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Igai: a little-known deity of Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt.

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Abstract

The scarcity of artefacts and documents attesting the cult Igai justify his classification as one of the more enigmatic deities of the ancient Egyptian pantheon. Nevertheless, his identification as 'Lord of the Oasis' and the presence of his name on artefacts from Dakhleh Oasis, demonstrates the importance of his cult in this region of the Western Desert of Egypt. This article documents the artefacts of the cult of Igai and, via comparison to other deities venerated in the Western Desert, hypothesises the likely aetiology of this god.

Introduction

Igai is a mysterious member of the ancient Egyptian pantheon.¹ His name was most often written incorporating one, or more often, two *was*-sceptres, and he was known to have been venerated from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period and possibly the Ptolemaic Period.² Very little is known about this god, his aetiology or the manner of his veneration, but his epithet 'Lord of the Oasis'³ (Figure 1) demonstrates that he was associated with one or more of the oases located in Egypt's Western Desert. As a result of widespread excavations in the Western Desert, particularly in Dakhleh Oasis, and the recent discovery of a number of Igai-related artefacts, it is now possible to examine the nature of this deity in more detail.⁴

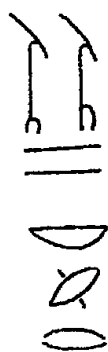


Figure 1. An example of the writing of Igai: 'Igai, Lord of the Oasis'.

The Western Desert of Egypt comprises approximately 681,000 km² of arid, inhospitable desert. Permanent habitation is only possible in the oasis

¹ The author is currently an Adjunct Research Associate of the School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies at Monash University, Melbourne. Many thanks to Associate Professor Colin Hope for his suggestions for my PhD thesis, *The oases of the Western Desert of Egypt during the Third Intermediate and Late Periods: the study of a regional identity* (2009), from which this article developed.

² Fischer 1980: 123; Leitz 2002b, 571.

³ Fischer 1980: 123-124; Leitz 2002b: 571.

⁴ Most recently, Arafa (2005) has provided a non-exhaustive catalogue of artefacts from the Nile Valley documenting the cult of Igai and an analysis of his name, iconography and known epithets.

depressions which encompass thousands of square kilometres and can dip 100 m below the surrounding desert plateau.⁵ The five largest oases of the Western Desert are, from north to south, Siwa, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhleh and Kharga (Figure 2). Dakhleh Oasis is located approximately 800 km south-south-west of Cairo and the site of its ancient capital, Mut el-Kharab ('Mut-the-ruined'), is situated south-west of the modern capital, Mut.⁶ The chief Inspector for Middle Egypt and the Oases, Ahmed Fakhry, systematically explored the region in the 1930s to 1940s and 1960s to 1970s.⁷ Currently the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale and the Dakhleh Oasis Project excavate at multiple sites throughout the oasis.

⁵ Ball 1939: 9-10.

⁶ From Dynasty 5 into the First Intermediate Period and in the New Kingdom Dakhleh Oasis was governed from the settlement of 'Ain Aseel (Giddy 1987: 174-151; Marchand and Tallet 1999; Hope 2001b: 31). From the Third Intermediate Period, however, the oasis capital was located at Mut (Hope 2001a: 60; Hope 2001b: 43).

⁷ Osing *et al* 1982.

