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Writing on Clay : Documentation from Balat (Dakhla Oasis, End of the 3rd Millennium)

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ORIENT & MÉDITERRANÉE

37

LES ARCHIVES ADMINISTRATIVES DE L'ANCIEN EMPIRE

édité par

PHILIPPE COLLOMBERT et PIERRE TALLET



PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

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Writing on Clay: Documentation from Balat (Dakhla Oasis, End of the 3rd Millennium)

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In a conference focussed on Old Kingdom papyri, a paper on Balat might seem out of place, since papyrus is exceedingly rarely attested there. Not a single piece of papyrus was found, and out of a collection of sealings now exceeding three thousand pieces, at most a dozen on papyrus have been recognized, bearing slight fibers imprints on their back. It is clay which forms the bulk of the written documentation brought to light by the Ifao team since the late seventies. Until this discovery, throughout the three millennia of pharaonic history, this writing medium was almost exclusively documented by the famous collection of the Amarna tablets, which reflect oriental, i.e. international, rather than Egyptian, archival practices of the 2nd millennium. In Old Kingdom Balat, clay has been systematically used by the scribes in the stead of papyrus to keep administrative records¹. Clay is mostly shaped into tablets, but sealings could be inscribed as well.

After assessing the archaeological context of the documents, we shall present some observations about writing and archival practices, before commenting briefly on the nature and contents of the documents.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE EPIGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS *IN SITU*

1.1 *Why Balat?*

The village of Balat, in Dakhla oasis, lies about 800 kms south-west of the Memphite region. The Old Kingdom remains consist of a town site ('Ayn Asil in

1. This choice resulted probably from the local environment and the shortage of papyrus plants: P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, "Les tablettes en terre crue de Balat", in E. Lalou (dir.), *Les tablettes à écrire de l'Antiquité à l'époque moderne* (Bibliologia 12), Turnhout, 1992, p. 42.

the current micro-toponymy) and, about one kilometer to its West, its contemporary necropolis (Qila' el-Dabba). To date, the oldest attestation of the pharaonic presence around Dakhla is Khufu's inscription at the Gebel called after him². If it can be surmised that people from the Valley were already familiar with the oasis in earlier times, no archaeological evidence of a pharaonic settlement in Balat predates the late 5th-early 6th Dynasty³.

The first king attested so far on a seal impression from Balat is Neferirkare⁴; this sole document can hardly prove that the site was already extensively occupied in his reign. The city remains excavated to date range from the early 6th to the early 12th Dynasty. During most of this time span, the Abu Ballas road, connecting Dakhla to the Gilf Kebir and Eastern Sahara, Southern Nubia or Central Africa, was equipped and maintained to facilitate expeditions⁵. The main convenience of Dakhla was to offer a proper logistic base to launch such trips. In addition, a more extensive use of the natural resources – in particular intensification of agriculture – was made possible through the installation of settlers from the Nile valley, including a group of officers headed by an “admiral-governor”⁶.

1.2 Where?

Several areas of the city site have yielded extensive collections of documents (**fig. 1**). The first area excavated by an Ifao team until the early eighties (so-called “sondage nord”) is located around the northern entrance of a huge building⁷, presumably the residence of the first governors. Several phases of occupation were defined, two of which yielded texts written on clay tablets, clay labels or clay sealings⁸. In the course of the 6th Dynasty, during the reign of Pepy II, the governor Khentika moved his living and administrative quarters to a new complex to the South. This complex – the southern palace –

2. K. P. KUHLMANN, “Der ‘Wasserberg des Djedefre’ (Chufu 01/1). Ein Lagerplatz mit Expeditionsinschriften der 4. Dynastie im Raum der Oase Dachla”, *MDAIK* 61, 2005, pp. 243-289 and pl. 42.
3. An earlier, local *Sheikh Muftah* culture site has been surveyed to the north of ‘Ayn Asil: Cl. JEUTHE, “Initial results: The Sheikh Muftah occupation at Balat North/1 (Dakhla Oasis)”, *Archéo-Nil* 24, 2014, pp. 103-114. There remains a gap between this occupation and the 6th Dynasty settlement.
4. L. PANTALACCI, “Noms royaux nouvellement attestés à Balat”, in Ph. Collombert, D. Lefèvre, St. Polis & J. Winand (dir.), *Aere perennius. Mélanges égyptologiques en l'honneur de Pascal Vernus* (OLA 242), Leuven, 2015, pp. 523-526.
5. Fr. FÖRSTER, *Der Abu Ballas-Weg. Eine pharaonische Karawanenroute durch die Libysche Wüste* (Africa praehistorica 28), Cologne, 2016, esp. pp. 462-487.
6. ‘*pr-wj3 jmy-jrty (j)mr-r(3) hmw-ntr*’: M. VALLOGGIA, “Les Amiraux de l’oasis de Dakhlah”, in Fr. Geus & Fl. Thill (dir.), *Mélanges offerts à Jean Vercoutter*, Paris, 1985, pp. 355-364; M. VALLOGGIA, “Note sur l’organisation administrative de l’oasis de Dakhla à la fin de l’Ancien Empire”, in B. Menu (dir.), *Égypte pharaonique: pouvoir, société, Méditerranées* 6/7, 1996, pp. 61-68.
7. See the annual reports by L. GIDDY *et al.* in *BIFAO* 79-81, 1980-1981; L. GIDDY, D. JEFFREYS, G. SOUKIASSIAN & N. GRIMAL, “Rapport préliminaire sur la quatrième campagne de fouilles à ‘Ayn Asil (oasis de Dakhleh)”, *ASAE* 69, 1983, pp. 103-112.
8. Notes on the epigraphic finds by N. GRIMAL in the articles quoted in n. 7 above.

