

**BEYOND THE NILE:
LONG TERM PATTERNS IN NOMAD-STATE INTERACTIONS
ACROSS NORTHEAST AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

The history of Northeast Africa is dominated by a “Nile Narrative”, a common story that places the urban and riverine cultures of Egypt and Nubia at its centre. While the various iterations of Egyptian and Nubian (Kushite) territorial states shaped the macro-history of the region, this enduring narrative often homogenizes and reduces a much more complex world which consisted of a milieu of nomadic peoples. Indigenous to the vast deserts east and west of the river, these nomads are a vital element in the macro-history of the Nile basin, constantly interacting with their urban neighbours, forming diasporas, conducting trade, and preventing exploitation of their homelands. While these patterns endured for millennia, pronounced episodes of conflict, subjugation, and even state formation abound in the record. This analysis takes a macro-historical view to nomads in Nilotic history, proposing a new model for nomadic polities and Nile states in ancient Northeast Africa.

KEYWORDS

Ancient Egypt; Nubia; Nomadism; States.

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1. Introduction

The fertility brought about by the Egyptian and Sudanese Nile Valley allowed for one of the densest urban populations in the African continent, creating a myriad of different dynasties, states, and cities that dominated trade and politics across Northeast Africa. Despite the Nile-centric axis of this world (and our study of it), almost every boundary of the Egyptian or Nubian states were bordered by desert and savannah ecologies, the abode of herders or more properly ‘pastoralist nomads’. From the Marmarica coastal steppe of the Mediterranean littoral, to the Atbai Hills of the Red Sea, to the Sahel west of the Upper Nubian Nile in Kordofan, Northeast Africa was dominated by nomads. In this thinking, sedentary urban groups on the Nile are spatially the exception rather than the rule, with urban peoples occupying a thin ribbon of agricultural potential on the banks of the river and select oases. The rest of Northeast Africa was ‘nomad land’. The history of nomad-state interactions is one of constant transgression of each other’s realms, with nomadic peoples coming to the Nile for employment and grazing and Nile peoples journeying through the desert for resource exploitation and trade. This Nile-desert nexus is one of the longest documented case studies in nomad-urban interactions in world history.

While it is true to say that the Nile provided the farmland which sustained urban settlement from the Mediterranean coast to Sudan, the river differed considerably across its length so as to make nomad-state interactions somewhat different in specific regions of Egypt and Sudan. The Nile in Egypt provides for an extremely fertile and wide floodplain, making intensive agriculture and high-density settled urbanism possible. But in Sudan, whole stretches of the Nile are ill-suited for intensive agriculture such as the Batn el-Hajar (‘Belly of Stones’) or the rocky Fourth Cataract, with such regions of the Nile exhibiting a more evenly proportioned mix of agricultural and pastoralist practices among its population.² Indeed, Nubian cultures would always have a slightly higher pastoralist quotient than their Egyptian neighbours, producing different kinds of ecological bases for Nubian polities than any iteration of a ‘pharaonic’ state.³ Furthermore, in the more southerly latitudes, the Nile in Sudan cuts through environments that receive the northerly reaches of the Africa summer monsoon, creating savannah-like environments filled with acacia trees and grasses all fed by seasonally flowing wadi

² For the local geography, see Auenmüller (2019).

³ Emberling (2014); Edwards (1998).

systems. Compared to the hyper-arid deserts of the Egyptian desert, the Sudanese deserts sustain a much higher density of nomadic populations, which in turn eventually give way to settled ‘agro-pastoralist’ zones outside the Nile in regions like Kassala, Kordofan, and Darfur. These geographic dynamics provide for a generally higher frequency of nomadic interactions along the Nubian Nile than in Egypt,⁴ although this is partly balanced by the significant nomadic habitations at Egypt’s extreme north along the Mediterranean littoral in Libya and the Sinai as well as the Oases of the Western Desert.

Each specific desert ecology surrounding the Nile was generally inhabited by distinct ethno-linguistic groups, each practicing a mix of cattle, sheep, goat, and later camel pastoralism. Nomads needed to move frequently across the landscape as a necessity of their pastoralist lifestyle. Despite their desert origins and homelands, the Nile Valley had a magnetic pull for many of these nomads. Its demographic and political weight as well as its diverse economies and markets were irresistible for pastoralist communities. Almost all nomadic groups in Northeast Africa were periodically represented on the Nile in diaspora communities and ‘frontier’ settlements, with distinct ebbs and flows in various historical periods. This kind of historical pattern remains until the present day, with desert pastoralists continuing their interaction with the Nile in the form of seasonal transhumance for grazing, community building (diasporas), exploitation, and acculturation, among some of the ‘modes’ and processes of interaction.⁵ Historiographically speaking, the importance of the ‘agricultural centre’ for desert nomads in such paradigms is often over-stated. The cultural and economic life of nomads, and the centre of gravity of groups such as the Blemmyes and Libyans, lies squarely in the desert. So too, their cultural heritage and expression of ‘homeland’ is usually the desert. Nomadic groups, even when they travel and live outside their homeland, often exhibit significant ‘nomadic heritage’,⁶ keeping ties with their brethren in the desert and retaining distinct cultural practices and foodways that would mark their legacies as nomadic. Anthropological literature has identified numerous types, stages, and gradations between ‘nomad’ and ‘sedentary’ lifestyles so one may speak of ‘agro-pastoralist’ or ‘semi-nomadic’ societies in many sub-regions or even more specific modes of transhumance like ‘tethered nomadism’.⁷ For instance, the Beja of the Atbai Hills are

⁴ Cf. Welsby (2002: 187-189); Brass (2015).

⁵ For case studies of arid land nomadism and urban-state interactions, see Murray (1935) and Hobbs (1989).

⁶ For the archaeology of nomads on the Nile, see Näser (2012) and Gatto (2014). For ‘nomadic identity’, see Hobbs (1989: 8-11); Szuchman (2009: 3).

⁷ Szuchman (2009); Wendrich & Barnard (2008).

largely nomadic but to this day, when rainfall is conducive, will settle in one spot for a part of the year and grow a small crop of millet or sorghum.⁸ Scholarship sometimes emphasizes definitional debates as to whether certain ancient or contemporary societies are truly ‘nomadic’ after assessing their level of transhumance and integration into agricultural economies. This approach, while relevant, sometimes relegates the place of ‘nomadic identity’ and self-expression of identity in societies which might no longer practice seasonal transhumance but nevertheless stress pastoralism as a cultural practice.

Nomads abounded all frontiers of the Egyptian and Kushite (Nubian) states, Northeast Africa’s two most stable political and territorial institutions (Figure 1). Likewise, the Aksumite state of highland Ethiopia was also surrounded by nomadic and agro-pastoralist zones on most of its northern and eastern frontiers, with the southern frontier constituting a continuation of agriculture fertility of the highlands. The Eastern Desert of Egypt and Sudan (Atbai) was dominated by groups termed ‘Medjay’, ‘Blemmyes’, and later ‘Beja’ in Egyptian, Graeco-Roman, and Arab documents. So-called ‘Asiatic’ nomads, mainly Semitic-speakers, inhabited the Sinai borderlands, stretching between historical Edom, the Mediterranean and Red littorals as well as the Eastern Delta. To the west of Egypt, along the Mediterranean littoral and Marmarica plateau stretching to Gebel Akhdar and probably beyond, a group of ‘Libyan’ nomads dominated the deserts, the so-called Tjemehu and Tjehenu of Egyptian records. All these populations are generally well-acknowledged in both modern scholarship and ancient sources, but their histories are always orientated as a facet of their relationship to the pharaonic state without due recourse to their indigenous economies, modes of production, or local politics. Each of these regions had its own specific dynamics, natural resources, and trade relationship with urban centres. This contribution will attempt to elevate the importance of nomads in the history of the greater Nile Valley by commenting on major patterns and processes of nomad-state relations and political ascendancies amongst these desert nomads. Such periods of ‘nomadic ascendancy’ are well acknowledged in the worlds of Central Asia and Iran, as well as China and ‘inner Asia’,⁹ but only cursorily treated in the Nile basin. There are enough case studies of such pastoralist political formations to posit a similar, but not wholly identical, macro-historical pattern in the case studies in Northeast Africa. Several distinct historical episodes such as the Libyan Dynasties of the early First Millennium BCE and the ‘Rise of the Blemmyes’ in late

⁸ Morton (1989, p. 185). For dry-land agriculture, see Lancelotti et al. (2019).

⁹ Influential studies are Khazanov (1994: 233-263) and Barfield (2001).

antiquity illustrate the impact of nomadic populations on one of the world's most ancient agricultural centres.

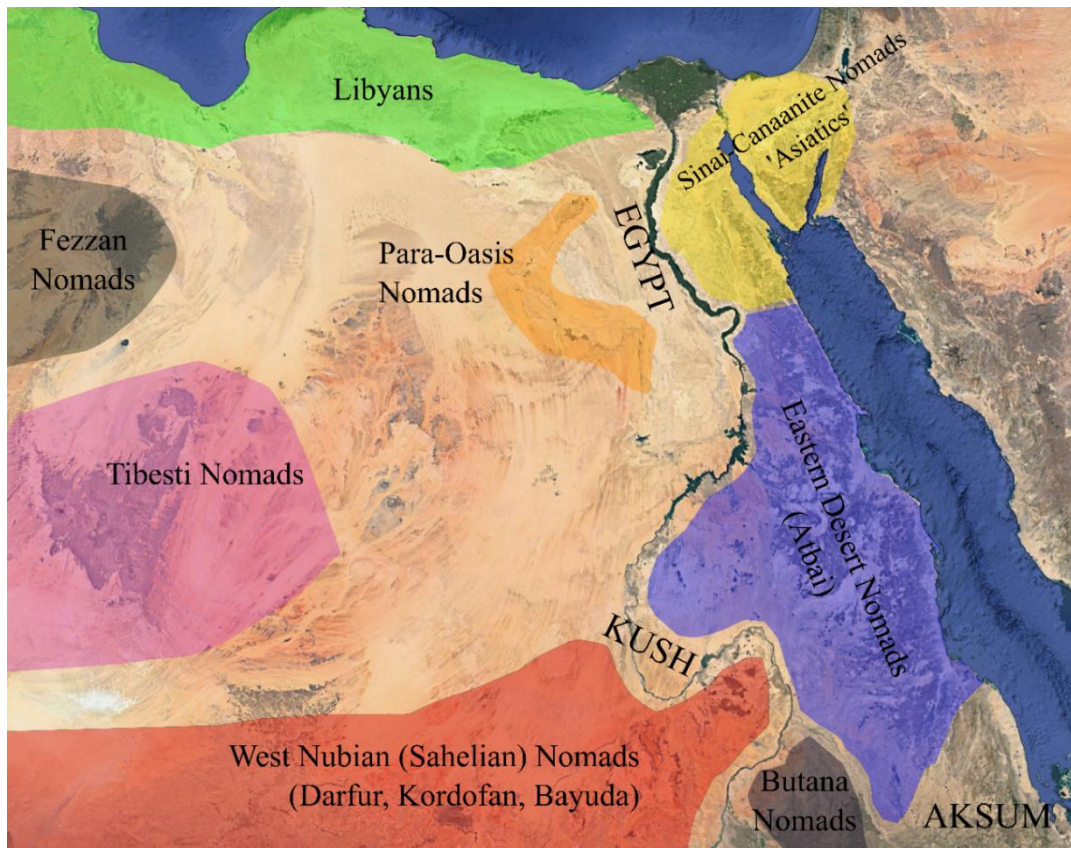


Figure 1. Broad zones of nomadism outside the Nile Valley.