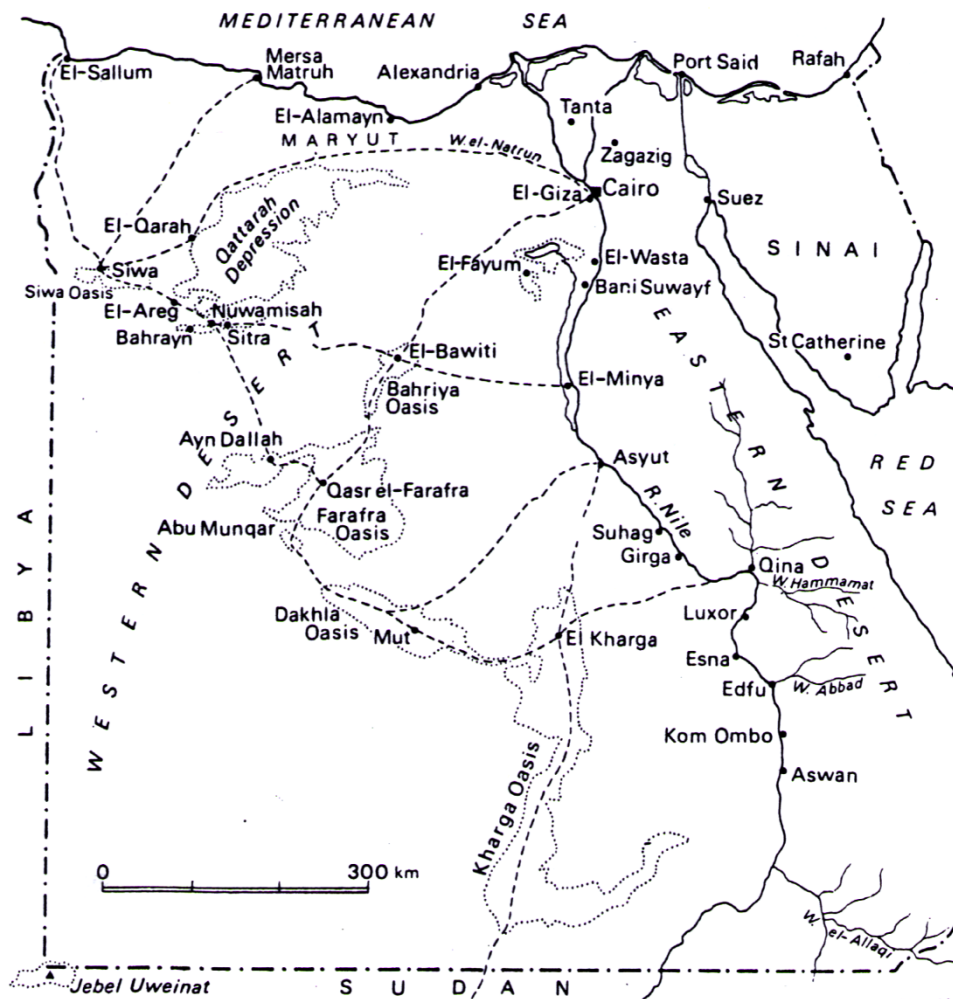


Figure 2. Location of the Oases relative to the Nile Valley.

It is the intent of this article to present and examine the evidence accounting for the cult of Igai in ancient Egypt in order to enable an improved understanding of the nature of this deity and the manner in which he was venerated. A number of artefacts have been recovered from contexts within Dakhleh, and I will argue that the cult of Igai was prominent in this oasis. This investigation includes a comparative analysis of the deities venerated in the Western Desert and, further, an investigation into the possible aetiology of the cult of Igai in this region of Egypt.

Evidence for the veneration of Igai

Old Kingdom

There are so few artefacts documenting the cult of Igai, from both oasis and non-oasis contexts, that it is possible to include all of them in this forum. The first items presented here comprise a series of Old Kingdom inscribed clay tablets excavated from 'Ain Aseel, a settlement site located in the western region of Dakhleh Oasis.⁸ These items document activities associated with the Governor's palace, and several demonstrate the presence of the cult of Igai at this location. Number 5051, a letter, appears to concern a dispute involving a steward named Ankhmededju. It discusses the sacrifice of cattle for this cult, and is particularly significant as it indicates the presence of a temple dedicated to Igai, most likely in the vicinity of the palace.⁹ The clay tablets also demonstrate that the word Igai could be incorporated into personal names such as Igai-hetep. An individual named Meru-Igai is even identified as local priest who was likely associated with the cult of Igai.¹⁰

The site of Khufu Hill, alternatively known as Radjedef's Water Mountain (Chufu 01/01) after the presence of the cartouche of Radjedef/Djedefre, the son of Khufu, is located approximately 60 km south-west of Dakhleh Oasis. It is a small, flat-topped sandstone cone approximately 20 m high, and investigations at its location have uncovered several Egyptian inscriptions, clay seals, ceramics, grinding stones, flints and ostrich eggshell beads.¹¹ The largest and most significant inscription details the exploratory expeditions made by two overseers, Iymery and Beby, in Years 25 and 27 of the reign of Khufu. The text records that they were searching for a substance identified as 'mefat', most likely a pigment mineral powder.¹² This inscription also depicts

⁸ Posener-Kriéger 1975, 1992.

⁹ Posener-Kriéger 1992: 46, 48; Soukiassian *et al* 2002: 358-360.

¹⁰ Fischer 1957: 230-231; Posener-Kriéger 1975: 220; Soukiassian *et al* 2002: 341-342.