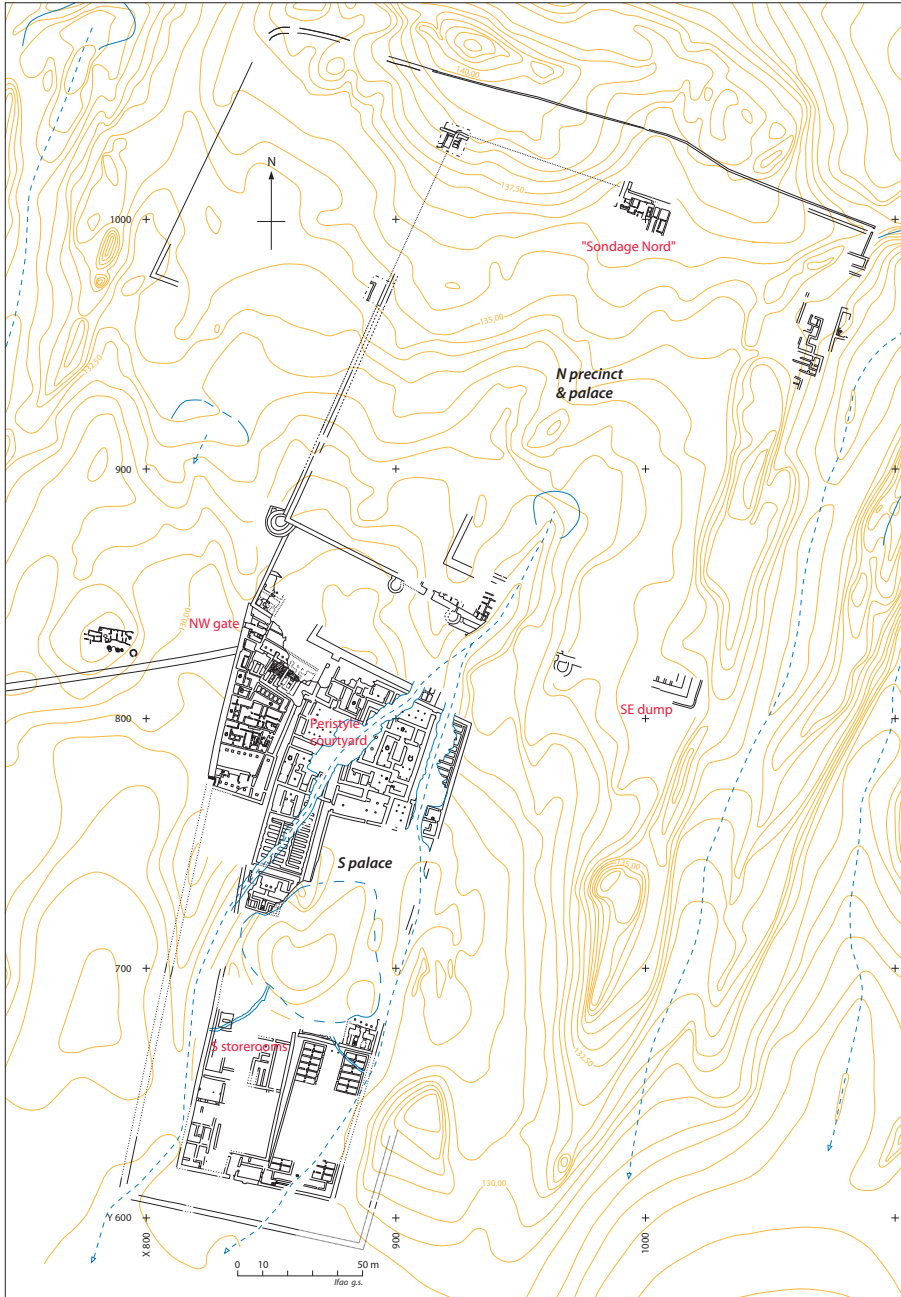


Figure 1 – Topographical map of the site site indicating in red the location of the main archive collections (© Ifao/G. Soukiasian).

has been under excavation since the mid-eighties⁹. During its long history, the building underwent several changes and a dramatic episode at the very end of the Old Kingdom: an arson destroyed the complex. The arsonists looted all the precious belongings, but documents were left behind and carbonized *in situ*. So most of them have been preserved and recovered in their original context. They mark the rooms and courts where administration was at work: under the porticos of the huge northwest peristyle court; near entrances leading to the inner palace; and also in and around storage facilities, especially in the southern quarter of the precinct.

