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Herausgegeben von
Richard Bußmann, Ingelore Hafemann,
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Stephan J. Seidlmayer, Dezember 2006, bei der Arbeit in Assuan (Ostufer).

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Laure Pantalacci
Local Contacts

Traces of Desert Culture(s) in Egyptian Contexts of the Dakhla Oasis
(Late 3rd Millennium BCE)

Abstract: Before the settling of Egyptians from the Nile Valley in Dakhla, the oasis hosted nomadic groups whose culture is called Sheikh Moftah. But the markers of these specific groups fade away gradually during the Old Kingdom, as if the natives were fully acculturated. Actually, in Balat faint traces of their presence can be detected in several aspects of the community life. While some features are obviously related to the local experience of desert environment, material remains from the town and tombs, and textual evidence, also suggest a cultural mixture of Egyptian and local traditions.

Since more than four decades, the desert and the oases west of the Egyptian Nile Valley have been intensively explored by international teams following different goals and applying different methods. These investigations have produced a mass of data about the human occupation of this area, before and after the permanent settling of Egyptians in Dakhla. The scarce material evidence left by the native inhabitants of Dakhla (consisting mainly of ceramics and lithics) defines a desert predynastic-Old Kingdom culture called Sheikh Moftah. Very little is known about the Sheikh Moftah people, rather small groups of hunters-herders leading a partly mobile life.¹ They built camps but no real villages; no tombs have been discovered, no linguistic evidence is preserved apart from a few toponyms. On several sites occupied by Egyptian settlers, Sheikh Moftah material has been found associated with Egyptian ceramics from the 4th dynasty to the late Old Kingdom.² This implies that these people, or groups with a similar culture, lived or continued to pass through Dakhla until then, and found a *modus vivendi* with the Egyptian settlers. Through a comprehensive review of archaeological and written evidence from Balat, we shall attempt to identify in the community lifestyle features of the desert culture(s) suggesting the presence and influence of natives in its midst.

Ethnicity?

The concept of ethnicity³ has relatively recently begun to be applied to the western desert, after it has proved to be productive for the rich archaeological corpus of Nubia. The different Nubian cultures attested from the 4th to 2nd millennia were strongly individualized.⁴ However, during the Egyptian occupation, the cultural contacts between Egyptian and Nubian cultures impacted the identity of Nubians as groups. But a fine-tuned analysis of archaeological evidence also revealed the complex positions between two cultures, and also the agency, of individuals, producing in turn a more subtle image of ethnicity.⁵

Applying a similar approach to the Western desert for the 4th–3rd millennia is far more delicate, as the oases yielded as little evidence about the “ethnicity” of the nomad groups, including the Sheikh Moftah people, as about their material life. During the predynastic period, markers of desert cultures such as the shale-tempered ceramics, or the Clayton rings and disks, a dyadic ceramic device related to a specific desert activity, are found all over a vast area including the western and eastern deserts in Upper Egypt, the Aswan region and Lower Nubia.⁶ Shortly before the rise of the Egyptian state, the complex material entanglement in the 1st cataract region reveals the coexistence

1 Most recent overview by Warfe/Ricketts 2019; Jeuthe/Linseele 2019.

2 Warfe/Ricketts 2019, 100–101; Pettman 2019, 193–202.

3 Using it here in the sense conveniently expressed by Gatto 2014, 94: “Ethnic groups, thus, are culturally ascribed identity groups, which are based on the expression of a real or assumed shared culture and common descent, usually through the materialization of cultural, linguistic, religious, historical and/or physical characteristics.”

4 Seidlmayer 2002, 90–92.

5 Smith 2003; Smith 2008.

6 Gatto 2012; Pachur 2017 for a summary of evidence and new interpretation of the Clayton rings.

tombs look perfectly Egyptian.¹⁷ It is not before the early New Kingdom that we get a different picture, when the Theban tombs stress the exotic look of the oasis dwellers, bringing their products, among other groups of foreigners, to the highest officials of the Egyptian state. No feathers on their head, but their hairstyle looks definitely non-Egyptian, and they wear leather loincloths.¹⁸ Did the natives settled in late Old Kingdom Balat really look like this? We know the Egyptian representations of all periods are to be taken cautiously.¹⁹