The zones do not accord to single nomadic groups but rather broad ecological zones, often overlapping with ethno-linguistic groups and some material horizons.

Beyond these ‘foreign nomads’ living in the deserts far away from the Nile, a significant community of pastoralist nomads seems to be ever-present in the Nile Valley itself, sometimes called in scholarship ‘peripatetic nomads’.¹⁰ These nomads could sometimes be foreign ethnic groups residing on the Nile, but in some cases there is no reason to believe that all such nomads were ‘foreign’. Egyptian texts had a specific phrase ‘ones who are upon the sand’ or ‘travelers of the sand’ (*hr.y-šʿ, nmi-šʿ*) for such nomadic people. One of the earliest extant papyri dossiers in Egyptian history, a kind of village roster called the ‘Gebelein papyri’ (c. 2550 BCE), mention a few such ‘ones who are upon the sand’ amongst a village dominated by farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. All the

¹⁰ Näser (2012).

‘ones who are upon the sand’ have Egyptian names such as Nefret.¹¹ If this roster from Gebelein is indicative of a standard Egyptian village, it would seem that some small part of Egyptian village life always contained such pastoralist nomads, perhaps they were herdsmen who itinerantly roamed the near deserts for pasture, also engaging in hunting or other activities.

2. Desert Nomadism

The deserts and savannah of ancient Northeast Africa had a particular type of nomadism inherited from the ruminants adopted since the neolithic – well suited to its semi-arid ecological context. The desert ecologies only allowed for a select few different ruminants, primarily, goat, sheep, and cattle, and even here they must be managed effectively and in low enough densities as to not stress local vegetation and water resources. After the termination of the Neolithic Wet Phase in Northeast Africa, the cattle largely vanished from nearby deserts where there was no permanent surface water.¹² As witnessed in rock art and through other cultural outputs such as cattle bucrania in burials, cattle were given disproportional cultural and symbolic importance vis-à-vis their small ratio in herds compared to sheep and goats. This is generally explained through a social-ritual importance attached to cattle in many Northeast African societies, something which is still observable in the Nilotic populations and Cushitic groups in the greater Horn of Africa.¹³ The horse is not found frequently on the archaeological record, although is said to have made a large impact on Kushite states where the pasture of savannah ecologies (rather than riverine floodplains) were comparatively more common and thus conducive to the rearing of large populations of horses.¹⁴ The date of the arrival and corresponding domestication of the camel into such nomadic societies is one of the most debated issues in Northeast African archaeology.¹⁵ At the latest, by the turn of the common era the camel seems to have been embedded in pastoralist communities of the greater Nile basin,

¹¹ Posener-Krieger (2004: Tav. 1 (A17, B6); Tav. 2 (44-45), Tav. 13 (78), Tav. 38 (35)). See also Moreno Garcia (2014, p. 46)

¹² Jesse et al. (2004); Bobrowski et al. (2013).

¹³ See di Lernia (2013); Chaix (2001). Note also that one might distinguish pastoralist herds kept alongside permanent bodies of water (the Nile, lakes, swamps *etc*) where the ratio of cattle is appreciably higher like at Kerma (Chaix & Dubosson 2012, p. 189) from arid rangelands where the quotient of cattle in the herd is much smaller (cf. Morton 1989, p. 114).

¹⁴ Trigger (1965, p. 131); Heidorn (1997).

¹⁵ Esser & Esser (1982); Bechhaus-Gerst (1991b, p. 44); Manzo (2004); Cooper (2020a); Cuvigny (2020).

excepting highlands and humid ecologies to which it is wholly unsuited biologically.¹⁶ The arrival of this ruminant might go some way to explaining the prominence of nomadic peoples in Nile history of late antiquity, a feature witnessed for both the Blemmyes and the Noba as well as the Saracens of the Sinai borderlands.

This broad type of arid land nomadism extended well beyond the Nile basin to the Horn of Africa and as far south as Tanzania, the southernmost extension of Afroasiatic peoples. Such nomadism was also practiced to the west across Sahelian latitudes of North Africa, the ecological interface between the hyper-arid Sahara and the savannah climes further south. Within this huge ‘nomadic sphere’, Northeast African nomadism differed appreciably. Transhumant or seasonal migrations are highly specific and engineered according to the needs of ruminants and local weather conditions as well as interactions with agricultural peoples. The type of livestock kept by a nomadic group could dictate specific movements, as could the unreliable aberrations in rainfall. Generally speaking, movements according to ‘summer’ and ‘winter’ pastures are recognized in most ethnographic research, but even this categorization is somewhat simplistic. Mobile shelters ‘tents’ were constructed with differing materials such as wood, matting, and skins, all of which could be transported on beasts of burden like the donkey or camel.¹⁷ While all such societies had a certain reliance on the sustenance of their herds and their meat and milk, the proportion of fishing, hunting, mixed-agriculture, or trade in cereals also differed markedly. For those pastoralists in proximity to the Nile, a significant part of their transhumance was geared to finding pasture on the Nile riverbanks – an activity that also promoted trade with urban regimes, integration with local communities, and employment within these urban societies.

3. ‘Asiatic’ Pastoralists

Despite the obvious inadequacies of the term ‘Asiatic’ in Egyptological literature, there remains no overarching term for the nomadic pastoralists who inhabited the Sinai borderlands and adjacent regions of the Gulf of Suez, the alternative use of ‘Canaanites’ or ‘Semites’ hardly rectify these issues. The inhabitants of the Sinai had been interacting with Egypt since the predynastic. Early phases of contact apparently comprised of some violent confrontations between the Egyptian state and these nomads in the Sinai ‘mineral

¹⁶ Wilson (1984, p. 17).

¹⁷ For different mobile structures (tents), see Prussin (1995).

zone'.¹⁸ This dynamic is one of the earliest examples of a continual pattern in nomad-state relations in Northeast Africa, with the Egyptian state's desire for desert resources and exploitation of nomadic lands fueling violent confrontation.¹⁹ It seems likely that these nomadic inhabitants of the Sinai and Egypt's northeastern periphery, belonging to the material horizon of the Canaanite 'Early Bronze Age' (c. 3300-2000 BC), were Semitic speaking groups who traversed between wells and pasture in the peninsula,²⁰ periodically coming into the Nile Valley, especially the Eastern Delta. Viewed in the *longue durée*, these movements of pastoralists into the Eastern Delta would foreshadow the much more pronounced historical episode of Canaanite influence under the Hyksos in the Second Intermediate Period.

Egyptian sources speak of a slew of groups in the Sinai and southern Levant such as the aforementioned 'sand-dwellers' (*ḥr.yw-š*'), the *Aamu*, the *Iuntiu* and later *Shasu* (New Kingdom) and *Saracens* and *Arabs* (Graeco-Roman period).²¹ However, it is not at all clear if in every instance (except maybe with 'sand-dwellers') one can discern whether these 'Asiatics' specifically designated pastoralists of the Sinai and southern Palestine (Edom, Moab, Midian) or additionally settled groups from further north in Palestine and Syria. Likewise, it is unclear whether one should at all attempt to segment and differentiate urban and nomadic populations in the southern Levant which probably practiced an adaptive mixture of pastoralism and seasonal agriculture. While violent episodes between Egyptians and Asiatic nomads abound in the texts, for the most part there was a symbiotic relationship between Asiatics and the Egyptian state. An Asiatic diaspora of sorts formed throughout the Middle Kingdom and all successive periods, and Egyptians regularly employed Asiatics on expeditionary ventures.²² For Egyptians, the 'Asiatic' ethnicity was intimately connected with their cultural practice of transhumance. The Egyptian labels made specific reference to their transhumant and herding nature. The word for 'Asiatic', *šm.w*, while originating in a foreign semitic tongue and borrowed into Egyptian language, had by the Demotic stage of the language become the word for 'shepherd'. Likewise the word *Shasu* (*ššs.w*) meant 'one who roams', also having a later meaning 'shepherd'.²³ Egyptians seem to have sharply distinguished nomadic peoples

¹⁸ Talbot & Laisney (2012).

¹⁹ For New Kingdom nomad-state resource problems, see Schulman (1982); Zibelius-Chen (1994).

²⁰ See the discussion in Cooper (2020b, pp. 93-98).

²¹ For the complex ethnic terminology on this borderland, see Desanges (1989); Cooper (2020b, pp. 93-95).

²² Mourad (2015); Winnicki (2009, pp. 145-173).

²³ Redford (1986, p. 131); Cooper (2020b, p. 76); Westendorf (1965, p. 5).

from their own agricultural ways. One Middle Kingdom literary text, *The Instructions of Merikare*, emphasizes the nomadic life of these Asiatics:²⁴

The vile Asiatic is miserable because of the place wherein he is,
Shortage of water, lack of trees,
And the paths thereof difficult because of the mountains.
He has never settled in one place,
But plagued by want, he wanders the deserts on foot.

While the text's subject is specific to 'Asiatics', such deterministic notions of geography and otherness could be reproduced for any foreign and nomadic groups whose lifestyle was alien to Egyptians. One Egyptian text even implies the most basic food in the world was that possessed by the nomads of the land of Ibhet (= Eastern Desert).²⁵ In these cases, Egyptians compounded the 'othering' of nomads by linking their nomadic lifestyle of movement to a life of wretchedness, a charge laid against all foreigners who lived differently to Egyptians. As Egypt was a riverine land of plenty providing for the norms of agricultural existence, the desert was a land of destitution breeding want and misery.