Another major collection was found outside the palace. Outside the southeast corner of the northern precinct, a test-trench exposed one of these dump areas where all outdated administrative documents from the palace were regularly discarded together¹⁰. It is well known that Egyptian scribes used to produce temporary records, which were periodically collated and erased. Washed sheets of papyrus could be used more than once¹¹. Concerning clay sealings, it has been observed on several sites that they were discarded in a systematic way, deposited in specific areas¹². In Balat, clay tablets were treated exactly this way and dumped, together with the sealings, always on the same heaps. The similarity of seal-impressions and prosopographical data between the documents found inside the burnt palace and those from the dump suggests that they are roughly contemporary.

On the other hand, in the necropolis of Qila' el-Dabba, written documents are uncommon; only two tablets were found, out of context, as well as a few dozens of clay sealings, some of them inscribed¹³. It seems administrative control was much looser in the cemetery than in the city¹⁴.

9. See the section *Balat* in the annual report of the director of Ifao since 1985. The mission is headed by Georges Soukiassian, to whom I am deeply indebted for sharing generously with me ever since his finds, knowledge and vision of the site.
10. B. MATHIEU, "Travaux de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale en 1999-2000", *BIFAO* 100, 2000, pp. 487-489; B. MATHIEU, "Travaux de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale en 2000-2001", *BIFAO* 101, 2001, pp. 514-515. It must be underlined that so far not a single inscribed sealing has been noticed within the dump collection.
11. It is often the case in Neferirkare's archive: P. POSENER-KRIÉGER & J.-L. DE CENIVAL, *The Abu Sir Papyri* (HPBM 5), London, 1968, pp. XVII-XVIII.
12. A case in point is the memorial temple of Sesostris III in Abydos, where the dumps produced by the secular and religious activities are discarded in two separated deposits: J. WEGNER, *The mortuary Temple of Senwosret III at Abydos* (Philadelphia Yale Expedition to Egypt 8), New Haven, 2007, pp. 53-285, particularly pp. 253-254.
13. For sealings recovered in the necropolis: A. MINAULT-GOUT *et al.*, *Balat II. Le mastaba d'Ima-Pepi (mastaba II): fin de l'Ancien Empire* (FIFAO 33), Cairo, 1992, pp. 102-103 & pl. 33; M. VALLOGGIA, *Balat IV. Le monument funéraire d'Ima-Pepi / Ima-Meryrè* (FIFAO 38), Cairo, 1998, /1, pp. 95-97 & /2, pl. 78-88; G. CASTEL *et al.*, *Balat V. Le mastaba de Khentika : tombeau d'un gouverneur de l'Oasis à la fin de l'Ancien Empire* (FIFAO 40), Cairo, 2001, /1 pp. 155-168 & /2, fig. 109-116.
14. All the cults were managed in the palace, where several documents refer to the *jm3hw*-status of previous governors. But the officers in charge coming to the necropolis to perform the rituals did write sometimes on door sealings: G. CASTEL *et al.*, *Balat V /1*, pp. 165-168 & /2, fig. 115-116.

2. CLAY DOCUMENTS

Until now about five hundred and twenty-five tablets, mostly fragmentary, have been unearthed, while, as mentioned above, the collection of sealings from ‘Ayn Asil amounts to about three thousands pieces.

2.1 Morphology

While in the Valley, papyrus is the major medium for keeping various records¹⁵, one of the most interesting insights gained from the excavations in ‘Ayn Asil is the diversity of clay objects used for writing. Apart from the tablets, the scribes could use various media, such as:

- * jar-stoppers : bearing mention of the nature and/or amount of jar contents¹⁶;
- * tags : to be hung to the neck of jars, attached to boxes, bags or cages by a string, a leather thong or simply a grass stalk. Triangular in shape, they can bear their owner’s name, seal impressions or hieratic notes naming the commodity to which they were attached¹⁷;
- * sealings : most of the clay sealings bear seal impressions, but in addition, a number of them, be they on doors of storerooms, granaries, boxes, sacks, or baskets, were inscribed. The text can be superimposed on the seal impression, or run beside it. In some cases, it replaces the seal¹⁸ - probably when the administrative context and the agents were sufficiently well identified to dispense with using their seal.

The text is necessarily short and formulaic, though often difficult to decipher on the uneven surface. A standard beginning for some of the hieratic notes found in the “sondage nord” is:

- date,
- mention of the withdrawal (*šdt*) of a certain species and quantity of grain (**fig. 2**).