To find locals in our sources, the only feasible approach is to consider material markers of identity departing from the Nile Valley cultural tradition. Indeed, from the archaeological viewpoint, the markers used to define individual and ethnic identities are often the same. Among the cultural aspects of personal identity accessible through material remains, Wendrich²⁰ lists “food, dress, domestic architecture, belongings, daily & burial customs”; while to define ethnicity in Nubia, Smith²¹ studied “the role of funerary practice, ceramics, and foodways in the construction of identity within a colonial context”. In order to detect the presence of natives in Balat, we will investigate successively some of these aspects, leaving out architecture, since we know nothing about the local architectural tradition, if any existed.

Ceramics and Foodways

In Nubian contexts, the preservation of ceramic traditional shapes adapted to specific local foodways has been linked to persistent ethnic traditions.²² A distinctive feature of the potters crossing the deserts of Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia since Neolithic times is the use of shale particles as a temper.²³ As this specific material is particularly well attested in and around Dakhla since the first evidence of pottery-making in the 6th millennium,²⁴ it has been defined as a marker of the Sheikh Mofteh culture. While in and around the First cataract area, the use of shale ware virtually disappeared in early dynastic times,²⁵ shale ware was produced in Dakhla – in particular in the governorate workshops of Balat – until the very end of the 3rd millennium; two main types are known, cooking pots and huge vats.²⁶

Is it connected, like in Nubia, with the cooking of typically local food? Quite the opposite, during all the phases of occupation of the Balat Residence, the big shale-tempered vats were found exclusively in the collective bakeries of the palace, where a massive bread-and-beer production took place.²⁷ These containers are less frequent in the *post-incendie* phases (early FIP), where the bread-and-beer production continued, but on a more modest, domestic scale. Here we see an original combination of the typical desert technique of shale-ware with the most sophisticated organization of the Egyptian administration, to optimize the production of food rations for the governorate staff. It is difficult to determine if the potters were locals, or if the techniques of the desert people had been fully adopted and mastered by potters from the Nile Valley.²⁸ In any case, the shale-tempered pottery appears as marker of a new local, but no more “ethnic”, identity, blending two cultures.

¹⁷ See Valloggia 1986, 49–55 and pl. 34–42.

¹⁸ Giddy 1980, 124; Anthony 2017, 28–34.

¹⁹ See about the foreigners in the Theban tombs Wachsmann 1987.

²⁰ Wendrich 2010, 209.

²¹ Smith 2003, 32.

²² Seidlmayer 2002, 103; Smith 2003, 44–51, 97–124.

²³ Gatto 2012.

²⁴ Hope 1999, 216–217; Gatto 2012, 61.

²⁵ Gatto 2012, 69–70.

²⁶ Soukiassian et al. 1990, 117–119; in the pottery workshops, they form only 1% of the production. See also Jeuthe et al. 2013, 211–213. The fabric not only included shale particles, but was also made from a special clay with high refractory properties; moreover, the vats were built by the coil technique: Ballet in Soukiassian et al. 1990, 84, 86.

²⁷ Soukiassian et al. 2002, 107 and 108, fig. 90; 110, fig. 92; 157 and 158, fig. 136; 186; and in house 5 belonging to the *post-incendie* phase, 255–256. Sherds of a few similar vats were found along the Abu Ballas trail at the main stations, where field bakeries must have operated, but their fabric is vegetal-tempered: Förster 2015, 136–137.

²⁸ The second case more probable according to Hope 1999, 224; more recent discussion about the mixed ceramic production in Hope et al. 2018, 194–202. One could also imagine independent indigenous potters joining the workshops teams in Balat only occasionally, to produce these special vats. Although potters are never mentioned among the staff of the Old Kingdom expeditions, the recent excavations at Ouadi al-Jarf, on the Red Sea coast, brought to light pottery kilns near the port, evidencing their presence: Tallet/Marouard 2016, 156–168.