4. *The Noba and 'West Nubian' Deserts*

Much further south, in the vast deserts west of the Nubian Nile towards Kordofan and Darfur, there was a pastoralist group known as the 'Noba'. The history of the early Noba is known from various Graeco-Roman authors and Meroitic inscriptions and what scant information we have of the early 'Noba' suggests that the group had a pastoralist and nomadic element. Strabo, the first historian to mention them (3rd Century BCE), describes them living west of the Nubian Nile.²⁶ Whatever the case, they frequently came into violent contact with Kushites and were one of their emblematic enemies, akin to the 'nine-bows' of Egypt (Figure 2). With the fall of the Kushite state, this group had become the new elite of the Middle Nile Valley and eventually formed a new series of kingdoms, transforming Kushite Nubia into the Christian kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria, and Alwa.

²⁴ Translation following Fischer-Elfert (2005, p. 332).

²⁵ For translation and analysis, see Sauneron (1959).

²⁶ FHN II, no. 109.

This transformation of Nubia in older scholarship is considered as a migration, but archaeological narratives of ‘Post-Meroitic’ Nubia have emphasized population continuity,²⁷ earmarking a strong possibility that ‘Noba’ communities had always been a (growing) part of the milieu of the Nubian Nile. The language of the elite shifted from Meroitic to Old Nubian, signaling some cultural and linguistic changes throughout the Nile. If the desert origin of Strabo’s Noba is true, then they once practiced pastoralism or agro-pastoralism by virtue of living in arid homelands of the Bayuda desert and further west towards Kordofan. Indeed, the ‘Noba’ transition on the Nile is in some areas marked by increasing archaeological signs of pastoralism compared to previous periods.²⁸ This suggests a complex set of dynamics and relationships between subsistence foodways, political arrangements, and ethnicity in the new order of the Nubian Nile.



Figure 2. A copper figurine of a ‘Noba’ enemy produced by Kushites. The Meroitic text on the figurine identifies the person as a ‘Noba King’ (=EA 65222).

© The Trustees of the British Museum.

The Noba evidently raided and wrested control parts of the Sudanese Nile from old regimes. For ancient chroniclers, the ‘Noba’ phenomenon involved a reconfiguration and migratory period across the Middle Nile, although the narrative is hardly clear and archaeological analyses stress continuity with the previous ‘Meroitic’ period rather than

²⁷ Edwards (2018); Obluski (2010, pp. 163-167).

²⁸ Adams (1965, pp. 168-169); Obluski (2010, pp. 78-80).

disruption.²⁹ Aksumite texts speak of Noba approaching the Atbara river on the eastern side of the Nubian Nile, raids which spurred the Aksumite empire into defensive action.³⁰ It is wholly uncertain whether these ‘Noba’ of Aksumite texts were the same groups as the ‘Noba’ of Meroitic and Greek texts, and indeed there is some indication that ‘Noba’ in Post-Meroitic Nubia may have been a catch-all term for a slew of different peoples who became newly prominent in the embers of the vanishing Meroitic empire.³¹

5. *Libyan Pastoralists*

The ‘Libyans’, like the ‘Asiatics’, are a quasi-Egyptological invented entity, and are a rather difficult group to define and encapsulate. This word itself came from the moniker Libu (*Lbw*) recorded by the Egyptians in the Ramesside period (c. 1290-1050 BCE).³² Modern scholars, conflating this with the modern connotations of the word ‘Libya’, have now used this term to refer to any peoples broadly west of the Nile, usually including the regions of the Mediterranean littoral of the Marmarica as far as Gebel Akhdar. This sometimes also includes the areas around the oases of Siwa and Kufra, the Qattara depression and beyond. The exact nature of the continuity between these ‘later’ Libyans of the New Kingdom to the Libyans of the earlier Third and Second Millenniums BCE, labelled Tjehenu and Tjehemu in Egyptian records, is uncertain.³³ From the perspective of Egyptologists, most ‘Libyan’ interactions occurred on the Mediterranean littoral, which after all is a relatively fertile zone with plentiful grasslands and even possibility of limited agricultural in the wadi-systems emptying into the sea (Figure 3).³⁴ By the New Kingdom at least, Libyans had also settled in the oases, perhaps using a network of desert paths connecting the Mediterranean coast with the distant oases of Kufra and Siwa and finally the ‘Egyptian’ oases of Bahariyya, Kharga, Farafra, and Dakhla.³⁵ On the Mediterranean coast, Ramesside kings constructed an ambitious chain of forts, linking the eastern Delta with the distant desert in a venture that was likely aimed at controlling maritime and terrestrial trade. This was a deliberate imperialistic policy that

²⁹ Edwards (2018).

³⁰ Hatke (2013, pp. 107-109, 114-122).

³¹ Bechhaus-Gerst (1991a) stresses the multi-ethnic nature of the Noba.

³² Wainwright (1962, p. 93, n. 8).

³³ Cf. Manassa (2003, pp. 82-85).

³⁴ Rieger et al. (2012); Snape (2003, pp. 94-96). See also Bates (1914).

³⁵ Roe (2008, pp. 498-504); Manassa (2003, pp. 99-113).

seems to be without precedent in earlier periods,³⁶ making it certain that Egyptian kings were responding to a ‘Libyan problem’. While interactions with Libyans are well-known from a variety of sources in the preceding millennia,³⁷ there is nothing compared to the regularity and familiarity of Egypto-Libyan contacts that occurs in the Ramesside period. How deep into historical ‘Libya’ this contact zone emerged is unknown; surely the Libyans of Egyptian texts accord to those groups of the Mediterranean littoral as well as Siwa Oasis, and perhaps even further afield in Gebel Akhdar (Cyrenaica).³⁸



Figure 3. The Marmarica littoral, the abode of the ‘Libyans’.
Picture of Wadi Hamara, courtesy of Linda Hulin.

The Libyan political impact on the Nile seems to have taken a rather different trajectory than other nomadic peoples. Ecological changes such as failing rainfall or pressures on the carrying capacity of the Mediterranean littoral have been posited as causes for Libyan encroachment on the Eastern Delta. At the same time, there is a reason to suggest that what happened in the Libyan wars of the Ramesside period was a more violent and pronounced version of the slow and recurrent population movements that the Delta had been experiencing for over a millennium. Such causes coincided with an

³⁶ Morris (2005, pp. 621-629).

³⁷ Cooney (2011).

³⁸ See Ritner (2009, p. 43).

element of political opportunism and the economic downturns of the late Ramesside state. Egyptian texts make clear that these ‘Libyan’ groups of the Ramesside period comprised a constellation of tribes who sometimes acted in concert.³⁹ This included the Libu, Meshwesh, Has, Isbet (var. Seped), Mahas, Pit, Shaman, and Qeheq. Two tribes stood above the rest in this confederation, the Meshwesh and Libu, groups who would eventually seize control of key parts of the Delta, become mercenaries, and themselves emerge as a new elite in the Delta.

6. *The Medjay and the Blemmyes*

As with other nomadic groups on Egypt’s periphery, the peoples of the Eastern Desert appear in Egyptian texts since the Early Dynastic. By the Old Kingdom the term ‘Medja’ (toponym) is found in Egyptian texts, a word which slowly crystallizes in Egyptian literate circles to an ethnonym ‘Medjay’.⁴⁰ Archaeologically speaking, the Medjay are a significant problem. There is no material horizon that can be equivocally connected with these Medjay, even if there have been attempts to link the Pan-Grave and Gebel Mokram cultures with the nomadic inhabitants of the Eastern Desert.⁴¹ Whatever the case, some difficulties of the archaeological ‘materiality of nomadism’ seem to be relevant here for our archaeological search for the ‘Medjay’. Medjay mercenaries are present in the Old Kingdom military and expeditionary apparatus, while in the Middle Kingdom there are plentiful records of Medjay living on the Nile and in the desert.⁴² Some Medjay had formed a diaspora on the Nile while other groups remained in the desert but nevertheless had interactions with their Nile neighbours. By the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000-1650 BCE), Egyptian scribes were aware of the names of some tribal rulers and territorial zones across the Medjay desert, and by the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1050 BCE), successive Egyptian officials attempted to quell local groups across the Eastern Desert who interrupted Egypt’s all important gold supplies. Some of these Eastern Desert groups also cooperated with Egyptian expeditions, fighting off rival tribes for Egyptians,⁴³ so there can be no simple universal notion of enemy and ally in nomad-state relations, rather a complex patchwork of local allegiances and rivalries. These dynamics between the

³⁹ Bates (1914, pp. 46-72). Ritner (2009, p. 47) calls them a ‘coalition’.

⁴⁰ Cooper (2020b, pp. 158-170); Liszka (2011).

⁴¹ Manzo (2017b); de Souza (2019, pp. 7-30).

⁴² Liszka (2011); Cooper (2021).

⁴³ Helck (1967); Cooper (2022).

Egyptians and Eastern Desert nomads also extended to the Kushite state in the First Millennium BCE, who likewise were tested by Eastern Desert groups such as the *Rhrhs* and a new group who they termed ‘Belahiu’ (*Brhw*), a label that is no doubt an early form of the word ‘Blemmyes’.

By the Graeco-Roman period, these Eastern Desert ‘Blemmyes’ had become increasingly prominent both in the textual sources and archeological record, with new pastoralist settlements and cemeteries cropping up in the desert from Coptos to Kassala. Greek, Coptic, Arabic, and Ge‘ez (Ethiopic) documents speak of Blemmyean raids on urban states, and also an extensive diaspora living within these states. They even mention episodes of Blemmyean territorial control of the Nile River. In the first half of the 5th Century CE the Blemmyes had seized the northern part of Lower Nubia from the declining Kushites and a retreating Roman administration. They made the temple of Kalabsha a kind of ‘Nile’ headquarters, patronizing the cult to the local god Mandulis, and extracting wealth from their new ‘Nile province’. One of the kings of this newly ascendent Blemmyean polity, Phonen, warred against the rival Noba, a war which ultimately ended Blemmyean control of the Lower Nubian Nile c. 450 CE. Taking cues from their Nile neighbours, the Blemmyes conducted an administrative apparatus in the manner of urban states, creating written decrees and laws in Greek and Coptic, while also enacting taxation of agricultural holdings.⁴⁴ These efforts do not seem to have ‘converted’ the Blemmyes to an urbane existence, however. Blemmyean rulers had significant authority over their realm and seemed to have travelled their desert and Nile domains, touring Lower Nubia while maintaining a life in the interior desert. They never lost their desert heritage. Even when they were living on the Nile, one of the primary concerns of King Phonen seems to have been his herd.