In the southeast storerooms of the palace as well, sealings were frequently dated. Conversely, in all the collections, dated tablets are exceedingly rare (see

15. C. J. EYRE, *The use of documents in Pharaonic Egypt* (Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents), Oxford, 2013, pp. 22-27.
16. A. MINAULT-GOUT *et al.*, *Balat II*, pp. 83-84; G. CASTEL *et al.*, *Balat V/1*, pp. 165 & /2, fig. 114; certainly the jars of the funerary equipments have been prepared and inscribed in the city. For ‘Ayn Asil, see G. SOUKIASSIAN, M. WUTTMANN & L. PANTALACCI, *Balat VI. Le palais des gouverneurs de l’époque de Pépy II: les sanctuaires de ka et leurs dépendances* (FIFAO 46), Cairo, 2002, pp. 366, 368.
17. See N. GRIMAL, “Balat: Rapport préliminaire des fouilles à ‘Ayn Asil, 1979-1980”, *BIFAO* 80, 1980, p. 269 n.(2); N. GRIMAL, “Balat. Rapport préliminaire des fouilles à ‘Ayn Asil, 1981”, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 202 & pl. 45A; G. CASTEL *et al.*, *Balat V/1*, p. 157 & /2, fig. 113 (n° 5505). For parallels from Elephantine, J.-P. PÄTZNICK, *Die Siegelabrollungen und Rollsiegel der Stadt Elephantine im 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.: Spurensicherung eines archäologischen Artefaktes* (BAR-IS 1339), Oxford, 2005, p. 241, Tafel IX & p. 418.
18. N. GRIMAL, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 203 & pl. 45B; G. SOUKIASSIAN, M. WUTTMANN & L. PANTALACCI, *Balat VI*, pp. 365-374.



Figure 2 – Sealing 2267, beginning with a date, [withdrawal of] *jt-šm*¹⁹
(© Ifao/A. Lecler).

under, 2.4). Obviously the different categories of written documents follow distinct, but complementary protocols.

2.2 Producing tablets

The clay was widely available in Dakhla. Nowadays, clay quarries for the “red clay”, suitable for bricks and ceramics, along with pottery workshops, are found near the major settlements of Dakhla: el-Qasr, Mut, Balat, where they are associated with abundant water resources¹⁹. For the same reasons, these same three areas were probably already among the most densely populated at the end of the 3rd millennium BC²⁰.

Strong variations in the colour and texture of the clay may be due to the different geographical origin of the documents found in the palace, but sent from other oasis settlements²¹. But even tablets or sealings undoubtedly produced in the palace used different kinds of clays and temper. So the aspect and quality of the material primarily depended on the choice and treatment of the clay, the knack of each scribe to preparing his own writing stuff.

The tablets were shaped by hand, and probably smoothed by means of a special tool (clay or bone spatula ? pebble ?), as were the sealings. The average dimensions of the standard tablets are about 15 x 9 cm, with a thickness about 1.5-2 cm. This is a very convenient size, easy to handle - probably more than a papyrus roll.

However, here also strong variations can be observed, suggesting that the length and layout of the text could be more or less precisely anticipated. It is clear that some tablets, at least the tiny or oversized ones, were made-to-measure. Compare for instance the mini letter 1508 with the long name-list 2095, both of them from “sondage nord” (**fig. 3**). But most of our documents used more standardised formats.

On the other hand, it happened not unfrequently that outdated texts were erased and tablets, reused. Erasing was achieved by first dampening, and then wiping the whole written surface or pricking out some incised signs with a stylus tip. Whenever possible, the scribe applied the same layout in the palimpsest than in the first text, and sometimes even managed to reuse some of its words or

19. N. HENEIN, *Poterie et potiers d'Al-Qasr : oasis de Dakhla* (BdE 116), Cairo, 1997, pp. 21-22.

20. L. PANTALACCI, “Broadening Horizons: Distant Places and Travels in Dakhla and the Western Desert at the End of the 3rd Millennium” in F. Förster & H. Riemer (dir.), *Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond* (Africa Prehistorica 27), Cologne, 2013, pp. 285-287.

21. This holds especially true for the collection of letters found near the northwest entrance of the palace: L. PANTALACCI, “La documentation épistolaire du palais des gouverneurs à Balat-‘Ayn Asil”, *BIFAO* 98, 1998, p. 304.

phrases. For example in inventories, he could keep the entry name and just change the numbers. The major collections also include blank tablets, which had been erased and were kept ready for future records.



Figure 3 – The smallest (letter 1508) and biggest (name-list 2095) tablets from the “son-dage nord” (© Ifao/A. Lecler [left], J.-F. Gout [right]).

2.3 Writing materials

The signs were not superficially incised, but deeply engraved in the wet clay surface with a bone stylus²². These bone tools were not specifically used by the scribes, since they were also found in assemblages clearly related to various handicrafts²³.