To come to the point of foodways, zooarchaeological studies have already given some insights. Wild animals such as oryx and gazelle were part of the diet in the Residence.²⁹ Their consumption was more important here than in other Old Kingdom sites, even in elite contexts.³⁰ Obviously, the game was more lavishly available than in the Valley and hunting was easier and more widely practiced, either in an official frame by expeditions, or as an individual, free activity.³¹ Among the remains of wild animals, the gazelle is largely dominant: 8% in the collections from the palace, a rate very close to the 10% observed in the 4th dynasty Sheikh Moftah camp excavated north of ‘Ayn Asil.³² No hunters are mentioned in our documents, but nine hunting dogs (*nwy*) are listed on tablet 7096. From the reign of Pepy I onwards, all the governors kept as pet dogs big hounds, certainly well fit for hunting parties.³³

The high status of big-game among the Egyptian elite is well illustrated in Old Kingdom tombs in the Nile Valley. Likewise, in Balat, the consumption of game was still viewed by the Egyptian authorities as a social marker distinguishing the rulers: thus, the governorate sent three big wild mammals to the chief of Demiu,³⁴ and reciprocally, on the Gebel Uweinat graffito of Mentuhotep II, the representative of the unlocated region of Tekhbeten is depicted bringing him an oryx.³⁵ Also, in the tombs of the highest elite, offerings of migrating birds, cooked or preserved, prove that the governors themselves and their relatives were partial to this local kind of food.³⁶ But like the ruling class, the earlier Sheikh Moftah hunters also fed on wild mammals and birds,³⁷ and still in the late Old Kingdom, the guards manning the watch-posts around the town hunted for themselves and consumed oryx and gazelles.³⁸ Thus, these foodways, originally a desert marker more than a status symbol, remained common to all the inhabitants of Balat, from governors to watchmen.

Another natural foodstuff was consumed in the oasis: honey. According to Nile Valley sources, in the Old Kingdom it might be distributed to workers as wages, or traded abroad, for example with Nubia.³⁹ Later on, it appears like a valued commodity kept in temple or palace treasuries;⁴⁰ the tribute scene of the vizier Rekhmire mentions the oases as producer of honey.⁴¹ And actually it was already the case in the late Old Kingdom: to the south of the governors’ Residence, an apiary with dozens of ceramic cylindrical hives was found, suggesting a large-scale production.⁴² Maybe this honey was traded with the southwestern partners of Dakhla; in any case, surprisingly, it is not mentioned in the lists of commodities found so far in the Residence. On the other hand, stoppers of small honey jars inscribed with the bee sign were found in the royal storerooms south-west of the southern palace,⁴³ and some others in the northern complex. Apparently, these vases were directly sealed and marked by the beekeepers themselves, who incised the bee sign on the clay stopper with their thumbnail. These awkward marks on small stoppers suggest that this honey had been harvested and marked by the same individuals, independent from the Residence’s apiary, to be delivered to the governorate.⁴⁴

²⁹ Pantalacci/Lesur-Gebremariam 2009, 249–250.

³⁰ Pantalacci/Lesur 2012, 292: 16% vs. only a few dozens out of 300.000 bone fragments in Memphite Giza in the 4th dynasty: Redding 2010, 68, 70, fig. 5.2.

³¹ Pantalacci/Lesur-Gebremariam 2009, 254–255. Along the Abu Ballas trail, a desert graffito dated from our period or slightly later depicts a single hunter with three dogs, shooting a gazelle; his look is obviously not Egyptian: a feather on his head, a beard, leather loincloth and girdle; full discussion in Förster 2015, 220–224.

³² Jeuthe/Linseele 2019, 184.

³³ Pantalacci/Lesur-Gebremariam 2009, 255. In the late FIP, the governor Idy even had a private canopy built for his dog (Aufrère 2000, 41, fig.1).

³⁴ Pantalacci 2008, 152–153.

³⁵ Discussed in Förster 2015, 479–487.

³⁶ In Giza, bones of birds are rare and most of them belong to waterfowl: Redding 2010, 68; waterfowl is similarly dominant in Balat: Pantalacci/Lesur-Gebremariam 2009, 252–253; see also Minault-Gout 1992, 126–127.

³⁷ Riemer 2011, 345–346.

³⁸ Pöllath 2009, 95–96.

³⁹ Fischer 1968, 158–159 and fig. 31, 181; for honey as commercial product traded by Sabni in Nubia, *Urk.* I, 136, 5.

⁴⁰ Feierabend 2009, 134.



