92) and the question as to which Arabic texts served as models for Italian Renaissance painters who depicted pseudo-Kufic texts on halos and garments (Heiligenscheine fremder Herkunft: arabische Schriftzeichen in Aureolen der italienischen Malerei des frühen fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts, *Der Islam* 77, 2000: 286–306).

Besides Qur'anic studies, the focal point of Leemhuis' interest in the Islamic world was Egypt. He spent two

four-year periods in Egypt at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo. He was director of this institute twice. His first stint there was from 1975 to 1979, during which he and his Swiss wife, the translator Vreni Leemhuis-Obrecht, enjoyed the adventure of bringing up two toddlers in a bustling Middle Eastern city and an arabophone environment. Many years later, in 1991, the family returned to Cairo for a second period of directorship. The nineties were a dynamic time, when the institute underwent renovations and the course offering for visiting students was greatly increased. Many will fondly remember Fred's effective directorship during this time. With his charisma and humour, he managed to build bridges between the visiting professors, the students and the local staff, and he forged lasting scholarly exchanges and friendships with scholars from other European institutes around the city. During these years, Leemhuis befriended Nasr Abu Zayd, whose modernist interpretations of the Qur'an fascinated him. For Abu Zayd this was an unfortunate time, as he was being accused by fundamentalist clerics of being an apostate. Under pressure to divorce his wife, Abu Zayd sought help from Leemhuis and other Dutch friends, who ultimately arranged a professorship for Abu Zayd in the Netherlands. With his son Rob, Leemhuis translated a collection of Abu Zayd's essays on Islam and modernism into Dutch (Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid, *Vernieuwing in het islamitisch denken: een wetenschappelijke benadering*, uit het Arabisch vertaald en ingeleid door Fred Leemhuis en Rob Leemhuis, Bulaaq, Amsterdam, 1996).

In the early new millennium, Leemhuis' career took an unexpected turn, when he became involved in the Dakhleh Oasis Project as director of the subproject on the medieval houses of al-Qasr. He became one of the few permanent Islamicists in the Dakhleh Oasis Project, to which he contributed with his expertise in Arabic and Islam and with his inexorable determination to restore and research the town. In 2002, he spent his first two-month period researching the town of al-Qasr in the north-west of the oasis. In the following years he was one of the steady forces behind the restoration of the town, for which he actively sought to raise funds, while simultaneously

assisting and co-ordinating the efforts of the conservation team to rebuild some of the historical multi-story mud-brick houses. The so-called *Bayt al-Qurashi*, the Qurashi House, turned out to be the jewel in the crown of this branch of the Dakhleh Oasis Project. During his second season at Dakhleh, Leemhuis discovered a treasure trove of hundreds of documents there, dating from the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries (see for example: The Dakhleh Oasis Project, the discoveries and conservation work being done in the old town of Qasr Dakhleh, *Ancient Egypt* 8 (4), 2008: 44–50). This house of an important local family was abandoned suddenly – in all likelihood because of a sudden collapse. Inside its numerous household objects and texts were left behind. Their preservation gives us insight into daily life in the Egyptian desert during these later centuries of the Islamic era, for example through written agreements about water management, tax bills, apotropaic texts and copies of the Qur'an. Several fascinating documents provide us with glimpses of the challenges women faced in their marriages. The decisions of local judges reveal that at times they gave

permission for divorce from an absentee husband. From among several interesting studies of such texts, one may mention the chapter that came to be Leemhuis' last publication: 'The letters of Hasan 'Abd Allah Ahmad to his mother Halima 'Uthman and others: Glimpses into the life of a divorced woman in the Qurashi family of Qasr Dakhleh in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (in *Dust, Demons and Pots: Studies in Honour of Colin A. Hope*, Peeters, Leuven, 2020: 469–80). Throughout his retirement years, Leemhuis continued to be involved in the Dakhleh Oasis Project. Together with his wife Vreni, who was also member of the conservation team, he visited the area virtually every year in late winter. His deep connection to the oasis was an expression of his love for Egypt whose people he admired for their spirit, humour and joie-de-vivre. May his spirit in turn continue to imbue the Dakhleh Oasis Project members with enthusiasm and inspire new generations of archaeologists, conservationists and historians.