7. *Desert Herds on the Nile*

There are records for all these pastoralist groups bringing their families and herds to the Nile Valley. At times, this may have been an emergency measure to avoid drought or conflict in the desert, but in several cases there is reason to believe that pasturing on the Nile Valley would have been a regular part of their seasonal movements. Moreno-Garcia has advanced a thesis for the western Delta as an important node for Libyan

⁴⁴ FHN III, nos 331-343.

pastoralists since the Old Kingdom.⁴⁵ Egyptian frontier missives reported that Edomite nomads were bringing their herds to the eastern Delta in the Ramesside period.⁴⁶ The data is even more explicit with Medjay and Blemmyean nomads of the Eastern Desert. These nomads are encountered in numerous Egyptian settlements throughout the 12th and 13th Dynasties, with a particularly large concentration in the Lower Nubian borderlands. This is ascertainable not only from documentary records like the missives from Egyptian fortresses (*The Semna Dispatches*) and the records of the Theban palace (papyrus Boulaq 18),⁴⁷ but also verifiable archaeologically from the many Pan-Grave sites in Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt, if these do indeed represent ‘Eastern Desert nomads’. While we only have access to the cemeteries of the Pan-Grave people rather than any settlements, these cemeteries convey a rich faunal assemblage suggestive of their nomadic nature and heritage. The precise ratio of animal remains (goat, sheep, cattle) occurring in Pan-Grave cemeteries is largely consistent with a standard pastoralist herd in Northeast Africa, and thus the burial assemblage likely represents the reality of the living nomadic herd.⁴⁸

The reasons for pastoralists taking their herd to the Nile are manifold and not necessarily motivated by the singular purpose of grazing on riverbanks. As the herding subsistence pattern is the major foodway for pastoralists, it stands to reason that herds may have been taken with the travelling family units on trading ventures, raids, or even alongside Egyptian expeditions. Napatan chronicles and narratives mention the capture of herds and families in violent episodes with nomads on the Nubian Nile.⁴⁹ The Egyptian and Kushite states may have been able to easily profit through the influx of such seasonal movements by facilitating trading nodes specialized in livestock trade. This seems to be the backdrop to relatively well-known Egyptian sources such as papyrus Anastasi VI which describe nomads from Edom seeking pasture in the Eastern Delta, the ‘Aamu’ traders depicted in the tomb of Beni Hassan, or the ‘foreign’ herders in the tomb of Ukhhotep.⁵⁰ Such trade would have also brought coveted desert wealth such as gold, aromatics, oils, leather but most of all the live animals themselves. For example, ‘Libyan cattle’ are mentioned in a number of Egyptian documents.⁵¹ Cities like Gebelein seem to have acted as an important hub for Eastern Desert nomads both in the Pharaonic period

⁴⁵ Moreno Garcia (2015).

⁴⁶ Gardiner (1937, p. 76).

⁴⁷ Scharff (1922); Smither (1945).

⁴⁸ Bangsgaard (2013).

⁴⁹ Török (2009, pp. 368-372); FHN I, no. 34.

⁵⁰ Gardiner (1937, p. 76); Kamrin (2013); Fischer (1959, pp. 249-251).

⁵¹ Ritner (2009, pp. 43-44).

and late antiquity.⁵² The major towns of the western Delta seemed likewise to have developed as ‘pastoralist-Nile’ nodes in respect to Libyan nomads and cattle trade.⁵³

Some episodes of ‘nomads on the Nile’ might have been part of seasonal cycles, but we should also reckon with periodic episodes of pronounced climatic change and ecological stress that brought nomads in larger numbers to the river. This has been proposed by a number of authorities in relation to the Pan-Grave and Medjay on the Nile, with special reference being paid to a missive from the fortress of Mirgissa who reported that the Medjay said that ‘the desert is dying of hunger’.⁵⁴ Even short episodes of drought, which are comparatively common for instance in the modern Atbai desert, might force nomads to retreat to safer water resources for a time. For example, the 1980s Atbai drought wiped out approximately 75-90 percent of herds, taking years for the Beja to restock to a pre-drought size.⁵⁵ The impact of these events on local politics and movements cannot be underestimated. One of the notable consequences of drought, even in recent history, is the movement of pastoralists to agricultural settlements with a shift in employment to diverse roles in urban communities. In ancient societies with little food contingency or assistance from aid-agencies, such events must have been catastrophic for the pastoralist community.

Such episodes of grazing, herding, and trading may have acted as ‘stepping stones’ towards the emergence of diaspora communities in the Nile Valley. Activities for which desert communities had natural dependencies and skills such as hunting, tracking, and mineral exploitation facilitated their integration into Egyptian bureaucracies and expeditionary activities. Nomadic diaspora communities are documented in almost all periods both on the archaeological and textual record, but it has proven difficult to correlate and marry these two categories of material and textual evidence together to produce a holistic narrative of nomadic habitations. The archaeological horizon of the ‘Pan-Grave culture’ for example has the appearance of one such diaspora group, stretching from Middle Egypt to Lower Nubia, but the data for Pan-Grave occupations on the Nile hardly allows for a simple equation with the Eastern Desert Medjay.⁵⁶ The situation of the nomadic ‘Trogodytes’ of the Graeco-Roman period is similarly murky

⁵² There is evidence of ‘Medjay cattle’ from the Eastern Desert at Gebelein, see Vernus (1986: 141-143). There is some evidence for nomads at Gebelein in the First Intermediate Period (Fischer 1961) and more explicit evidence in late antiquity (Darnell & Manassa, 2020).

⁵³ Moreno Garcia (2015).

⁵⁴ Kraemer & Liszka (2016); Liszka & Kraemer (2016); Smither (1945, p. 9).

⁵⁵ Hjort-af-Ornäs & Dahl (1991, p. 160).

⁵⁶ Liszka & de Souza (2021).

from an archaeological perspective.⁵⁷ With the Blemmyes of the late Roman period our narrative is slightly better developed, with both ‘Blemmyean’ satellite settlements known throughout the near and interior desert as well as plentiful remains of locally produced ceramic type ‘Eastern Desert Ware’, both of which can be more or less correlated with the plentiful historical and epigraphic records for Blemmyean occupations.⁵⁸

8. *Raiding Cultures*

Raiding is not an activity specific to nomadic pastoralists but both historians and anthropologists stress it as a comparatively common feature amongst pastoralist societies, a pattern that continues in some parts of the world to the present day. There are a number of possible reasons for the prevalence of this activity among nomadic pastoralists. The mobile nature of pastoralist communities allows for ease of movement across the landscape, with plentiful beasts-of-burden including camels and horses assisting in this activity. Then there is the economic motive for raiding, either to seize livestock for their own herds or supplement their economy away from livestock subsistence, with some even supposing a nomadic dependency on the products of urban economies. Furthermore, raiding could be considered a method of asymmetric warfare which does not give the disadvantages of open pitched battle against a numerically superior foe. Probably more importantly, however, is the lack of economic contingency in nomadic economies particularly those inhabiting arid environments. The anthropologist Anatoly Khazanov championed a view of raiding as a pattern shared between sedentary and nearby nomadic peoples, an activity that was balanced on the other hand by *trading*, with both strategies having the same goal of resource acquisition and redistribution. Accordingly, Khazanov stresses a recurrent pattern that arises from integration in sedentary worlds:⁵⁹

Nomads are in a position in which they are able to acquire the agricultural products and handicraft goods they need (and also livestock) by force, or by threatening such, while giving little or nothing in exchange. Thus wherever nomads have the corresponding opportunities, their raids and pillaging become a permanent fixture. For many nomads they were an important supplementary means of livelihood.

⁵⁷ Burstein (2008); Cuvigny (2014).

⁵⁸ Cooper (2020a); Lassányi (2012).

⁵⁹ Khazanov (1994, pp. 221-222).

With no cereal agriculture, obvious food surpluses, or storage apparatuses, nomadic economies, once integrated with those of agricultural centres, would have become somewhat reliant on trade. Historical documents in Egypt and Nubia indicate that raiding was directed at different targets: 1) settlements and their food supplies, including livestock or 2) temples, churches, and places of worship, probably directed at their stored resources, goods, and attached workshops.⁶⁰ In the former, the raid would seem to be a method of supplanting the nomads' food economy, while in the latter, raiding seems deliberately to seek out precious goods for redistribution and prestige in their own economy. Raiding was not just directed at foreign groups, and there is evidence that raiding on other nomadic groups of the same ethno-linguistic continuum were relatively common. Agatharchides, a Greek historian (2nd Century BCE), remarks that the Troglodytes of the Red Sea coast fight each other for pasture, while such a phenomenon of 'livestock raiding' exists till the present day in certain parts of East Africa and the Horn.⁶¹ For the macro-history of the Nile basin, the allure of urban riches would always mean that nomads could turn to the Nile for a shortfall – trading, raiding, or employment were all equally valid strategies for economic diversification. Other methods of acquisition, often enacted alongside raiding, included extraction of tribute or direct taxation.

In the Nile Valley, Pharaonic state dogma communicated an ideological aversion to the nomadic and unsettled way of life. Boundary stele warn against transgression by nomadic groups onto Egyptian political territory and nomadism is specifically chastised in various genres of Egyptian literature.⁶² The Egyptian state did actively try to keep out some groups from grazing in the Nile Valley through fortified frontiers and denying access to wells,⁶³ a policy which would have certainly led to conflict with nomadic groups, especially in times of drought or internal conflict where access to the valley was necessary for their survival. Beyond the motive of 'opportunity', current anthropological theories have attempted to model the causes and patterns of raiding as originating from the ecological bases of arid land pastoralists. This raiding arises from constantly

⁶⁰ For raiding amongst the Blemmyes, see Cooper (2020a). For the chronology of Libyan raids, see Bates (1914, pp. 210-241).

⁶¹ Khazanov (1994, p. 183). For Agatharchides, see Burstein (1989, p. 114).

⁶² Fischer-Elfert (2005).

⁶³ See Snape (2013, p. 448) for the Libyan frontier. Fischer-Elfert (2015, p. 330) cites similar policies on Nubian frontiers.

fluctuating desert ecologies that are in ‘disequilibrium’ or experience localized climate variability and exceptional droughts, affecting one pastoralist tribe more than another and thus necessitating redistributive mechanisms to balance economies across tribal units.⁶⁴ Such modelling is probably beyond empirical tests with respect to the ancient evidence, but nevertheless this theory remains a powerful heuristic for explaining the ubiquity of raids amongst pastoralist peoples. Whatever the cause of raiding, it seems that this practice became institutionalized and politicized in some para-Nilotic cultures, with raiding benefitting local elites and thus contributing to new political formations in nomadic tribes and confederations.