¹¹ Kuhlmann 2002: 133-137; Kuper and Förster 2003: 26.

¹² Kuhlmann 2002: 133-137; Bergmann 2003: 22.

Igai, the most prominent figure, adjacent to the serekh of the king (Figure 3).¹³ The iconography of the god, standing while holding a *was*-sceptre, identifies him as Igai.¹⁴ It is evident that Igai was an important god in Dakhleh Oasis during the Old Kingdom.



Figure 3. Representation of Igai (figure on right) at Khufu Hill (Dynasty 4).

There are a number early of references to Igai that are not from an oasis context. A priestly titulary from Dynasty 3 records that a man named Habaseker was a priest of the cult of Igai.¹⁵ Igai is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, in the ‘conspiracy of the serpent’ (232 Recitation),¹⁶ and is present amongst offering niches in the Dynasty 3 tomb of Khabusokar at Saqqara where the owner is identified as the ‘priest of the cults of Anubis, Igai, Seth and

¹³ Kuhlmann 2002: 133-137; Bergmann 2003: 24.

¹⁴ Leitz 2002b, 570.

¹⁵ Fischer 1957: 231.

¹⁶ Allen 2005: 88. Due to the ‘complexity and inconsistency of the current system of PT numbers [which] often makes it difficult to know how to refer to a particular spell or to which spell a particular number refers’, Allen (2005: 4) adopted a system whereby the spells are numbered consecutively in order of their appearance. Using Sethe’s (revised) convention, Allen’s ‘232 Recitation’ is PT 377 (Faulkner 1969: 125).

Seshat'.¹⁷ The Dynasty 6 tomb of Ipy in the cemetery of Kom el-Ahmar Sawaris in Middle Egypt records that the tomb owner was a priest of the cults of Igai and Anubis,¹⁸ while Igai-hetep was the name of an offering-bearer in a fragment of a tomb relief from Saqqara that is dated to Dynasty 6.¹⁹ His name is also written in a graffito on the mortuary temple of King Nyuserre of Dynasty 5.²⁰

Middle Kingdom

The only known artefact related to the cult of Igai from an oasis context that can securely be dated to the Middle Kingdom is the Stela of Sa-Igai, excavated from Mut el-Kharab in central Dakhleh Oasis in 2008. It is a large, reddish sandstone block that is damaged at both the top and bottom. Measuring 118 cm high, between 27 and 23 cm wide and with a thickness of about 25 cm, it is an autobiography of Sa-Igai, a governor of the oasis. Four columns of hieroglyphs are preserved on three sides of the block.²¹

Right side: (Words spoken by) the chief of the priests: "I am one who returns, whom his city loves, after I have inscribed my name upon the stone that was brought by the army, a ruler who is loyal (...)"

Front face, right column: (Words spoken by) Igai (Lord of) Mut of the Oasis (... he has given) strength (...)

Front face, left column: (Words spoken by) the leader of nobility, mayor, chief of the priests: "I have erected a monument in the temple of my Lord Igai, so that (my name lives...)"

Left side: (Words spoken by) the leader of nobility, mayor, chief of the priests of Sa-Igai, beloved of Nebeh, who does what is praised by his god: "I have erected monuments for (...)"²²

¹⁷ Porter and Moss 1927-1999, III:2: 449.

¹⁸ Meeks and Meeks 1986: 8.

¹⁹ Fischer 1957: 231 & no. 46.

²⁰ Osing 1986: 73 & no. 2.

²¹ Hope *et al* 2008: 3.

²² Kaper, in Hope *et al* 2008: 56-57.

This text informs that Sa-Igai erected a monument in a temple for Igai which was located in the vicinity of Mut. The name of a king has not been preserved in the text but based on a comparison with contemporary inscriptions that are similar in context it can be dated to the end of Dynasty 11 or early in Dynasty 12.²³ The inscription commemorates building works completed under his authority and Sa-Igai is identified as the 'chief of the priests'.

