Published from 1950 to 2004, *Postilla* short papers are based on original scientific research by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History’s curatorial divisions, staff and research associates, and their colleagues, in the natural science disciplines represented by the collections of the Yale Peabody Museum’s curatorial divisions.

Full text of *Postilla* numbers 1 through 232 are available for download at peabody.yale.edu.

Yale University provides access to these materials for educational and research purposes only. Copyright or other proprietary rights to content contained in this document may be held by individuals or entities other than, or in addition to, Yale University. You are solely responsible for determining the ownership of the copyright, and for obtaining permission for your intended use. Yale University makes no warranty that your distribution, reproduction, or other use of these materials will not infringe the rights of third parties.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.
A NATURAL HISTORY STUDY OF KURKUR OASIS, LIBYAN DESERT, EGYPT. IV. THE VEGETATION

by

LOUTFY BOULOS

NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTRE, DOKKI, CAIRO

In the first paper of this series, Reed (1964, p. 13-18) gave a history of exploration and scientific research at Kurkur Oasis. Reviewing the reports of these studies one finds notes on occasional observations on the plant life of the area, e.g. Willcocks 1899 (p. 6), Ball 1902 (p. 23, 40), Hurst 1910 (p. 268), Cuvillier 1934 (p. 349) and 1935 (p. 138, 139), Shata 1962 (p. 298) and Butzer 1964 (p. 128). The present paper presents an account of the vegetation of this region as well as that of a few of the surrounding areas.

Kurkur is a small uninhabited oasis; it lies at latitude 23° 54' N and longitude 32° 19' E, about 62 km southwest of Aswan and about 55 km west of the Nile at Dabud (fig. 1). The oasis occupies what seems to be the confluence of three wadis joined

in the form of the letter Y (fig. 2). These are the upstream parts of Wadi Kurkur which extends eastward till it meets the Nile River at Dabud.

The area is practically rainless; the mean annual rainfall recorded at the nearest meteorological station of Aswan is 3 mm. This mathematical mean is misleading. The rainfall is not an annually recurring phenomenon but an accident that may happen once every decade. The main source of water for the oasis is seepage along a line that seems to follow the direction of the northwest wadi. The plant growth indicates the line of seepage, the geological basis for which has been described by Butzer (1964). The three wells reported by the various visitors to the Kurkur
oasis (Reed, 1964; Butzer, 1964) are associated with an area where the plant growth is remarkably dense.

The vegetation of this area was studied during the period of

![Kurkur Oasis and surrounding area map](After Murray 1939)
9-21 December 1964. Notes were also made on the plant growth of a smaller affluent of Wadi Kurkur (3 km south of the oasis) and on a part of the road between Kurkur and Dungul, 20-40 km south of Kurkur.

Kassas and Imam (1954, p. 424) defined the term wadi as a dried riverbed in a desert area. A wadi may be transformed into a temporary water course after a heavy rain. Each wadi has a main channel and branched affluents. Kassas (1953, p. 256) summarized the features of desert wadi vegetation as follows: “The organization of the plant community is a permanent framework of perennials, the interspaces of which are occupied during the spring by the ephemerals... The vegetation is subject to seasonal changes resulting from differences in growth form of component species, and the seasonal changes of the climate... Another type of vegetational change is the accidental modification due to exceptionally wet or exceptionally dry years.”

In Egypt, wadis are much more abundant in the Arabian (Eastern) Desert than in the Libyan (Western) Desert. In the latter, oases are occasionally present but are practically unknown from the Eastern Desert.

It is thus obvious that a typical desert wadi vegetation is dependent upon rain water. According to the above definition, Wadi Kurkur is not a typical desert wadi but rather an oasis since its main vegetation is supported by groundwater and not by rain. However, the upstream parts of the affluents of wadi Kurkur represent typical wadi vegetation, being more dependent on rainfall.