⁴¹ Hallmann 2006, 188; Feierabend 2009, 117.

⁴² Soukiassian, personal communication; see Mathieu 2001, 513.

⁴³ Pantalacci/Soukiassian 2019, 197.

⁴⁴ On “honey-hunters” harvesting of wild honey in the deserts along the Nile, Leclant 1975, 787; Feierabend 2009, 67, 70, 78. Until today, wild honey is a food resource for African tribes south and west of the Sahara: Pachur 2017, 27.

Dress

New Kingdom iconographic sources retained the leather loincloth as an Oasis-feature. The only representation of a non-Egyptian connected with Dakhla, in the graffito referenced above (fn. 31), corresponds with this picture. Besides, the textual data indicate that leather was widely available in the Residence. Hides of wild or domestic animals are mentioned in several lists of commodities;⁴⁵ and in the spelling of textile words, the hide (F 27, ) replaces most of the time the fabric sign (S 28A, ) as a specifier. This constant peculiarity suggests that clothes made of leather were rather more common than those made of textiles. Sheikh Mofthah sites have yielded tiny remains of leather objects proving that the native hunters were experts in curing and working rawhides.⁴⁶ Even before the foundation of Balat, the hunting practice of the natives had been modified: expeditions now targeted animals prized by Egyptian consumers, such as gazelles, wild birds and foxes.⁴⁷ Thus in Balat local tradition must have made leather, such as goatskins (tablet 4959), a commodity widely available for different objects of daily life.

Nevertheless, the excavations in the necropolis did not confirm its use for clothing.⁴⁸ Maybe Balat people, whatever their origin and daily wear, preferred to be buried either in linen, to follow the Egyptian practice, or naked, if such was their own tradition.⁴⁹

Belongings & Burial Equipment

On the other hand, leather, in the form of hides covering or wrapping the bodies, or forming a sort of litter, is attested in the tombs of commoners surrounding the main mastabas.⁵⁰ Although often combined with mats, reeds or wooden coffins to protect the corpse, leather is always the material in direct contact with the body – a position which supports its possible use for everyday clothing. While at that time the burials in the Nile Valley made increasing use of linen around the dead body, the persistence of hides protecting the dead, even in the close entourage of the governors, seems an archaic desert feature, shared with different Nubian cultures.⁵¹

Another piece of furniture also found in Balat, but apparently absent from the Nile Valley, is the funerary bed or litter on which the dead were laid. Such litters, simply composed of one or two stuccoed wooden planks, have been observed in secondary burials inside and around the mastaba of Medu-nefer.⁵² The most recent mastaba, II, also contained, and was surrounded by, burials containing litters, among which was the rich tomb C.⁵³ Thus, the litters are in use during the late Old Kingdom-early FIP, a period when on the other hand wooden coffins also become more common. The litter is apparently not a social marker, since it appears in poor and wealthy tombs alike; we should rather think of different burial customs, maybe originating in desert traditions.

⁴⁵ See for example Pantalacci/Lesur-Gebremariam 2009, 250 and fig. 5, tablet 7194; Pantalacci 2013, 290, fig. 6, tablet 7232, count of 38 hides (*msk3*).

⁴⁶ Riemer 2011, 144–145; Kaper/Willems 2002, 82, 92.

⁴⁷ Pöllath 2009, 94–96, 104. I would suggest that the “dépôt de pillage” hidden under a wall in a corridor of Mastaba IV, comprised of a faience bead, several needles with bone handles, and a gazelle horn (Valloggia 1998, 44), is rather the forgotten equipment of a desert hunter passing by the necropolis. For gazelle horns as typical desert tool, Riemer 2011, 145, 5.3; in funerary context in Balat: Minault-Gout 1992, 60.

⁴⁸ Although in the burials a number of fragments of leather were preserved, they were found close to various parts of the body, but not the hips or thighs; only in one 6th dynasty tomb near the mastaba III, the presence of a leather loincloth on the body was suggested: Castel/Pantalacci 2005, 103, T 11.

⁴⁹ Cp. on Nubian examples of strongly Egyptianized funerary equipment, Smith 2003, 37–43, 193–200. In Balat, in many cases no clothes at all were preserved.