With regard to this study, the key aspect of this text is where Igai is identified as '[lord of] Mut of the Oasis'.²⁴ Two contemporary documents from the Nile Valley identify Igai as the 'Lord of the Oasis'. The first is a seated granite statue of Senwosret III which identifies the king as 'beloved of Igai, the Lord of the Oasis, endowed with life',²⁵ the second is a fragmentary limestone stela of unknown provenance that is dated to the end of Dynasty 12 or the beginning of Dynasty 13. Demonstrating the affinity Igai had with the oasis, it discusses an offering which the king 'gives to Osiris Khentimentiu, the great god, Lord of Abydos and Igai, Lord of the Oasis' on behalf of 'the *ka* of the Overseer of the Army of the Oasis, Inw, justified'.²⁶

A series of Middle Kingdom rectangular wooden coffins whose provenances are unknown are located in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Igai's name is present in line 34 on the coffin of an individual named Kheperre (no. 28036), in lines 85, 86 and 98 of the coffin of Wernefer (no. 28037) and in lines 78-79 of the coffin belonging to Weresnefer (no. 28038).²⁷ Igai is also documented in line 41 of the coffin belonging to an individual named Heduwtynehet (no. 28123), in lines 5 (XXV) and 2 (XXVI) of the coffin of Sepi (no. 28083) and in line 59 of the coffin of Neferi (no. 28088).²⁸ Spells 755, 756, 757 and 776 mention Igai, as do two coffin texts of Dynasty 12.²⁹ The name Igai was first deciphered during Lacau's analysis of these Coffin Texts; it was revealed as

²³ Kaper, in Hope *et al* 2008: 56-57.

²⁴ Kaper, in Hope *et al* 2008: 56-57.

²⁵ Steindorff 1946: 23, pl. CX, no. 30.

²⁶ Fischer 1957: 223, 224.

²⁷ Lacau 1904: 101-121.

²⁸ Lacau 1906: 10-20, 136-142; 1907: 157, 158.

²⁹ Lacau 1907: 157-159; de Buck 1956: xiv, plates V and VI; Arafa 2005: 13.

part of a series of punning combinations in the text of the coffin of Sepi. The deceased is advised:

do not become hemmed in (?lgw3) in this thy name of Igai; do not become decayed (hw3), in this thy name of Ha.

With the verb *hw3* associated with the name of the god Ha and *gw3* with Igai, it became clear that Igai's name contains the element *g3*. The presence of a *was*-sceptre determinative in Igai's name in PT 662b further demonstrated that this sign also functioned as part of Igai's name.³⁰

As occurred in the Old Kingdom, Igai could be incorporated into personal names: two scarabs dated to Dynasty 13 are inscribed with the name Igai-hetep (Figure 4),³¹ with the second belonging to the 'son of the mayor, Igai-hetep, repeating life'.³² One final reference is found in several graffiti from Semeneh East that is dated to Dynasty 13, or possibly later, which makes mention of an individual named 'Igai-hetep, keeper of the chamber of the daily watchers'.³³

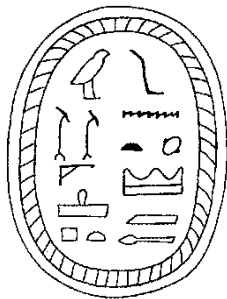


Figure 4. Scarab of Igai-hetep (Dynasty 13).

Igai is also present on larger monuments including in a column of text that mentions the 19th nome of Upper Egypt in a chapel at the temple of Amun at Karnak that dates to the reign of Senwosret I, and in the text of a pink granite

³⁰ Fischer 1957: 230.

³¹ Newberry 1906: 144, pl. XVII, no. 2; Fischer 1957: 229.

³² Newberry 1914: 39, pl. IV, no. 9.

³³ Fischer 1957: 231.

stela from the reign of Amenemhat II that was found re-used at the Ramesside temple of Ptah at Mit Rahina.³⁴

New Kingdom

Formula number 64 of the papyrus of Nebseni is a chapter of the Book of the Dead, a compilation of spells and hymns designed to aid the deceased in the afterlife. Although aspects of the text are known from as early as the Old Kingdom, being influenced by Pyramid Texts and Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts, the larger collection generally labelled as the 'Book of the Dead' can be dated to Dynasty 18.³⁵ The text mentions a sanctuary of Igai and it is interesting that his name was written over the original deity, Anubis, effectively replacing him in the text.³⁶

Third Intermediate and Late Periods

A fragmentary sandstone stela of a priest of Seth named Khai, Stela JE 52478, was found by locals in the vicinity of Mut in 1928 and is now housed in the Cairo Museum.³⁷ The top two lines of text are missing, as is the upper part of the stela which would have shown a pictorial relief. At present it measures 56 cm high, 80 cm wide and has a depth of 20.5 cm. It is carved with eight lines of poorly-executed cursive hieroglyphs that are divided by irregular horizontal lines. The text, which identifies the owner, Khai, as 'true of voice...', indicates that it was a funerary offering stela. It most likely originated from a cemetery close to Mut el-Kharab and a palaeographic analysis enables it to be dated to Dynasty 23.³⁸

Much of the text is missing and, as a result, it is impossible to gain a full understanding of the document. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect concerns

³⁴ Arafa 2005: 13-14.