THE OASIS

The oasis proper is a part of the wadi bed covered by dense growth of plants with groves of dom palms and date palms, and patches of reeds around the wells (fig. 3). There are a number of wells, which are mostly silted; two of these “wells” are permanently open; each is actually a small shallow pool surrounded by reeds (fig. 4). Within the area of the oasis the water table is high.

The plant growth around a well is organized into: a ring of reeds (Typha australis), (fig. 4) and/or Phragmites communis, (fig. 5), followed by a ring zone of rush (Juncus arabiicus), a further and more extensive zone of halfa grass (Desmostachya
Fig. 3. General view of the Oasis of Kurkur showing the dense growth of reeds and the wells (where the man is standing). Note the groves of dom palms and date palms, with camel-thorns and halfa grass on the higher ridges.

*bipinnata*, and an outer zone of a mosaic of *D. bipinnata* and camel-thorn (*Alhagi maurorum*). In the vicinity of one of the wells there is a patch of *Imperata cylindrica*, a halfa grass similar in appearance to *D. bipinnata*. The growth of *Desmostachya bipinnata* forms a floor carpet of the wadi bed with a cover ranging from complete cover in the central part to lesser cover on the sides. This green carpet is studded by dom palms (*Hyphaene thebaica*) and date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*); the former are more numerous. In the central part of the oasis there is a single bush of tamarisk (*Tamarix nilotica*) near one of the wells.

What has formerly been a dense mass of dom palms in the center of the oasis (fig. 6) is now a desolate scene of dying trunks (fig. 7), the result, according to our Bedouin guide, of a fire
Fig. 4 Reeds (*Typha australis* and *Phragmites communis*) growing around one of the wells in the oasis.

started in the autumn of 1964, a few months before the visit of the writer. The oasis has no permanent inhabitants, but is occa-
Fig. 5. *Phragmites communis* growing around one of the wells. Associated species are: *Typha australis*, *Juncus arabicus* and *Desmostachya bipinnata*. In the background dom and date palms are seen.

Sionally visited by nomads who find in the wadis of the area some *Acacia* wood which they use for charcoal making, halfa grass
Fig. 6. The central mass of dom palms at Kurkur Oasis, March, 1963, before they were burned.

Fig. 7. Clump of burned dom palms in Kurkur Oasis, December, 1964.
Fig. 8. Fresh green pasture of halfa grass (*Desmostachya bipinnata*) appearing in the burned areas. Note also camel-thorns (*Alhagi maurorum*) and scattered fruits of dom palm.
(Desmostachya bipinnata) for their animals, and dates and dom- 
fruits which they collect and sell in the Aswan market together 
with the charcoal. When such visitors come to the oasis they may 
set fire to the dried Desmostachya growth, a practice which causes 
the production of some fresh foliage of this halfa grass and pro-
vides some green pasture for their animals (fig. 8). The fire may 
catch the palms by accident.

NORTHWEST WADI

The northwest wadi may ecologically and geomorphologically 
be divided into two sections: a downstream section deeply cut 
across the limestone plateau with a clearly defined channel bounded 
by cliff sides (figs. 9 and 10), and an upstream section with an

Fig. 9. Rich growth of Alhagi maurorum in the entrance of the 
northwest wadi. Note the patches of Zygophyllum coccineum and scattered 
individuals of Acacia raddiana (tree) and A. flava (bush).
ill-defined shallow course on the surface of the plateau. In the latter section the course of the wadi is often lost amidst extensive areas of plant growth. The whole wadi runs along what seems to be a seepage line which feeds the plant growth that obviously would not be found otherwise in this rainless country.