Barbara Roggema  
University of Florence, Italy  
(student of Fred Leemhuis, 1988–1995)



## Working with Fred Leemhuis

I first met Fred when the Embassy of the Netherlands in Egypt, where I was Senior Policy Officer for Culture and Development, decided to put funding into Fred's restoration project: the mud-brick houses in Qasr al-Dakhila, back in 2006. If I remember correctly, it was the first funding agreement for the houses, and I had only been in the job for a little more than two weeks. The whole thing was a bit overwhelming, not in the least because it was all very new to me while everyone else at the embassy seemed to know exactly what they were doing. But we managed, and as it turned out, it was the beginning of a long co-operation. And a beautiful friendship!

There were many special moments with Fred over the years, especially when he went in full 'Arabist' mode to fix whatever was going wrong at that particular moment. Or to use events in practical ways. The list is long and has a wide range but my all-time favourite is the project visit to Dakhleh in 2008, with the then ambassador Tjeerd de Zwaan. Apart from being a great help during the preparations, Fred decided – on the day we arrived – that this would be a good occasion to have a 'grand opening', or rather unveiling, of the new

lintel placed over the door of one of 'his' houses – an exact replica of the missing one but with the small addition of his own name, that is, as he was known locally: Doctor Farid Abu Ibneen. A huge shower-curtain was placed in front of the door and, while the company enjoyed the contents of a crate of lemonade, the ambassador did his duty with an impromptu speech – luckily this was an ambassador with a good sense of humour. After the festivities we continued our way to the dig house, but not without another brilliant Fred moment. Water had been off for several days before we arrived so, making full use of the ambassador's presence, we made a stop at the local governorate building where Fred made a passionate plea to explain the utterly improper situation of having an ambassador staying at a house with no water. Needless to say, the water was working when we arrived at the dig house 15 minutes later. Even more needless to say, Fred never announced the departure of the distinguished guests. The water worked till the end of the season and we had a very pleasant stay, enjoying some of Fred's favourite 'jenever'.

Anja van de Put

# An Appreciation of Fred Leemhuis

The Egyptian oases, with their long history, have witnessed many people who played a major role in uncovering their secrets and historical and cultural treasures. Among these is Professor Fred Leemhuis, who contributed greatly through his academic and practical activities for many years searching to safeguard and reveal the history of Qasr al-Dakhila. He was primarily an Islamicist who turned his hand to archaeology and restoration. He uncovered many documents describing the lives of the people of the oases and their activities. He was one of the pre-eminent authorities in his field of specialisation, and the best of those who mixed and mingled with the people of the oases in thought and in language. We ask God that he be in a better place, and may his soul be at peace.

Many thanks, Professor Fred Leemhuis!

Maher Bashandy Amin  
former General Director of Antiquities of Dakhleh  
Sabry Yusuf Abd ar-Rahman  
Researcher of Egyptian Antiquities

List of those recording their respect to the memory  
of Fred Leemhuis

Iain Gardner  
Maxine Kleindienst  
Remke Kruk  
Szymon Maslak  
Peter Nanninga  
Frans Oort  
Barbara Roggema  
Petra M. Sijpesteijn  
Ursula Thanheiser  
Gunter Vittmann  
Willeke Wendrich  
Klaas Worp  
Adam Zielinski

## Publications of Fred Leemhuis

- 2020, The Letters of Hasan ‘Abd Allah Ahmed to his Mother Halima ‘Uthman and others: Glimpses into the Life of a Divorced Woman in the Qurashi Family of Qasr Dakhleh in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, in A. R. Warfe *et alii* (eds) *Dust, Demons and Pots: Studies in Honour of Colin A. Hope*, Peeters, Leuven: 469–80.
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