³⁵ Allen 1974: 1.

³⁶ Barguet 1967: 103; Arafa 2005: 15.

³⁷ Gunn 1929: 94; Porter and Moss 1927-1999: VII, 296.

³⁸ van Zoest *et al* 2006: 24; Kaper 2009: 153.

the phrase ‘... an offering for the *ka* of the scribe, the priest of Seth, Khai, of the house of Igai [...]. He says: “I am a servant of Seth...” ’.³⁹ Although the context is ambiguous, it is evident that Khai was a priest of Seth and, significantly, he was also associated with an as yet undiscovered temple in this region that was dedicated to Igai.⁴⁰ It also demonstrates a close relationship between the cults of Seth and Igai in Dakhleh in the Third Intermediate Period. The only other reference to Igai at this time occurs in the Bubastite Festival Hall of Osorkon II, as a member of the Egyptian pantheon.⁴¹

One final artefact with an oasis provenance is a crudely manufactured rock inscription that reads ‘Igai, Lord of the oasis’ from Gebel el-Teir in Kharga Oasis (see Figure 1). The inscription provides little information except for the existence of the cult of Igai at the time of its carving, which is estimated to be sometime between Dynasty 26 and the Ptolemaic Period.⁴²

Igai: one of several gods of the Western Desert

Seth and Igai are the only deities identified with the epithet ‘Lord of the Oasis’.⁴³ Specific associations with regions to the west of the Nile Valley, however, were not restricted to these two deities. Ha, an inconspicuous god known from as early as Dynasty 3, was depicted with a three-hill determinative on his head and was granted the epithet ‘Lord of the Western Desert’.⁴⁴ As distinct from ‘Lord of the Oasis’, his title demonstrates that there was a recognised distinction between a specific location, ‘the Oasis’, and the more general region of ‘the Western Desert’. This implies that the artefacts concerned with the cults of Igai and Seth are associated with specific oases,

³⁹ van Zoest *et al* 2006: 24.

⁴⁰ Fischer 1957: 232; van Zoest *et al* 2006: 24.

⁴¹ Naville 1892: pl. 12, no. 7; Lange 2009.

⁴² Fakhry 1951: 413, 415, fig. 25; Fischer 1957: 232.

⁴³ Gardiner 1933: 21-22, ln. 2; Steindorff 1946: 23, pl. CX, no. 30; Fischer 1957: 224; Leitz 2002b: 571.

⁴⁴ Fischer 1957: 233; Wildung 1977: 923.

most likely Dakhleh and to a lesser degree Kharga, as locations within the more general Western Desert region.

As mentioned above, Igai is present amongst the pantheon of Egyptian deities in the Bubastite Festival Hall of Osorkon II.⁴⁵ Fischer suggests that Igai was a Libyan deity and that he was shown here to demonstrate the Libyan ancestry of Osorkon II.⁴⁶ Libyans were non-Egyptian nomadic peoples who occupied territories to the west of the Nile Valley. There is uncertainty, however, whether Igai was ever associated with Libyans and, indeed, if the Libyan heritage of Osorkon II would have been thus promoted. Igai has also been connected with the god Ha in Coffin Texts (384-386);⁴⁷ an interesting juxtaposition considering that one of the many duties assigned to this god was the protection of the desert regions from invading nomads, specifically Libyans.⁴⁸ In the oases Ha is represented on the west wall of the 'first chapel' at 'Ain Muftella in Bahariya,⁴⁹ on the temple of Amun at Hibis⁵⁰ and in the mammisi of Tutu at Kellis in Dakhleh.⁵¹ In the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, possibly as a result of his affinity with the Western Desert, Ha was even identified as the 'Lord of [the] Tjehenu', a recognised group of Libyans.⁵²

An important aspect of the nature of these gods concerns their origins and the manner of their development and acceptance into the ancient Egyptian pantheon. Comparisons between the cult of Igai and those of other deities linked to regions to the west of the Nile Valley including the oases such as Ash and Ha reveal notable dissimilarities worthy of discussion. The god Ash is an anthropomorphic deity represented as a lion or vulture, or even with the head of a hawk, and was often shown with one or two *was*-sceptres. In the Late Period his name was, on occasion, written with a Seth-animal

⁴⁵ Naville 1892: pl. 12, no. 7; Lange 2009.