The downstream section (near the confluence with the oasis proper) is characterized by a carpet of *Alhagi maurorum* with patches of bean caper (*Zygophyllum coccineum*) and a distant open scrub of acacia trees (*Acacia raddiana*) and bushes (*A. flava*), (fig. 9). This rich growth of *Alhagi* indicates a copious supply of subsurface water. As one continues up the wadi, the part shown in fig. 9 is followed by a less moist part shown in fig. 10, where the vegetation consists of open *Acacia* scrub with the undergrowth dominated by *Zygophyllum coccineum*; the other species is prickly clover (*Fagonia parviflora*). This vegetation-type is typical of desert wadis which receive occasional rains or run-
Fig. 11. A hillock formed of sand mixed with dead remains of *Tamarix amplexicaulis*. Note the *Acacia raddiana* tree and, in the foreground, the undergrowth of *Zygophyllum coccineum*. In the distant background dry *Fagonia parviflora* are also to be seen.

off from higher ground, and the situation would seem to indicate a local blockage of the seepage. In the distant background of fig. 10, a few palms may be seen. This part of the wadi seems to indicate a subsurface supply of water deeper than the central part, near the wells, and is also characterized by a number of hillocks formed of sand mixed with dead remains of *Tamarix amplexicaulis* (fig. 11). These are evidently relics of phytogenetic hillocks built around the growth of *Tamarix*. The presence of *Tamarix amplexicaulis* hillocks in this area as well as in Dungul oasis may be attributed to former more humid climatic conditions which are no longer existing. Similar hillocks of *Tamarix mannifera* and *T. aphylla* were recorded by Girgis (1965) in the deltaic part of Wadi Qena in the Eastern Desert. In the vicinity of the hillocks of *Tamarix amplexicaulis* there is an extensive patch of rosin weed (*Cressa cretica*), indicating saline soil.

The upstream section has an eastern part which may be described as halfa grass country (*Desmostachya bipinnata*) and a western part as a camel-thorn country (*Alhagi maurorum*) with *Acacia* scrub. There is a sterile expanse between these two parts. Fig. 12 shows the grassland growth of *D. bipinnata* on shallow
Fig. 12. A general view of the upstream extension of the northwest wadi on the plateau showing the grassland growth of Desmostachya bipinnata on shallow sheets of sand overlying the limestone plateau.

Fig. 13. A sand hill covered and stabilized by the growth of Desmostachya bipinnata.
Fig. 14. The plant growth of *Alhagi maurorum* and *Acacia raddiana* on sandy hills. Associated species are *Desmostachya bipinnata* and *Acacia flava*.

Fig. 15. The thin cover of *Zygophyllum coccineum* in the upstream part of the north wadi.
sheets of sand overlying the surface of the limestone plateau. In this part there are extensive sand hills covered and stabilized by the growth of this halfa grass (fig. 13). Fig. 14 shows the plant growth in the *Alhagi maurorum-Acacia raddiana* country. These two types of plant growth indicate a subsurface supply of water, as contrasted with desert plants which might survive on water from rare sporadic rains.

NORTH WADI

The mouth of the wadi is about 600 m to the north of the northern well of the oasis. The vegetation-type of the central part of the oasis expands, though in a thinner form, into this mouth. In this part there is a rather dense scrub of *Acacia raddiana* and *A. flava* with occasional dom palms and a rich undergrowth of *Zygophyllum coccineum*. Throughout the major part of this wadi the vegetation is essentially an open scrub of *Acacia flava*. In the upstream part the vegetation is a thin cover of *Zygophyllum coccineum* (fig. 15).

Apart from the plant growth within its mouth, the vegetation in the rest of the North Wadi is typical of those desert wadis which receive some water occasionally. It is obvious that this wadi is less favored by seepage than is the northwest wadi.

SOUTH WADI

This wadi is the downstream continuation of the oasis valley and is part of the principal channel of the drainage system (Wadi Kurkur) of which the other two wadis are affluents. The channel of this wadi follows a southern direction for a short distance from the wells of the oasis, then turns and cuts its way across the scarp of the Sin-el-Kidab down to the plain, across which it proceeds east till it meets the Nile.