⁵⁰ Minault-Gout 1992, 52, 61; Minault-Gout 1995, 316; Castel/Pantalacci 2005, 28–31.

⁵¹ One might compare this with C-group or the later Pan-graves, where leather is also quite common. In Nubia similarly tombs with Egyptian architecture and funerary belongings occur, where only the body, by its position, dress and closer objects, refers to Nubian tradition: Seidlmayer 2002, 104–106.

⁵² In tombs T2 and T4, Valloggia 1986, 59–60; also in the northern cemetery: Giddy/Grimal 1979, 44 and pl. XXB.

⁵³ Minault-Gout 1992, 55–63; Minault-Gout 1995, 316.

In funerary as well as domestic contexts, one of the best attested commodities in lists and accounts from Balat, are mats. They were produced in Dakhla, and also in *Msqt* (tablet 7209). These indications are in line with the New Kingdom pictures showing vegetal stems, cordage nets and elaborate basketry as the major tribute from the oases.⁵⁴ In the Nile Valley, such insignificant artefacts are not often included in the elite belongings.⁵⁵ Conversely, in the governors' Residence, basketry or wickerwork were part of the furniture, still visible through the imprints of baskets and mats on some floors, and of boxes and baskets on the back of sealings.⁵⁶ The little portable, beehive-shaped baskets still produced today in Dakhla are included among the funerary offerings of Khentika, probably containing food;⁵⁷ and they recur again regularly in the Theban tombs paintings.⁵⁸ They are also archeologically attested, both in the town and the necropolis, on the backs of sealings.⁵⁹ In the cemeteries, mats or simple reed bundles were frequently used, alone or together with other materials, to wrap the bodies of individuals of various social statuses.⁶⁰ As in the case of leather hides, the continuation of this pre- and protodynastic tradition might be a heritage of the local funerary tradition.

A much rarer category of funerary belongings is even more clearly related to the desert culture: ostrich eggs. Their use as containers to carry liquids, or as raw material to make beads, is well attested in pre- and protodynastic cultures of Egypt, Nubia and their deserts. In the late 3rd millennium, ostriches had been extinct for a while in the Eastern Sahara; their eggs and these beads, therefore, must have been a precious product, maybe keeping some kind of connection with the old desert tradition. Ostrich egg beads, so common in the Western desert in predynastic times,⁶¹ are poorly attested in the town and cemeteries of Balat. The single reported exception is a long necklace found in a rather well-equipped tomb close to mastaba III, dated to the early FIP; it may be a souvenir of the local culture.⁶² The tablet 6718 lists as valuable products delivered to (or by?) the Residence a variety of beads in semi-precious stones and an (ostrich) egg. One of the most remarkable objects found in the mastaba III is an ostrich egg engraved with the image of a falcon spreading its wings; to this egg were attached several stone components carved out of small pieces of imported, prestigious stones.⁶³ Displaying this strong royal symbol on a valuable desert object is emblematic of the mixed culture prevailing in the governors' palace, and of the adjustment of the elite decorum to the oasis resources. Three more ostrich eggs, intact but undecorated, were found in tomb C, a rich secondary burial of the early FIP in mastaba II.⁶⁴ As mentioned above, the food offerings of this tomb included a high number of game birds; the body had been buried on a litter. All these features point to the local tradition, probably maintained, rather than adopted, and consciously displayed, by an elite member.⁶⁵

⁵⁴ Giddy 1980; Hallmann 2006, 273.

⁵⁵ For example, basketry seems absent from the archive of Neferikare's funerary temple, and very rare in the *frises d'objets* (Jéquier 1921, 249–250). See also the recent evidence from Giza, where the sealings on baskets amount only to 0.08 to 0.3% of the collections: Nolan 2010, table 1.1 on p. 86.

⁵⁶ Imprint of a large basket on a floor, Soukiassian et al. 2002, 24 and 26, fig. 10; mat? on sealing back, 402 n° 3480.

⁵⁷ Osing et al. 1982, n°21, Taf. 4.

⁵⁸ Giddy 1980, 123 and pl. VIII.

⁵⁹ Castel et al. 2001, /1, 157 and /2, 106 fig. 109B. The scarcity of wood has probably to do with the developed use of basketry, but the portability of these convenient small baskets may also be seen as a legacy of the nomadic tradition.