⁴⁶ Fischer 1957: 233.

⁴⁷ Fischer 1980: 123.

⁴⁸ Aufrère 1995; Wildung 1977: 923.

⁴⁹ Fakhry 1942: 88, pls 22, 34b; Labrique 2004: 350.

⁵⁰ N.d.G Davies 1953: pl. XXX.

⁵¹ Kaper 2003: 126.

⁵² Osing 1980: 1023.

determinative.⁵³ The association between Ash and the Tjehenu is a strong argument that he had a Libyan affinity.⁵⁴ He was unlikely a god of the Tjehenu themselves, however, for the location of his cult centre at Nubt suggests that he was venerated first in the Nile Valley and then later associated with Tjehenu Libyans. Indeed, the earliest he is presented as a god of the Tjehenu is in the mortuary temple of Sahure of Dynasty 5.⁵⁵ Nubt was in close proximity to Wadi Hammamat and access to routes into the Western Desert and foreign lands and its location was particularly well suited as the cult centres for both Ash and Seth.⁵⁶ Likewise, there is no evidence to suggest that Ha, 'Lord of the Western Desert',⁵⁷ was not Egyptian. He was present in Kharga and Bahariya Oases and although he was not afforded prominent status in Dakhleh, it is noteworthy that the temple of Seth at Mut is very poorly preserved⁵⁸ and has revealed little of the deities who would have accompanied Seth on the temple walls. With attributes including the ability to repel marauding Libyans, Ha was an appropriate deity for regions to the west of the Nile Valley in the Late Period.⁵⁹

Igai, however, presents a different scenario. Although he was depicted in Nile Valley contexts as early as Dynasty 3, he was also present at 'Ain Aseel in Dakhleh Oasis at this time. His name sounds curiously non-Egyptian and it is valid to speculate that there is a possibility he was venerated by the oasis inhabitants in some form prior to his recognition by the Egyptians, after which time he was sequestered into the Egyptian pantheon and provided with the title 'Lord of the Oasis'. As a god suited to veneration in the desert and oasis regions, the cult of Igai may have been appropriated, promoted and maintained by the central administration as a way of maintaining theological and administrative control of the southern oases.

⁵³ Kees 1977: 99 & no. 2; Te Velde 1977: 114; Leitz 2002a: 81.

⁵⁴ Scharff 1926: 23-25; Wilkinson 2003: 98.

⁵⁵ Borchardt 1913: pl. 1; Otto 1975: 459-460.

⁵⁶ Te Velde 1977: 116.

⁵⁷ Fischer 1957: 233.

⁵⁸ Hope 2001b: 37.

⁵⁹ Hubschmann 2009: 255.

Conclusions

It is evident that representations of Igai are extremely rare and as a result he remains an enigmatic deity. He was recognised in the Nile Valley as a god of the oases, Dakhleh in particular, with examples dating from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period and possibly the Ptolemaic Period. Although the sparse documentation may not present an accurate distribution of his veneration, the lack of relevant artefacts in the Nile Valley that date later than the Middle Kingdom (notwithstanding formula number 64 from the Book of the Dead) allows for the possibility that sometime between this point and the Third Intermediate Period he came to be represented solely in oasis contexts.

Although Dakhleh Oasis appears to have been Igai's primary cult centre, particularly at 'Ain Aseel in the Old Kingdom and Mut in Third Intermediate Period, the aforementioned inscription at Gebel el-Teir demonstrates the existence of his cult in Kharga Oasis in the Late Period. Further evidence allows for the presence of the cult in Bahariya and Farafra Oases as well. The abovementioned pink granite stela inscription from the reign of Amenemhat II was recovered from Mit Rahina in the 19th administrative nome of ancient Egypt. In the Ptolemaic Period Farafra Oasis was part of this administrative district, as was Bahariya in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods.⁶⁰ Although no direct evidence links the cult of Igai to the northern oases this organisational connection allows for the veneration of this deity in Bahariya and Farafra Oases in the Middle Kingdom as well.

The scarcity of artefacts associated with the cult of Igai limits our level of understanding; however, hypotheses concerning the nature of his veneration and aetiology, as presented in this article, aid in further developing avenues of investigation within an environment lacking in textual and archaeological data.

⁶⁰ Aufrère 2000: 88-89, 90.

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