The vegetation in the part of the wadi extending southward from the wells is the continuation of that of the oasis: dom palm, date palm, *Acacia raddiana* and *A. flava*, with an undergrowth of *Desmostachya bipinnata* and *Alhagi maurorum*. On the peripheral parts of the wadi, *Zygophyllum coccineum* may be abundant.

At the eastward bend of its course the plant growth of the wadi bed suddenly changes into a dense growth of *Phragmites*
communis and Juncus arabicus, with some bushes of Tamarix amplexicaulis. This complex is very similar to the plant growth around the wells of the oasis (though Typha australis is absent). Though this locality has no apparent well, it is obvious that the water table is high.

Further eastward there is a part of the wadi where the bed is covered by large rounded boulders mixed with other deposits. In this part there is an area covered by a dense thicket of Tamarix amplexicaulis (fig. 16). Associated species include Juncus arabicus and Desmostachya bipinnata. The peripheral ridges have lines of growth of Alhagi maurorum following fissures in the rock. Zygo-phyllum coccineum is also present.

The area of Tamarix amplexicaulis represents the eastern limit of the influence of ground water. The remainder of the wadi channel eastward is a typical desert habitat with a sparse plant

Fig. 16. A general view of a part of the south wadi showing the thicket of Tamarix amplexicaulis. Note Juncus arabicus behind the large rounded boulder in the foreground, and date palms and dom palms in the background. On the sides note the growth of Alhagi maurorum.
growth of *Zygophyllum coccineum* and a few widely spaced bushes of *Tamarix* and stumps of dead date palms. In this part there are relicts of dry *Schouwia thebaica*, a desert annual. These are obviously remains of its growth following a previous rain: a rare incident in this nearly rainless desert (see Reed 1964, for a discussion of rain in the Kurkur area).

As the wadi crosses the scarp of the Sin-el-Kidab it follows a shallow and ill-defined course across the plain (Lower Nuba Plain, Shata 1962) for 50 km throughout which the vegetation is a sparse growth of *Zygophyllum coccineum* and *Fagonia parviflora*.

**OTHER OBSERVATIONS**

The vegetation in a small affluent wadi joining the South Wadi at its eastward bend was also studied. The plant growth consisted of a rich cover of *Alhagi maurorum* in the downstream part (confluence with the South Wadi), and an open growth of *Zygophyllum coccineum* and *Fagonia thebaica* var. *violacea* var. nov. (fig. 17)
in the upstream part. It is apparent that the downstream part receives some of the subsurface supply of water whereas the upstream part is typical desert habitat.

The plants were also studied on the limestone plateau on a stretch of the Kurkur-Dungul road, 20-40 km south of Kurkur. The notable feature was the profuse dry remains of the following species: *Farsetia ovalis, Farsetia ramosissima, Monsonia nivea, Fagonia thebaica var. violacea, mignonette (Reseda pruinosa), Bassia muricata, triple-awned grass (Aristida plumosa), Schouwia thebaica* and caltrops (*Tribulus mollis*). These are evidently the remains of a rich ephemeral plant growth which appeared in a rainy year. Living individuals of the following desert perennials were observed: *Acacia flava, Fagonia parviflora, Cornulaca monacantha* and *Salsola baryosma*, whose growth may be explained by the presence of some underground water.

**List of species collected, with some taxonomic remarks**

**Chenopodiaceae**

*Bassia muricata* (L.) Murr.

*Cornulaca monacantha* Del.

*Salsola baryosma* (R. et Schult.) Dandy

**Convolvulaceae**

*Cressa cretica* L.

**Cruciferae**

*Farsetia ovalis* Boiss. This species is treated as a variety of *Farsetia aegyptia* Turra in Täckholm et al., 1956.

*Farsetia ramosissima* Hochst. et Fourn.