Evidence for the use of ink in ‘Ayn Asil is scarce. An interesting document clearly written with ink is the clay torso of a male figurine (inv. 2326), whose name and patronym is written in black ink twice, on his chest and on his back. The man is called a Yamite, and the purpose of this figurine may hardly have been other than magic²⁴. The use of ink on clay in such contexts is well attested in collections of execration figurines from various sites dating to the Old and

22. It has been determined that the shin bone of different ungulates was preferably used for this specific purpose: L. PANTALACCI & J. LESUR, “Élevage et consommation de viande à Balat (oasis de Dakhla). Fin de l’Ancien Empire-Première Période intermédiaire”, *BIFAO* 112, 2012, p. 299.
23. For bone tools in a workshop context, Cl. JEUTHE, *Balat X. Ein Werkstattkomplex im Palast der I. Zwischenzeit in Ayn Asil* (FIFAO 71), Cairo, 2012, pp. 292-293.
24. N. GRIMAL, “Les noyés de Balat”, in Fr. Geus & Fl. Thill (dir.), *Mélanges offerts à Jean Vercoutter*, Paris, 1985, pp. 111-121; about the “Kushitic” flavor of these anthroponyms, R. EL SAYED, *Afrikanischstämmiger Lehnwortschatz im älteren Ägyptisch: Untersuchungen zur ägyptisch-afrikanischen lexikalischen Interferenz im dritten und zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (OLA 211), Leuven, 2011, p. 128.

Middle Kingdom²⁵. Apart from this unique piece, a single fragment of letter written in ink has been found in the dump area to the northeast of the palace (inv. n° 6963)²⁶. Some of the tablets found there also show faint, but clear traces of an inked text. So far it has been impossible to determine whether the inked text is identical to the incised one, i.e. is a draft of the last, or if the successive texts were different. Inside the palace, only a few tablets retain tenuous traces of ink.

Moreover, in all the collections, some documents show clear textile imprints or even incorporate tiny bits of textile fibers. A plausible explanation is that they were wrapped in wet linen either in order to protect their contents or, more probably, to prevent the clay from drying up too quickly and cracking²⁷. This dampness could have washed away the ink pigments.

In the light of these remarks, it becomes obvious that ink writing on clay was more common than we thought at first sight²⁸.

2.4 Storing and discarding documents

Most of the documents are mere memos, which must have been valid for a really short span of time. But it seems that the records produced every day by the officials operating in Balat had a highly variable status and life-expectancy. While some of them were wiped out and kept in the palace to be reused, others were disposed of without being recycled. Indeed, all the documents discarded in the dump deposit were perfectly legible, no attempt having been made to erase their text. Though their contents does not differ so much from the tablets found inside the palace, their value or validity, and treatment, happened to be different

25. G. POSENER, *Cinq figurines d'envoûtement* (BdE 101), Cairo, 1987, pp. 2-6. For a recent update on the "execration figurines", A. D. ESPINEL, "A Newly Identified Old Kingdom Execration Text", in E. FROOD & A. McDONALD (dir.), *Decorum and Experience. Essays in Ancient Culture for John Baines*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 26-33. In the 2nd and 1st millennia, some "magical bricks" are similarly made of clay and inscribed with inked texts, while the formulae of some others are incised or engraved: I. RÉGEN, "Une brique magique royale. Birmingham 1969 W 478", *ENiM* 3, 2010, pp. 28-32.
26. Photo and comment: L. PANTALACCI, "Between Old and Middle Kingdom: Palaeography of the clay documents from Balat", in S. A. GÜLDEN, K. VAN DER MOEZEL & U. VERHOEVEN (dir.), *Ägyptologische „Binsen“-Weisheiten III. Formen und Funktionen von Zeichenliste und Paläographie. Akten der internationalen und interdisziplinären Tagung in der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz im April 2016*, (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse Einzelveröffentlichung 15), Mainz, 2018, p. 219.
27. P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, in E. LALOU (dir.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, p. 43. The sealings from the same collection, whether inscribed or not, underwent the same treatment.
28. Another point to be considered is the absence of writing equipment such as calami, but this can be explained by the fire. In the city, scribe's palettes made of clay were found (e. g. Cl. JEUTHE, *Balat* X, pp. 307 et 312, Abb. 128), and the use of red and yellow ochre is attested (L. GIDDY, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 194), though to the best of my knowledge no black ink is reported. In the necropolis, the governors are often portrayed or even buried with their scribal equipment (for the ivory palette with ink pellets of Ima-pepy II, A. MINAULT-GOUT *et al.*, *Balat* II, n° 1888, pp. 120-121).

from the ones found in their original context of use. So far the reason for these distinctions is not understood.

To keep in order and in use collections of documents undergoing constant recycling, it must have been necessary to sort them systematically. Chronology was a major concern. In the storerooms of the southern palace and in the “sondage nord”, collections of dated sealings were kept together²⁹, near the door or container they once sealed, awaiting to be counted and checked. Conversely, very few tablets bear dates. Maybe dating was superfluous in places where administrative control was exercised on a daily basis (the vague locution *m hrw pn*, “today/on the same day”, is sometimes used as a way of dating). So the tablets were only a part of the recording process, while the record date was registered and could be checked by means of other documents.