Such political and ecological factors meant that low-scale conflict between nomadic groups and agricultural communities were comparatively frequent and even inevitable. Viewed in such a way, raiding might be considered as part of the same goal-oriented behaviour as trading, both producing the same outcome of resource acquisition and wealth. Raids from Atbai nomads are described in several texts of the New Kingdom, where they robbed cereals from Lower Nubian towns.⁶⁵ In late antiquity, Blemmyean raids originating in the same desert are well-known in the historical record from the 3rd Century and continue largely unabated into the early Arab period c. 9th Century CE, proliferating on the whole stretch of the Nile Valley from Upper Egypt well into the Kushite heartland (Figure 4).⁶⁶ A vivid archaeological example of this are the gold objects of Nubian manufacture found in a Blemmyean tomb of the Eastern Desert, objects which most likely belong to a much earlier Kushite royal burial.⁶⁷ The situation of raiding on the Libyan frontier of Egypt is less clear owing to the presentation of ‘Libyan wars’ in Egyptian sources. Some scholars situate the Ramesside Libyan wars as part of a larger restructuring and migratory episode involving pastoralists along the Mediterranean littoral, involving the movement of whole families and herds.⁶⁸ Associated raids and immigration events were also directed towards the oases and Thebes. Asiatic nomads were known to infringe on the Eastern Delta since the earliest phases of the Egyptian state, originating in the Eastern Desert of Lower Egypt or the Sinai and find a later

⁶⁴ McCabe (2004); Marshall et al. (2011, pp. 45-49).

⁶⁵ Schulman (1982).

⁶⁶ Cooper (2020a). For documents of individual raids, see Updegraff (1978, pp. 46-162) and Power (2012, pp. 140-162).

⁶⁷ Sadr et al. (1995, pp. 215-220).

⁶⁸ Snape (2003); Snape (2013, pp. 447-448); Ritner (2009); Hulin (2020).

corollary in the activities of ‘Saracens’ of late antiquity who marauded monastic settlements.⁶⁹

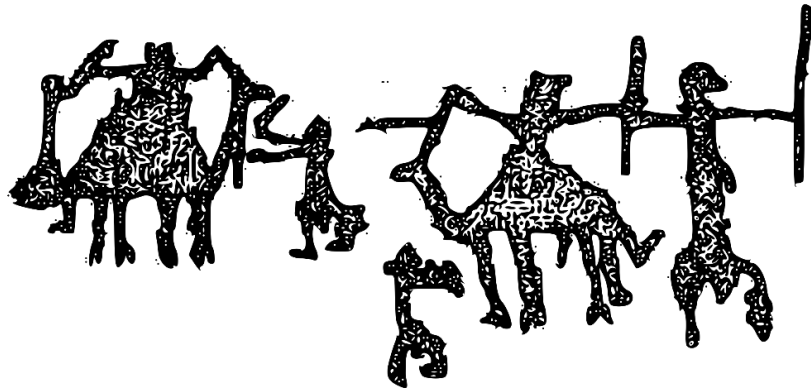


Figure 4. Rock art in the Atbai Desert (Wadi Hodein) depicting a camel raiding party from late antiquity or the medieval period, after Červíček (1978), Abb. 327.

Each of these raiding affairs involved different goals and entailed different historical trajectories. Blemmyean raids seem to have been small affairs, pilfering resources from small settlements and monasteries, taking captives and livestock. In certain parts of the valley particularly well-travelled by the Blemmyes such as Lower Nubia and Gebelein, these episodes of raiding (and grazing) eventually manifested in migrations and the formation of local administrations and annexations of Nile territory to the Blemmyean polity.⁷⁰ The Libyan wars of the Ramesside period eventuated in a large demographic input of Libyans to the Delta region – a several century long process that would lead ultimately to the formation of a community of Libyans who would seize power in the Third Intermediate Period (c. 1050-664 BCE).

9. Forming Nomadic States

While state-formation is one of the most well-studied and debated processes in ancient world studies,⁷¹ there is little consensus and even methodological apparatus on how and why nomadic regimes may form overt political institutions and ‘confederate’ or

⁶⁹ Cooper (2020a).

⁷⁰ As manifested in the papyrological and epigraphic documents, see FHN III, nos 300-301, 310-313, 331-343.

⁷¹ See most recently Graeber & Wengrow (2021, pp. 359-413), who problematize the concept of the ‘ancient state’ and state formation more generally, preferring instead to analyse ancient societies in terms of how they exercised domination.

‘unify’. Significantly, scholarship using both historical and anthropological approaches has stressed that nomadism is no barrier to the formation of highly centralized and successful political configurations, ‘kingdoms’, ‘states’, ‘empires’ *etc.*⁷² Viewed in the evolutionary model of statehood, which supposes stadial levels of supposed increasing complexity and hierarchical organization (aka the so-called ‘chiefdom model’), desert nomadic societies seem unlikely contenders for forming large political and territorial states vis-à-vis agricultural regimes.⁷³ However, even cursory examples of strong territorial-based nomadic polities in the proximal Near East tell us this cannot be the case. The Ghassanids, Nabataeans, and Palmyrenes of the Arabian desert ecologies formed political institutions and territorial agglomerations in what was a vastly arid and nomadic space spliced by oases. Further afield, the process of state formation amongst peoples of the Central Asian Steppe is well-studied, with a significant scholarship focusing on the case studies of Turko-Mongol state formation across nomadic and agricultural zones. Such formations and processes where pastoralists seize power over sedentary regions and form new ruling dynasties are seldomly recognized in the scholarship as occurring in the African continent. One case might be the emergence of Sayfawa dynasty of Kanem around Lake Chad.⁷⁴ This pattern of nomadic ‘state-building’ has also be identified in several transitions relating to Berber or Tuareg ascendancy over sedentary groups in the Maghreb, or even the ancient Numidian (c. 200-40 BCE) and Laguatan confederations (c. 6th Century CE) in Libya.⁷⁵ In general, however, there remains a degree of ambiguity and fuzziness on the status and emergence of the ‘nomadic polities’ across Africa generally and the ‘Nile corridor’ especially.

The evolutionist view of political formation and so-called ‘archaic states’ and chiefdoms has been criticized as being much too simplistic to explain the many diverse case studies of the emergence of ancient polities. Beyond this view, there is a growing recognition in the scholarship that there existed such a thing as a ‘nomadic state’,⁷⁶ political formations whose population was by in large nomadic but nevertheless could form complex political and territorial institutions. Some scholars have seen these

⁷² Khazanov (1994); Emberling (2014, pp. 147-150); Honeychurch (2014); Härmäläinen (2013).

⁷³ Yoffee (2005). For the issues of this model as applied to African societies, see McIntosh (1999). As applied to nomads, see also the model of ‘chiefly confederacy’ in Levy (2009, pp. 157-158).

⁷⁴ Muiu (2009, p. 39); Khazanov (1994, pp. 277-290). Khazanov also identifies possible examples in East Africa (290-295) but finds difficulties with applying this model, borne out of Central Asian exemplars, to African cultures.

⁷⁵ See Mattingly (1983). These examples of ‘nomadic polities’ are complicated by the fact that these regions were always host to a mix of nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturists.

⁷⁶ Honeychurch (2014).

formations as cases of ‘secondary state formation’, that is these polities form only in proximity to pre-existent urban states and often borrow symbols and systems of governance from such nearby states, as exhibited in the case of the Mongol relationship with China. Another related view of nomadic states is that they are largely predatory or parasitic ‘shadow empires’,⁷⁷ polities reliant on raiding and exploitation of agricultural states for maintenance of their own institutions and wealth. Accordingly, these nomadic polities were capable of forming unity only after a ‘primary state’ has emerged in a nearby fertile agricultural zone.

Scholarly attitudes to the presence or absence of ‘nomadic polities’ is mainly shaped by our primary evidence and investigative methodologies. Political formations, being abstract entities, are difficult to perceive in the textual and archaeological record outside the exemplars in Central Asia. In pre-literate societies, there will be no explicit record of a political institution unless nearby states have noted it in their foreign neighbours, and even here it is not always clear (as in Egyptian texts) if such records are identifying and describing a political or territorial bound entity or something much vaguer like a broad externally created amorphous ‘ethnicity’. When Egyptians use the word *Tjehenu* ‘Libyan’ or *Aamu* ‘Asiatic’ in texts there is certainly no reason for us to reconstruct a Libyan or Asiatic nomadic polity in each of these cases. In archaeological terms, certain features such as administrative seals, monumental architecture, or even urban architecture itself are sometimes taken to be evidence of territorial polities or ‘centralization’, but it would indeed be a simplistic model of sociocultural organization for these things to be preconditions of political organization among pastoralists.⁷⁸

In many cases, scholars have counterintuitively shaped their search for nomadic polities by trying to detect the paraphernalia that is quintessentially associated with urban states. A nomadic polity is unlikely to engage in monumental architecture, and certainly does not produce the same sort of features of economic storage and redistribution as urban polities.⁷⁹ A perceived absence of political formation amongst nomads is sometimes grasped in terms of an almost geographic deterministic arguments, where agricultural intensification or surplus is seen as a precondition for ‘complexity’ and statehood.

⁷⁷ Barfield (2001).

⁷⁸ See the discussion in Ben-Yosef (2019).

⁷⁹ This is also true of the theoretical models, see Honeychurch (2014, p. 281): “These models tend to discount the possibility of indigenous forms of statehood among nomads because of the way in which complexity and states are typically imagined”. Likewise McIntosh (1999, p. 22): “archaeological theory is at present ill-equipped to evaluate such instances because our current conceptual toolkit for investigating complexity has been fashioned with only a subset of complex sites and societies in mind”.

Nomadic political establishments, often based on assemblies, consensus politics, and tribal confederacies of kinship rather than bureaucratic institutions will axiomatically manifest themselves in completely different ways both on the archaeological and textual record.⁸⁰ Furthermore, theoretical approaches from African ethnography and archaeology stress models of ‘horizontal’ complexity rather than vertical hierarchy, where institutions cut across society like cult associations or groups of specialist craftsmen,⁸¹ creating an altogether different view of the ancient polity from the expectation of the centralized ‘kingdom’. Anthropological theorists analysing nomadic political organizations have stressed the flexible and adaptive nature of nomadic political structures,⁸² allowing them to quickly reshape and transform in response to new historical, economic, or climatic circumstances. This makes the detection of ‘nomadic power’ even more elusive wherein there is no stable mental image of an ever-changing nomadic polity.