*Schouwia thebaica* Webb

**Geraniaceae**

*Monsonia nivea* (Decne) Decne ex Webb
April 20, 1966  Study of Kurkur Oasis Vegetation

GRAMINEAE

Aristida plumosa L.

Desmostachya bipinnata (L.) Stapf

Imperata cylindrica (L.) Beauv.

Phragmites communis (L.) Trin. Several varieties are known of this species, classified according to the breadth of leaves, length of panicle, etc., (Täckholm et al. 1956). In our material both narrow and broad-leaved, short, lax and long, dense-panicled plants were observed growing together.

JUNCACEAE

Juncus arabicus (Asch. et Buch.) Adams.

LEGUMINOSAE

Acacia flava (Forsk.) Schweinf. This species is occasionally attacked by insects which form characteristic long narrow spine-like conical cocoons on the branches. This attack is specific and is not recorded on any other species of Acacia.

Acacia raddiana Savi. Normally this species possesses glabrous branches, leaflets and legumes. Our material is rather hairy; it may represent a hybrid between Acacia raddiana and the pubescent A. tortilis (Forsk.) Hayne.

Alhagi maurorum Medic.

PALMAE

Hyphaene thebaica (L.) Mart.

Phoenix dactylifera L.

RESEDACEAE

Reseda pruinosa Del.

TAMARICACEAE

Tamarix amplexicaulis Ehrenb. According to Täckholm et al. (1956) this species was thought not to occur in the Libyan
Desert or in the Nile region. However, more recently the writer has recorded it from the Nubian Desert, the Nile Valley in Nubia, (Boulos, in press) and from Dungul Oasis (unpublished work).

*Tamarix nilotica* (Ehrenb.) Bunge

**TYPHACEAE**

*Typha australis* Schum. et Thonn.

**ZYGO PHYLLACEAE**

*Fagonia parviflora* Boiss. Täckholm et al. (1956) treat this species as a variety of *Fagonia bruguieri* DC.

*Fagonia thebaica* Boiss. var. *violacea* var. nov.


Holotype in the Herbarium of Botany Department, Faculty of Science, Cairo University (CAI). Isotypes in the Herbaria of Desert Institute, Mataria, Cairo (CAIH) and Department of Biology, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (YU). It may be described as follows: *affinis Fagonia thebaica differt spinis brevioribus et petalis violaceis*.

Our plant looks to be somewhat between *Fagonia thebaica* Boiss. and *F. arabica* L. It has the large hairy capsules of *F. arabica*, but the spines are shorter and the leaflets narrower and fleshy, approaching those of *F. thebaica*. It differs from both by its intensely violet flowers. It is described here as a variety of *F. thebaica*; however, further research may prove that it deserves a higher taxonomic rank (cf. El-Hadidi, in press).

*Tribulus mollis* Ehrenb. ex Schweinf. This species was previously known in Egypt only from the district of Gebel Elba, in southeastern Egypt (Täckholm et al., 1956).
April 20, 1966  Study of Kurkur Oasis Vegetation  21

Zygophyllum coccineum L.

Three complete collections representing specimens of the plants listed above are deposited in the following herbaria:

1. Herbarium of the Botany Department, Faculty of Science, Cairo University (CAI).
2. Herbarium of the Desert Institute, Mataria, Cairo (CAIH).
3. Herbarium of the Department of Biology, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (YU).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was proposed by Professor Charles Reed of the Peabody Museum, Yale University, as a part of a general survey on the Kurkur Oasis carried out by the Yale University Prehistoric Expedition to Nubia. To him the author extends warmest thanks. The author wishes to express his thanks to Professor M. Kassas, Khartoum University, for reading the manuscript and for valuable suggestions; to Professor Vivi Täckholm, Cairo University, for revising the determinations of the plants; and to Mr. Bahay Issawy, Geological Survey, Cairo, for kind hospitality and help at Kurkur. Part of the expenses of the field research were defrayed by support from the Department of Biology, Yale University.

LITERATURE CITED