Tablets were also sorted according to their subject matter. Files were created by tying up together several texts referring to the same topic. Though no such physical tie has been preserved, we observe that some of the documents were pierced through, presumably in order to be tied together by a string or thong. Boring such holes through thick clay plates certainly required dexterity. It was done once the text was written down, since most of the time the hole interrupts or distorts the writing (fig. 4), but while the clay was still damp and malleable, otherwise it might result in breaking the document. Alternatively, we observe grooves left by a stylus pressed against the edges or corners of the tablet while still damp. Such grooves were less destructive; in addition, they facilitated the hold during the writing, and ultimately could be used to tie up together several tablets or maybe to attach the tablet, like a label, to the object(s) to which it related.

Generally the tablets found *in situ* were preserved close to or inside storerooms. Were they kept inside the storerooms, in ceramic pots, like most of the later papyri collections, or in bags or baskets³⁰ ? Did they stand in niches, on wooden benches or shelves³¹ ? Were they simply deposited on top of the various objects piled up in the storerooms ?

Figure 4 – Tablet 7088, a letter pierced through in its center (© Ifao/A. Lecler).



29. L. GIDDY, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 194; N. GRIMAL, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 203 & pl. 45B.

30. On storage methods in Egypt, see C. J. EYRE, *The Use of Documents*, pp. 298-303.

31. This kind of storage is well known in the Near East, particularly in Ebla: P. MATTHIAE, “The archives of the royal palace G of Ebla: distribution and arrangement of the tablets according to the archaeological evidence”, in Kl. Veenhof (dir.), *Cuneiform Archives and Libraries. Papers read at the 30^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Leiden, 4-8 July*

In administrative contexts, outside proper storage areas, the documents were stored in wooden boxes. It was clearly the case in the huge peristyle of the northwest court. In its southwest corner, a platform was installed as a bureau for the scribes, where they could store their files in a wooden box³². The tablets found here refer to the highest level of state management in the oasis: distributions or name-lists concerning the highest palatial staff, including *srw* (fig. 5); provisions for offerings to the gods, etc.

3. THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENTS

Such observations on the status and handling of the documents remain unparalleled so far on Egyptian sites for this early period. As for their contents, the different categories of texts on clay are akin to what is attested in other documentary collections from the Nile Valley, such as those from Abusir, or from Illahun in the Middle Kingdom. They are mainly letters; name-lists; object lists and accounts.

3.1 Letters

Communications between officials form an interesting part of the dossier. The main collection was found near the western entrance to the formal peristyle court referred to above. The letters had to be very concise, considering the restricted space available for writing, even when several sides of the tablet – including edges – were used. So the eulogies used by the Memphite scribes, or the calligraphic layout of the heading, typical of the contemporary letters on papyrus, were left out³³. The letters sent to the palace from outside remain anonymous. Classically, the sender is referred to as *bzk jm(.j)*, “the servant who I am”, while the recipient is also addressed in the 3rd person, as *jry-mdjt nty m djdjt*, “the secretary who is in the council”³⁴. Then three or four short sentences give or ask information about missions and travels, various works and workers, transfer of animals or goods, etc.³⁵

1983 (PIHANS 57), Leiden, 1986, pp. 56-66. Storage on shelves may be impractical for papyri, but is quite appropriate for rectangular clay plates.

32. P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, “Travaux de l’IFAO au cours de l’année 1988-1989”, *BIFAO* 89, 1989, pp. 293-296 (fig. 1-2). Copper hooks found in this area point to a sizeable, portable chest.
33. About the “Memphite formula”, P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, *Les archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakaï (Les papyrus d’Abousir): Traduction et commentaire* (BdE 65), Cairo, 1976, pp. 454-455. These greetings could be emphasized by their calligraphy and bigger size: see for example E. EDEL, “Unpublizierte althieratische Elephantine-Papyri aus Strassburg”, in I. Gamer-Wallert (dir.), *Gegengabe: Festschrift für Emma Brunner-Traut*, Tübingen, 1992, pp. 73-81.
34. P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, in E. Lalou (dir.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, pp. 44-45; L. PANTALACCI, *BIFAO* 98, 1998, pp. 306-307.
35. L. PANTALACCI, *BIFAO* 98, 1998, pp. 311-313.



Figure 5 – A work-list ? from the great peristyle court mixing title holders and unqualified men (n° 4415) (© Ifao/A. Lecler).

Another type of letter, even shorter, begins with two lines giving the title and name of the writer and sender, and proceeds in a direct style, first mentioning the messenger “I sent him to...”, then noting short questions, orders or replies in one or two sentences. It seems these “internal” letters were sent between colleagues working closely together in the same institution or at least in the same city.

3.2 Name-lists

Other documents include lists of personal names. Some are entitled *jmy-rn(f)*³⁶, but most of these texts lack a title, so their purpose remains undefined. Lists of masculine names, ranging from 5 up to 20 men, are not uncommon, and these groups were presumably work gangs³⁷. Usually men who bore no official title or had no professional speciality trade are identified only by their patronym; only

36. *Jmy-rn.f* is not used in the Abusir archive. It appears only at the end of the Old Kingdom, in provincial documents: R. HANNIG, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I. Altes Reich und Erste Zwischenzeit* (Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt 98 - Hannig-Lexica 4), Mainz, 2003, p. 128, referring to H. VANDEKERCKHOVE & R. MÜLLER-WOLLERMANN, *Die Felsinschriften des Wadi Hilâl* (Elkab VI), Turnhout, 2001, /1, pp. 90-91 N 118 (6th Dynasty).