⁶⁰ For an overview, Castel/Pantalacci 2005, 29–31, 45.

⁶¹ See for example, for Farafra, Cristiani 2014.

⁶² Castel/Pantalacci 2005, 266–267 (texte), 275 photo 214, 456 PA 19 (3359): a total of 416 pearls. Fragments of ostrich eggs found inside the palace may result from an accidental break, or indicate that such beads could still be produced there (Pantalacci/Lesur-Gebremariam 2009, 253) – perhaps by and for locals? Ostrich egg and beads are still attested in the 1st mill. in Libyan contexts: Hubschmann 2010, 171, 173.

⁶³ Cherpion in Castel et al. 2001, 279–294.

⁶⁴ Minault-Gout 1992, 54, 124–127.

⁶⁵ This is all the more remarkable, as on the other hand, the Egyptianization of individuals from other cultures are often overemphasized through their funerary equipment: Smith 2003, 193–197; van Pelt 2013, 537.

Religion

So a few objects – or maybe better: things⁶⁶ – point to what seem to be non-Egyptian funerary practices; but due to the complete lack of Sheikh Moftah or other locals' tombs, their attitude about the afterlife remains unknown. On the other hand, the governorate's archive offers an insight into the local divine cults, confirming that the natives had their own gods and sacred emblems. For some tablets list divinities unknown or little known outside Dakhla at that time, and whose cult was provisioned with food offerings: Igay, Taout (y?), “Terrible-of-season” (*Nḥ3-tr*), “Terrible-of-water” (*Nḥ3-mw*) ...; cult objects like standards received offerings as well.⁶⁷ The fear of divine entities controlling water and climatic events is easily understandable in the desert environment; but the gods' compound names sound quite Egyptian. Alongside the Memphite official cults in the *meret.s*,⁶⁸ the written evidence seems focused on local deities. Priests are mentioned, but without reference to a particular deity; they may have served several cults.⁶⁹

That the religious beliefs of the native community were preserved to a certain extent, even within Egyptianized cultic patterns, is an important fact when evaluating the history and weight of the indigenous component in the Balat culture. It makes us suspect that the locals' influence went far beyond what archaeology tells us. Thus, some of their religious practices could be readily adopted by the Egyptian incomers, just like the natives adopted many of the Egyptian customs.⁷⁰ Certainly the constraints and opportunities of the desert environment played their part in the creation of a mixed culture. Actually, archaeology suggests that at least some individuals of the governors' staff and inner circle were connected to a primarily local background. Interestingly, traits from the desert culture become more visible in the elite burials at the time of the last mastabas (V and II). Thus, towards the end of the 3rd millennium, local features surfacing again restore some substance to the elusive Dakhla people, just before they disappear from our sources and get definitively out of our reach.

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⁶⁶ On this distinction in mixed cultural contexts, Gosden 2004, 36–39.

⁶⁷ Tablets 4429, 4435–4437; see Posener-Kriéger 1992, 48; on Taout(y), Pantalacci 2000. The cult of gods like Igay was probably endowed with land: Soukiassian et al. 2002, 358–360 (tablet 5051). Balat also provisioned the divine cults of other settlements in Dakhla (tablet 4436).

⁶⁸ Centered around the cult of the king, Re and Hathor, the *meret.s* were certainly important for the economic management of the Residence: Pantalacci/Soukiassian 2019, 198–199.

⁶⁹ Soukiassian et al. 2002, 340–341 (tablet 3487). Onomastics does not help us to determine if they were natives or Egyptian incomers.

⁷⁰ Applying the schemes proposed by Gosden in his analysis of colonialism through history, in my view the contacts between Egyptians and Dakhla people would be a combination of “middle ground” and “shared cultural milieu” types, like most of the early forms of “colonisation”. In the “shared cultural milieu”, the cultural interaction concerns primarily the elites and networks of things play a major role (Gosden 2004, 40, 41–81). Hope et al. (2018, 205) rather propose a pure “middle ground” model, “a process that brings systems of value together to create a working relationship between them” (Gosden 2004, 30–32).

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Abbreviated literature

PN = Ranke 1935–1977.

Urk. I = Sethe 1933.