Such differing forms of organization must manifest very differently, possibly invisibly, on the archaeological record. Where an Egyptian temple might mark a ‘vestige’ of a state enterprise, no such obvious markers are to be expected in nomadic societies. One way nomadic institutions might express themselves in a very nomadic idiom is using symbols of lineage and kinship as markers of identity. For example, pastoralist branding marks for tribal and herd identification (*wasm* in the Middle East, *tamgha* in Central Asia) could sometimes manifest as emblematic symbols of nomadic regimes or their dynasty and ruler.⁸³ Such ‘clan’ or ‘tribal’ marks are documented in the ancient rock art record of the Nile basin, the Sahel, the Horn, and East Africa, but as yet there is limited scope for linking such identifier marks with political institutions in the Nile basin.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, such ‘pastoralist’ manifestations of identity demonstrate that our search for nomadic formations must be geared to different kinds of material and symbolic manifestations. Likewise, large group cemeteries and sacral sites across the desert probably served as focal points to bond disparate mobile groups together and create common identities.⁸⁵ The mobility of pastoralist groups means that our search for political identities is *different* from that of urban cultures, not that pastoralist groups did not possess political identities.

⁸⁰ For the place of ‘kinship’ in such political formations, see Sneath (2007).

⁸¹ McIntosh (1999).

⁸² Salzman (1978); Togan (1998).

⁸³ Landais (2001). These marks are often used for the symbol of the ruling nomadic elite or empire in Central Asia.

⁸⁴ Russell (2013). For a putative example of the Blemmyes using a ‘royal wasm’, see Cooper (2020a, pp. 11-14).

⁸⁵ For examples of collective burial sites in the Eastern Desert such as Khor Nubt, see Krzywinski (2012, pp. 144-146). I thank the anonymous reviewer for this comment.

Without an obvious primary source base to explicate the ‘nomadic polity’, the question remains as to what is the status of ‘nomadic polities’ in the Nile basin? In a number of the cases illustrated above (Libyans, Noba, Blemmyes) it seems likely that these peoples formed something of a ‘nomadic polity’ if we accept some basic definitions of such an entity as having some notion of territorial control, agreed-upon leadership and membership, and evidence of some coordination in decision making. In all these cases, one must reckon with largely independent political units or ‘tribes’ loosely bound in such confederations, with episodes of greater or lesser unity. The obvious pattern here is that we chiefly notice these nomadic polities insofar as they are mentioned in Egyptian or Kushite texts. For example, the Libyans of the Ramesside period are epistemologically present only as a result of being listed in Ramesside war texts – no one doubts their existence certainly, but we are a long way from being able to define or characterize a Libyan nomadic polity from the archaeological record.

The case study of polities in the Eastern Desert is illustrative. The pastoralist Medjay, for example, had established tribal-territorial institutions as far back as 1800 BCE, named Webat-Sepet and Ausheq. In this period, the Atbai desert was ruled by three leading families, some of whom journeyed to the Theban palace and maintained diplomatic relationships with the Egyptian court.⁸⁶ There is little to nothing on the archaeological record to posit their existence but it would be crass to ignore the data from the Execration Texts and Middle Kingdom Annales which unproblematically mention ‘polities’ of some kind in the interior desert.⁸⁷ Much later in Eastern Desert history in late antiquity, inscriptions at Kalabsha and a corpus of texts at Gebelein bear witness to the emergence of an institution of pre-eminent Blemmyean kings, ruling over a wide territory and subgroup of tribal elders (*phylarchs*). A number of structural causes and triggers for the emergence of this Blemmyean polity can be posited: the development of camel nomadism, the slow integration (c. 300BCE) of the nomads in Ptolemaic and Roman trade networks, and the subsequent downfall of these networks in the Third Century CE crisis coupled with the slow demise of the Meroitic state. The archaeological record in the desert also demands that we also consult internal factors for the emergence of this ‘Blemmyean state’. All throughout the desert, the nomads constructed a different type of settlement or

⁸⁶ Cooper (2020b, pp. 121-122, 142-147). Morkot (1999: 182) opines that the existence of these groups as evidence for ‘recognized leaders’ in Nubian states.

⁸⁷ Cooper (2021).

seasonal camp in the 3rd-7th Centuries CE.⁸⁸ A Blemmyean ceramic type, ‘Eastern Desert Ware’, likewise emerges in a similar period and is found all across their desert space, from Myos Hormos, Berenike, Mons Smaragdus, the Sudanese Deserts, Aksum and even a site on the Arabian coast, witnessing the integration of desert peoples in long-distance networks.⁸⁹ This Blemmyean ‘polity’ controlled several regions in the Nile Valley, but never transformed into an expansionist empire. According to Murray’s macro-historical assessment, it was only the integration of Egypt into the wider Roman Empire that prevented this ‘nomadic invasion’:

Had these new invaders had only the native Egyptians to conquer, they might have repeated the success of the Hyksos, but the Romans restricted their inroads to the district south of Thebes and eventually drove the Blemmyes back beyond the First Cataract.

Despite being ejected from their Nile ‘provinces’ by the 7th Century CE, the Blemmyes (‘Beja’ in Arabic documents), continued raiding the Nile Valley well into the Medieval period and remained fiercely independent for much of history.⁹⁰ Even down to the 19th Century, the foreign Turkish control of this region was barely felt beyond the Red Sea coast.

10. ‘Post-Nomadic’ Dynasties and Politics

Nomads could form political agglomerations in the desert and, if historical conditions favoured, could seize parts of the Nile Valley from urban regimes. The most famous example of this are the Libyan dynasties of Egypt’s ‘Third Intermediate Period’ or eponymous ‘Libyan period’. Some have also speculated that the Hyksos dynasties of the Delta (15th Dynasty) also involved a nomadic element from the southern Levant and Sinai, although debate continues as to the exact origin and nature of the Hyksos interlude.⁹¹ The Blemmyes of the Eastern Desert would also create ‘urban provinces’ of

⁸⁸ Lassányi (2012, pp. 287-290).

⁸⁹ Barnard (2008); Manzo (2014). For sherds of this ware on the Arabian coast, see Zarins & Zahrani (1984, p. 81, pl. 77).

⁹⁰ Dahl & Hjort-af-Ornäs (2006).

⁹¹ Egyptian written traditions, at least, remembered the Hyksos as nomadic peoples, see Redford (1970). For these considerations from the archaeological record, see Bietak (2010).

their kingdom, periodically seizing Lower Nubia and small stretches of the Nile in Upper Egypt around Moalla and Gebelein (Figure 5). The case of the Noba is more difficult to grasp due to their uncertain status as nomads and relationship to pastoralism, but they would emerge as a new ruling elite in late antique Nubia, supplanting the prior Kushite rulers headquartered in Meroe.

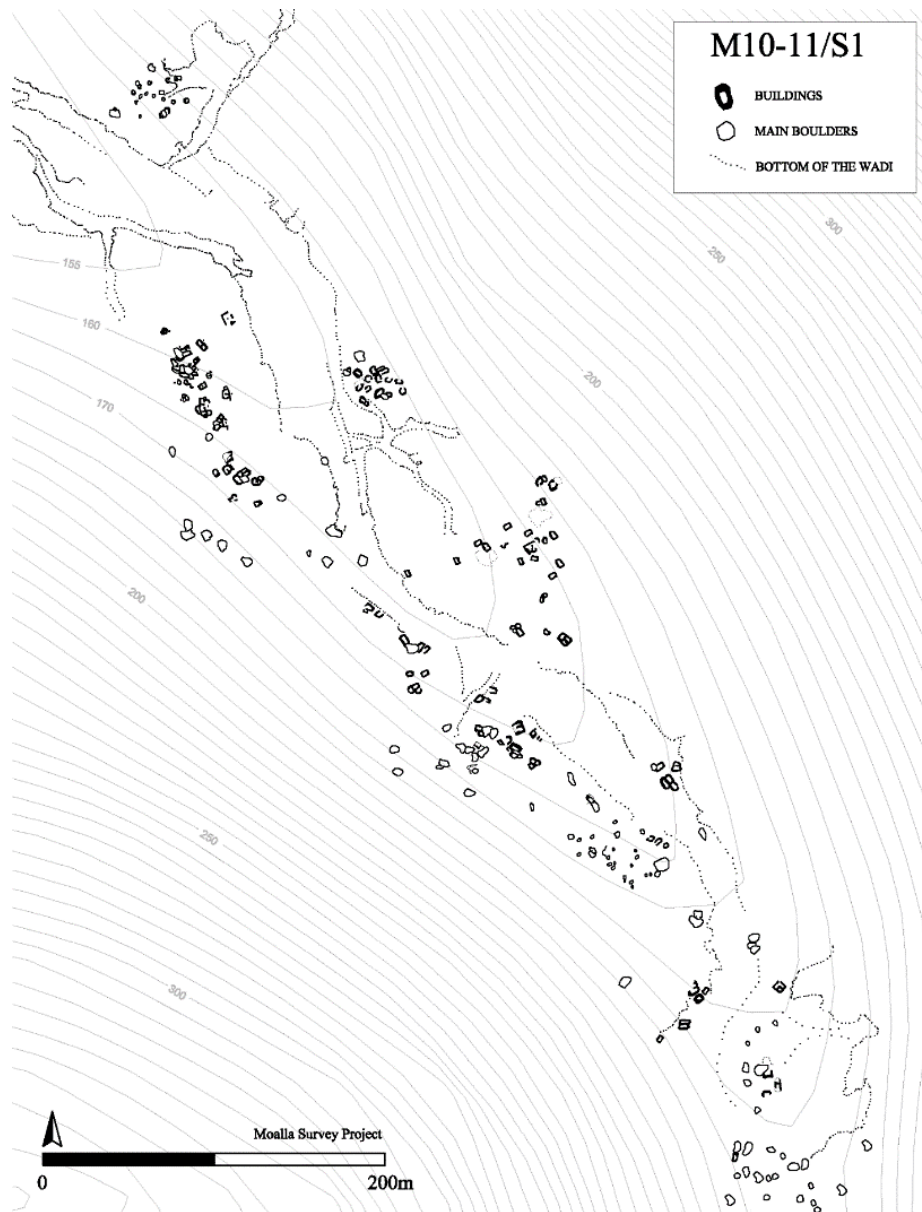


Figure 5. Nomads on the edge of the Nile Valley, a low-density ‘Blemmyean’ settlement of stone huts along a narrow wadi in the near desert near Moalla and Gebelein (M10-11/S1 – ‘Debabiya’).