37. About such lists, N. GRIMAL, *BIFAO* 80, 1980, p. 269; N. GRIMAL, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, p. 202; P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, in E. Lalou (dir.), *Les tablettes à écrire*, pp. 47-48; L. PANTALACCI, “Organisation et contrôle du travail à la fin de l’Ancien Empire dans la province oasisite”, in B. Menu (dir.), *L’organisation du travail dans l’antiquité égyptienne et mésopotamienne*

once (n° 7087) a bare title (*jmy-st-ʿ*) was not followed by a personal name. The name of the team supervisor is sometimes added on a line under the vertical columns of the name list³⁸. Some of the longer lists (fig. 5) are a surprising mix of title holders and less qualified men - certainly in a special context.

3.3 Lists of objects and accounts

Inventories of objects are called *rht*³⁹. Also common are accounts relating to commodities: the governorate controlled basic food (mainly grain), but also processed food products (bread and meat), and *mrht*-oil. Leather, textile, mats and ropes, were products of local craftsmanship also widely controlled by the local administration. Boxes and caskets (of wood or wickerwork) feature regularly in the lists, though like the textile and other basketry products, they left faint archaeological traces⁴⁰ or none at all. Some lists are plain inventories of objects, presumably kept in a palace storeroom, such as a short series of weapons or tools (n° 4970+4988); other tablets list belongings of high officials stored in collective facilities (n° 5067). A major obstacle in reading these short texts comes from our poor understanding of the Egyptian vocabulary applying to artefacts.

A number of texts combine anthroponyms and lists of commodities. Those might record distributions – mainly of food – from the governorate supplies. The main staple was grain, sometimes bread: the lists of different kinds of bread presumably refer to the distribution of cult offerings after celebrations⁴¹. Inside the palace precinct, the excavations brought to light several *hwt-k3* chapels dedicated to the successive governors, hosting their long-lasting memorial cults⁴². These cults were vital for the socio-economic patterns of the palace. Temples of kings or gods have not been found so far, and for the moment are not identified in our hieratic documentation. But hieroglyphic monuments and widely-used seals refer to the royal *mrt*-temples of Pepy I and Pepy II⁴³. These sanctuaries may have been located in the northern precinct, or inside/near the southern palace; the governor was the high priest of all cults.

(BdE 151), Cairo, 2010, p. 144. Several examples from the palace are published in G. SOUKIASSIAN, M. WUTTMANN & L. PANTALACCI, *Balat VI*, pp. 335-362.

38. Examples in fragmentary condition: G. SOUKIASSIAN, M. WUTTMANN & L. PANTALACCI, *Balat VI*, pp. 335, 356.

39. P. POSENER-KRIÉGER, *Archives*, pp. 211-212; all the accounts being in kind, the meaning “list” for *rht* suits better the contents and context of many of our documents than the abstract word “montant”.

40. The floors (exceptionally) and nearly all the sealings retain imprints of the various materials which were in contact with the clay.

41. E.g. n° 3690: G. SOUKIASSIAN, M. WUTTMANN & L. PANTALACCI, *Balat VI*, p. 352.

42. G. SOUKIASSIAN, M. WUTTMANN & L. PANTALACCI, *Balat VI*; G. SOUKIASSIAN, “Les sanctuaires de gouverneurs du sud-est du palais”, in G. Soukiassian (dir.), *Balat XI. Monuments funéraires du palais et de la nécropole* (FIFAO 72), Cairo, 2013, pp. 5-24.

43. About the *mrt* of Pepy I, see L. PANTALACCI & G. SOUKIASSIAN, “Un magasin royal dans le palais des gouverneurs de Dakhla”, in S. Vuilleumier, P. Meyrat (dir.), *Sur les pistes du désert. Mélanges offerts à Michel Valloggia*, Geneva, 2019, pp. 191-192, 198-199.

3.4 Glimpses of people from Balat

Elliptic as the documents may be, their number, constant and/or varying features throw some light on significant aspects of a non-memphite, non-royal society.

The visibility of women, as expected, is modest. Few women are named in the documents, be it in the letters, work lists or among the privileged elite. Only a few ladies from the governor's entourage are mentioned – most often, his wife, *hmt-hq3*. In one of our best preserved lists, a complete tablet recording a distribution of meat to members of the highest society⁴⁴, two women are listed, together with their spouses; one of them bore the title “king's daughter”⁴⁵.