Image courtesy of the Moalla Survey Project, Yale University (Colleen Manassa Darnell, John Darnell, & Alberto Urcia).

These examples of ‘nomadic kingdoms’ on the Nile are frequent enough to justify it as a geopolitical pattern which has better known examples elsewhere in the world in what some historians call ‘Post-Nomadic’ Empires.⁹² Leaving aside the difficulties with the term ‘empire’, various nomadic confederations of Central Asia engaged in a pattern of invasion and dynastic replacement of nearby urban states, especially in fertile agricultural ‘centres’. Examples are numerous and include the Mongol Yuan Dynasty of China, the Il-Khans of Persia, and the Mughals of north India (to name a few). All these cases involved not only a kind of limited migration and seizure of political power by peoples of nomadic heritage, but also the engendering of a new dynastic elite engaged in ‘state-building’ and traditional administrative apparatuses.⁹³ The main variable, as many scholars have noted, is the degree to which the nomadic overlords acculturate to their new political centre of gravity or rather preserve their nomadic heritage. This is overlaid by other developments as to whether parts of the nomadic population engage in new economic and subsistence strategies, sometimes exchanging their nomadic pastoralism for settled agriculture or some sort of mixture of these activities. The social dynamics of these new ‘Post-Nomadic’ states are complex and involve constantly shifting negotiations and identities between the new elite ruling (and often militaristic) class, the old indigenous elite, and the sedentary subjects. For example, the case of the Manchu Qing Dynasty provides a vivid example of an active policy of preserving Manchu identity and heritage at the expense of the assimilation to Chinese (Han) norms.⁹⁴ Other nomadic dynasties seem to quickly acculturate to the cultural and ideological norms of their demographically numerous urban subjects, possibly driven by a policy of expedience when confronted with a vastly different economic and demographic setting. ‘Nomadic rulers’ in such episodes adopt the titles and accoutrements of their former rulers, *Shah* (Iran), *Huángdì* (China), and in the case of Libyan Egypt, the full fivefold titulary of a traditional Egyptian king.

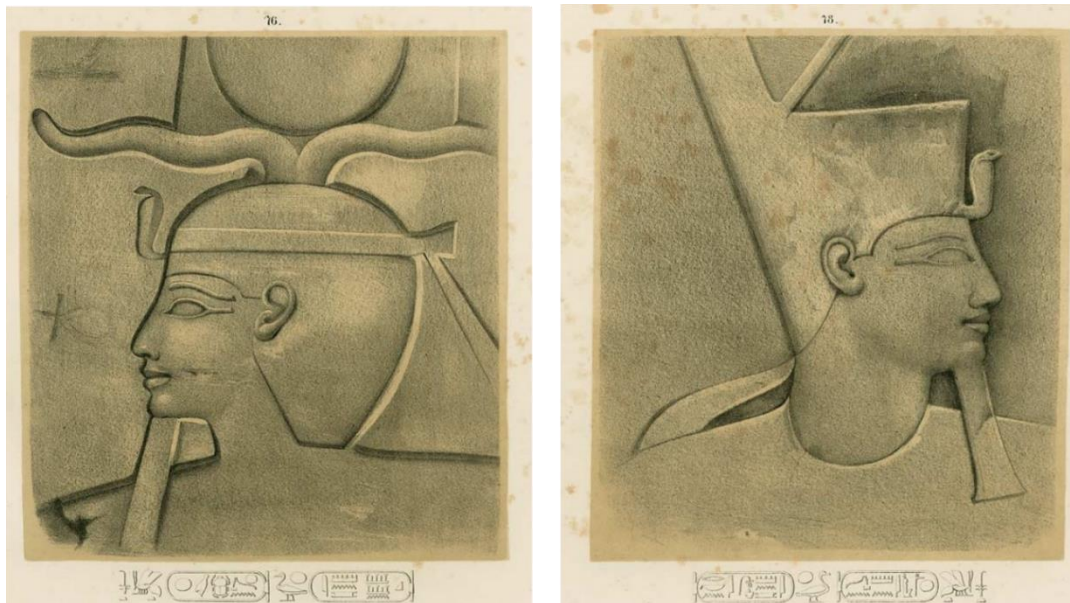
The parallels with the rise of ‘nomadic’ Libyan power in urban Egypt are tempting but not altogether fitting. The ‘new regimes’ of the Libyan Dynasties (Dyn. 22-24), apart from dynastic heritage, quickly resembles something very un-Libyan in most details left to historians. Although in truth, most our details of what is ‘Libyan’ in a cultural sense

⁹² Wink (2011).

⁹³ The literature on Central Asian nomadic dynasties is vast, see the edited volume of Paul (2013). Seminal studies include Khazanov (1994, pp. 233-263) and Sneath (2007).

⁹⁴ See the extensive study of Elliot (2001).

derives largely from Egyptian ‘outside’ sources which are rather broad and stereotyped ethnographic brushstrokes. Feather-wearing, cattle keeping, and manifesting different norms of kinship and genealogy, Libyans may well have kept many of their indigenous cultural conditions intact. Such traditions were, however, not important to communicate in elite display in an Egyptian world. Despite the comparisons of ‘nomadic replacement’ of an urban centre, the Libyan example does not seem to recreate the images of an invading Central Asian horde in China or Iran. Firstly, the Libyan elite did not rapidly invade Egypt and replace a dynasty in a single or even protracted campaign of conquest, but rather fought a long series of drawn-out wars and skirmishes over multiple generations, slowly settling in the Delta and other regions, and then eventually rising to the spectre of political power in an atmosphere of decaying political unity in Lower Egypt. Little in the way of pastoralist rhetoric or heritage is communicated by the Libyan overlords in their newfound dynasties. All the paraphernalia of Pharaonic elite display seems to have been adopted comprehensively (Figure 6), after all the Libyans had spent part of their prior history in the Egyptian agricultural world of the Delta.⁹⁵



*Figure 6. ‘Post-Nomadic’ rulers? The Libyan Pharaohs of Sheshonq I and Osorkon II, after Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien*, III, 300.*

There is furthermore, unlike say for example the Mongol experience under Genghis Khan, any certain evidence for the Libyan dynasty remaining rulers over their nomadic

⁹⁵ For detailed discussions of Libyan acculturation, see Hulin (2020) and Leahy (1985).

heartland, that is ruling both Libya and Egypt together. This may be because the specific Libyan tribes and confederation that had emerged as pharaohs had already largely acculturated to an urban agricultural life for centuries in the Delta, distancing themselves from those ‘desert Libyans’ on the eve of their expansion in the Ramesside period. The issue here is that our record of the Libyan dynasty is largely confined to funerary archaeology and standards of Egyptian epigraphic practice, categories of evidence that are markedly ‘Egyptian’ in acculturating potential. Were we able to step into a Libyan residence and observe their food preparation, cultural festivities, or oral traditions, we may have a very different view of Libyan practices in the Nile world. It would be simplistic to view Libyans as wholesale assimilating to the Egyptian culture either. While they styled themselves as pharaohs, they still honoured their heritage as ‘chiefs of the Ma’ and were bestowed with names in the Libyan tongue. The distinction here is important; Libyan Pharaohs kept titles directed at their Libyan social status (‘chief of the Ma’) while also taking on the dynastic norms of fivefold Pharaonic names.

A commonly held rhetoric in the literature of nomadic states is that they are largely secondary phenomena, emerging in response and reaction to nearby agricultural regimes. Much of the theoretical literature on these issues is dominated by the historical situations of China, Iran, and Central Asia. These case studies have given rise to Barfield’s aforementioned ‘shadow-empires’.⁹⁶ This view, while promoting a key ‘external’ influencer, cannot sit as a mono-causal approach to state formation.⁹⁷ Internal factors such as changing subsistence patterns and ecologies in the nomadic heartlands must also have a part to play. The political ambitions and repositioning of distinct kinship groups and lead-tribes as well as internal exchange within the nomadic sphere might have just as much a role in the path to a nomadic state and the shaping of a ‘confederacy’. Likewise, there is reason to suppose that nomadic pastoralists always contained or exhibited forms of ‘political complexity’ involving confederating tendencies and complex kinship and political relations, even if most scholars would seldom afford words like ‘polity’, ‘confederation’, or ‘state’ to these formations unless they are capable of invading or maintaining diplomatic relations with foreign states. An illustrative case is the Eastern Desert formations of Wabat-Sepet and Ausheq known from Egyptian sources in the early

⁹⁶ Barfield (2001).

⁹⁷ Cf. di Cosmo (2012, pp. 173-174): “For these theoretical schemes to be useful, the idea that inner Asian states developed “in relation to” sedentary states needs to be substantiated with historical evidence that illustrates how that relationship came into being”.

Second Millennium BCE. These groups engaged in trade ventures with Egypt including the export of gold, and their leaders and retainers are also documented journeying to the Theban palace of the Middle Kingdom. The mere existence of these nomadic entities is significant as these formations exist thousands of years before any scholar would afford the pastoralists of the Eastern Desert any such political labels like ‘chiefdoms’ or ‘polity’.

Comparing nomad-state relations in the Nile basin and inner Asia is a helpful exercise and heuristic but not one that can be used uncritically or transplanted without exception. The specifics of nomad-state relations differs markedly from example to example. Even across the Nile basin, it would be spurious to compare the Libyan ascendancy and ensuing ‘Libyan dynasties’ with that of the Blemmyes seizure of Lower Nubia in late antiquity. In one case a nomadic group became sedentary elites and then pharaohs, in another case a large desert nation of nomads exercised political control over discrete parts of the Nile Valley, while remaining inseparably bound to their desert territory. Both regimes clearly engaged in conflict with Nile-bound states, but the dynamics of their ‘emergence’ or ‘rise’ seem to have little commonalities except for their being tribal confederacies in marginal ecological situations on the periphery of the Nile. There is, as some scholars have pointed out, a contradiction in ‘nomadic states’ here, dependent on whether one views these states as still containing a nomadic populace, or whether the ‘nomadic’ element is rather a small elite group that originated in a pastoralist nomadic setting.⁹⁸ Implicit in this approach is the existence, for example, of two different Libyan ‘nomadic states’, a tribal confederacy that attacked Egypt in the Ramesside period and had a desert homeland, and a later state which was largely centered around a ruling Libyan Dynasty in the Delta.⁹⁹ The common element that must be emphasized is that nomadic peoples and political configurations have a greater place in the geopolitics of the Nile Valley than is commonly espoused, forming confederacies that threatened, invaded, and administered parts of the Nile Valley.