The organisation of human resources appears as a major concern in the governorate. Listing work gangs was only a first step; then their activities had to be scheduled and the work plan (*sšm n k3t*) followed. A couple of tablets refer explicitly to the monitoring of collective work on a daily basis (*hrw*)⁴⁶. The workers could be sent on expeditions outside the city (n° 7089), or work in or near the palace⁴⁷, especially for huge construction projects. In such occasions, the gangs came from different, often distant, regions, and did not actually work together, since a specific task was separately assigned to each group (7202)⁴⁸. We are not able to locate all the place-names which appear in our texts, but definitely several of them, written with the determinative of the triple mountain (N 25), were outside Dakhla itself⁴⁹. As already stated, Dakhla was a major node in a network of desert roads leading from the Nile Valley to the west and south, and could occasionally recruit work force available in remote areas, such as other oases in the Libyan desert or maybe northern Sudan⁵⁰.

Apart from (processed) food and labor, the necessary exchange between the pharaonic administration and people from Balat or from neighbouring communities might take different forms. This is attested by another type of lists recording basketry, leather, and above all, textile brought to, or removed from, the palace

44. Tablette n° 7087: L. PANTALACCI & J. LESUR, *BIFAO* 112, 2012, pp. 310-312.

45. L. PANTALACCI, “Famille royale et pouvoir oasite. Une fille royale à Balat à la fin de l’Ancien Empire”, in R. Legros (dir.), *Cinquante ans d'éternité. Jubilé de la Mission Archéologique française de Saqqara* (BdE 162), Cairo, 2015, pp. 301-307.

46. The oldest known document of this type is now the diary of Merer, on a papyrus of the 4th Dynasty very recently found and published: P. TALLET, *Les papyrus de la mer Rouge I. Le journal de Merer; Papyrus Jarf A et B* (MIFAO 136), Cairo, 2017.

47. In view of housing the workforce during their temporary stay in ‘Ayn Asil, series of small rooms and facilities were built to the south-east of the palace: Cl. JEUTHE *et al.*, “Ayn Asil, palais des gouverneurs du règne de Pépy II. Etat des recherches sur la partie sud”, *BIFAO* 113, 2013, pp. 205-207.

48. Both tablets are published in L. PANTALACCI, in B. Menu (dir.), *L'organisation du travail*, pp. 148-153.

49. L. PANTALACCI, in B. Menu (dir.), *L'organisation du travail*, pp. 141-142. For comments on the use of this graphem in the Old Kingdom, see A. LOPRIENO, “Travel and Fiction in Egyptian Literature” in D. B. O'Connor & St. Quirke (dir.), *Mysterious Lands, Encounters with Ancient Egypt*, London, 2003, pp. 34-36.

50. Several toponyms determined by the mountain sign (N 25) occur regularly in connection with people coming to Dakhla. The connection between Upper Egypt and the Nubian Nile through Dakhla, suggested by the inscription of Montuhotep II recently discovered in Gebel ‘Uweinat, is discussed by Fr. FÖRSTER, *Der Abu Ballas-Weg*, pp. 479-487.

storerooms⁵¹. The direction of the transactions is rarely specified and the terms (like *hryt-*) are ambiguous. Besides, a number of lists are totally silent about the products and/or persons involved, and register only numbers.

On the whole, the hieratic documentation from Balat is on line with contemporary data from the Nile valley, though on a modest scale, as it is related to a small population living in specific conditions – but by no means in isolation. The administrative routine was presumably close to what is known elsewhere in Egypt, and was not so much influenced by the peculiar writing medium. Actually, though this practice went widely unnoticed so far in the Nile Valley, writing on clay was more common than we think in the Old Kingdom and occurred elsewhere in Egypt⁵². In addition, the exceptional archaeological context in Balat evidenced the continuity between different types of records – texts and sealings⁵³ – usually found on different media and studied until now separately (if at all). Indeed, keeping administrative records in 3rd millennium Egypt was an activity more diversified than just writing on papyrus.

51. Deliveries or distributions of similar products occur in Papyrus Gebelein IV, involving many persons in two villages (P. POSENER-KRIÉGER & S. DEMICHELIS, *I papiri di Gebelein. Scavi G. Farina 1935* (Studi del Museo Egizio di Torino, Gebelein 1), Turin, 2004, pp. 18-20 et pl. 30-36).
52. In the Memphite region, several royal sites yielded numerous collections of sealings, but until recently these objects often passed unnoticed or poorly studied: historiographical summary in J. S. NOLAN, *Mud sealings and fourth Dynasty administration at Giza*, PhD University of Chicago, Chicago, 2010, pp. 119-124 (<https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/research-archives-library/dissertations/mud-sealings-and-fourth-dynasty-administration-giza>). For the collection of incised sealing from the Pottery Mound in Giza, see his data base: <http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/research/is/scholars/nolan/catIncised.html>; also M. TORCIA RIGILLO, *Giza: cretule dall'area delle piramidi*, Rome, 2003, pp. 39, 83-103.
53. This is the main point of M. S. PINARELLO, *An Archaeological Discussion of Writing Practice: Deconstruction of the Ancient Egyptian Scribe* (GHP Egyptology 23), London, 2015, pp. 117-148, elaborating on recent archaeological evidence, especially from Balat.