11. The Archaeology of Para-Nilotic Nomadism

One of the major reasons why nomadic societies and ‘nomadic polities’ remain elusive to us is the *comparatively* poor archaeological wealth associated with transhumant

⁹⁸ Bruun (2006, p. 233); Khazanov (1994, p. 228).

⁹⁹ O’Connor (1990) championed the view of a Libyan ‘nomadic state’ in the late New Kingdom, a level of organisation which is rejected in Ritner (2009, p. 44).

living. Nomadic society, being largely on the move, is typified by transient sites; hearths, tent bases, faunal remains and other trappings of food production, as well as clusters of surface artefacts such as lithics and pottery in addition to the record of rock art and petroglyphs. Bradley's case study of the ancient nomadism in the Butana Desert proposed a hierarchy of types of nomadic sites oriented to the degree of transience and presence of permanent architecture. This included 'sedentary sites', 'rainy season campsites', and 'nomadic burial sites'.¹⁰⁰ Sadr's analysis of nomadism in the southern Atbai categorized site types according to density of surface remains, 'high', 'medium' and 'low', noting that low-density sites might reflect seasonal camps and medium density sites correspond to reoccupied camps.¹⁰¹ This material record of nomadism depends largely on the frequency of movement and intensity of human activity at the site, in turn dictated by seasonal differences of ecologies. Compounding these problems, even when surveys take place in these desert zones, they usually focus on the prominent archaeological remains attributed to urban foreigners such as fortresses, mines, harbours, and even desert temples. This means that in most desert zones outside the Nile, the record of nomads is 'patchy', but is notably improving. Such aims have increasingly been the subject of dedicated projects with a view to analysing the habitation of desert regions and filling in the 'blanks' in our habitation map of Northeast Africa.

Surveys have now taken place in most nomadic 'peripheries' of the Nile Valley albeit in varying levels of intensity. Amongst the most illuminating results are the various projects focused on the Sudanese Western Desert, where a huge number of sites belonging to cattle pastoralists have been identified in what is now hyper-arid desert.¹⁰² The importance of this work has been both to reconstruct nomadic habitations and link this with discrete environmental changes. This work has thus been instrumental for understanding the end of the Neolithic Wet Phase, a process of climatic change which would irreversibly change the nomads' home forever. Nomadic habitations retreated spatially over the course of the neolithic and terminal historic (c. 2000-1500 BCE) to other marginal ecologies, the Nile River, or indeed other ecological refuges such as the Nuba Mountains. In the southwestern periphery of Nubia in the region of Kordofan, sites at Gebel Zankor and Wadi el-Malik have been subject to a number of surveys and

¹⁰⁰ Bradley (1992, pp. 198-199). For these problems more generally, see Cribb (1991, pp. 65-83).

¹⁰¹ Sadr (1991, pp. 20-22).

¹⁰² For a summary of results, see the volume of Bubenzer et al. (2007) and Riemer & Kindermann (2019). This worsening ecology and ensuing migrations have a significant bearing on the spread of Nilo-Saharan languages, for which see Dimmendaal (2007).

excavations, revealing habitations from the neolithic to the First Millennium CE.¹⁰³ Moving north, around the oases of the Western Desert, the local cattle-raising Bashendi and Sheikh Muftah cultures have undergone extensive archaeological documentation, a cultural horizon that seems to disappear with growing Egyptian control and settlement of Kharga and Dakhla (c. 2000 BCE).¹⁰⁴ Many surveys and projects have documented the nearby Libyan deserts of the Marmarica and Gebel Akhdar, with extensive signs of pastoralist habitation around well sites and even signs of low-intensity agriculture along rain-fed wadis nearing the coast.¹⁰⁵ Local harbour sites and fortresses acted as nodes of interaction between pastoralists and urban states who attempted to control and facilitate trade along the littoral.

Moving to the east of the Nile, continued surveys in the Southern Atbai around Kassala have been able to explicate complex relations between communities that variably exhibited by pastoralist and agricultural tendencies.¹⁰⁶ From the fieldwork conducted thus far, these communities exhibited ebbs and flows in subsistence patterns with greater and lesser emphases on pastoralism in distinct periods. For instance, the cultural horizon of the ‘Gebel Mokram’, based mainly on surface surveys between the Gash and Atbara rivers, is considered to be a material manifestation of pastoralists. Known primarily through a set ceramic tradition, the ‘Gebel Mokram’ culture built large circular huts fixed with posts and practiced a mixed agro-pastoralist culture comprising of millet, sorghum, fishing and herding of goats and cattle. The relatively well-watered savannah of the Butana or the ‘isle of Meroe’ is famous as the site of Meroitic temple towns like Naqa and Musawwarat es-Sufra. Dryland agriculture was possible in this region and artificial reservoirs (*hafir*) created a haven for herds, making this region a dynamic nexus between nomadic and sedentary subsistence patterns. While most studies in this region are oriented to sites exhibiting monumental architecture, a number of surveys have demonstrated the high-density of pastoralist occupations.¹⁰⁷ The royal Kushite constructions in this desert, particular the *hafirs*, are often emphasized as deliberate strategies on the part of the state to serve and control nomads in their transhumance, giving the Kushite state a rather different political ecology than that of Egypt with its intensive and dense agricultural settlement. Across the Nile, several projects relating to the Bayuda desert have

¹⁰³ Best summarized in Chlebowski & Drzewiecki (2019).

¹⁰⁴ See the volume of Riemer (2011).

¹⁰⁵ Hulin (2012); Rieger et al. (2012); Vetter et al. (2013); White & White (1996).

¹⁰⁶ Manzo (2017a) summarizes decades of results, surveys, and excavations in the region.

¹⁰⁷ Bradley (1992).

demonstrated the extensive pastoralist use of this desert, a region which also has significant traces of urban regimes who travelled along its wadis to shorten navigation through the bends of the Nubian Nile.¹⁰⁸ The significant interplay between pastoralists and the Kushite states in the Bayuda has some commonalities with the Butana, and likewise has been termed a ‘hinterland’ of the Kushite state. A mix of agro-pastoralism likely existed in the Gezira south of the Nile confluences at Khartoum. This region is well-known through the extensive excavations from Henry Wellcome at the base of Jebel Moya. New work has brought more rigor to the chronology of the site, which experienced a nadir of nomadic burials in the late first Millennium BCE until about 500 CE.¹⁰⁹

The archaeology of the Eastern Desert of Sudan and Upper Egypt (the Atbai) is little understood until late antiquity, when distinct ‘nomad-settlements’ crop-up at many sites in Egypt and Sudan. These sites are typified by a base of rectilinear or circular stones, with most sites situated near a water-source.¹¹⁰ Surface remains at these sites, sometimes call ‘enigmatic settlements’, exhibit local ceramic traditions of the indigenous nomads as well as wares originating from the Roman and Arab worlds. The settlements are of such a different shape and size to earlier and later domestic architecture in the Eastern Desert as to suggest a change in lifestyle and transhumance, perhaps one that engaged in a slightly more sedentary or seasonally encamped pattern of movement. In some cases, the proximity of these settlements to gold-sources suggests that the nomads may have been directly engaged in gold-processing,¹¹¹ while other settlements sit alongside major trade routes connecting Red Sea harbours with the Egyptian Nile, the so-called ‘Berenike road’.¹¹² In roughly the same period, a new burial tradition emerges in the Eastern Desert, typified by a circular and flat-topped tumulus superstructure, locally called *Akerataheil* in the Beja language or ‘disc-shaped tumuli’ by archaeologists. These graves scatter the Eastern Desert from Kassala as far north as Upper Egypt. While the overwhelming majority of these tombs and cemeteries are located squarely in the desert, significant clusters occur in the Nile Valley at Kalabsha, Wadi Qitna, and further north at Moalla, all known abodes of the Blemmyes on the Nile. These cemeteries sometimes comprise isolated tombs or small clusters, yet where there is good pasture in the interior desert at

¹⁰⁸ See the edited volume in Lohwasser et al. (2018) and the summary in Karberg & Lohwasser (2019).

¹⁰⁹ Brass (2016); Gregory et al. (2022). New fieldwork has also been conducted along the Dinder watershed in the Ethiopian borderlands, see González-Ruibal (2021).

¹¹⁰ Sidebotham et al. (2002); Lassányi (2012).

¹¹¹ Manzo (2020, pp. 77-78); Cooper (2021, pp. 125-126).

¹¹² Lassányi (2012); Luft (2010).

sites like Khor Nubt, Bir al-Ajjami, and Gebel Qoqay tombs aggregate in their hundreds or even thousands (Figure 7).¹¹³ Judging from a diplomatic text in the Arab period, it seems as if Nubt functioned as the ‘royal’ settlement and burial ground of the Eastern Desert nomads.¹¹⁴



Figure 7. Nomadic burials, Akerataheil tombs on the wadi and hillsides near Bir al-Ajjami. Tombs extend to the horizon in every direction from this cluster.

© Google Earth.

A significant vestige of nomadic peoples are burials, which are especially important and rich sources for nomads where the trappings of settlement are otherwise absent or elusive. Perhaps one of the most well documented ‘nomad burial’ traditions are those labelled as the ‘Pan-Grave culture’ (c. 1800-1550 BCE), a distinct burial tradition and type occurring in the Egyptian and Nubian Nile. This culture has unquestionable connections to other contemporary Nubian material cultures such as Kerma and the C-Group, and is sometimes defined as pastoral Nubian culture’s manifestation to the riverine world (Figure 8).¹¹⁵ ‘Pan-graves’ are relatively shallow and small burials with little or no superstructure. Burial goods reveal connections with Egypt, particularly the presence of Egyptian manufactured objects. Decorated cattle bucrania echo a burial

¹¹³ Krzywinski (2012, pp. 144-146); Krzywinski et al. (2020); Manzo et al. (2011).

¹¹⁴ Hagen (2009, p. 116).

¹¹⁵ de Souza (2019).

tradition also well-known from Kerma in Upper Nubia, and also comprise one of the diagnostic classes of evidence for the Pan-Grave peoples ‘pastoralist’ heritage.



Figure 8. The burial accoutrements of pastoralists, a decorated cow skull (bucranium) of the ‘Pan Grave’ culture, likely from the site of Khozam (03.1957).

© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Eastern Desert further north at the latitudes of Lower Egypt are much more sporadically surveyed in terms of nomadic habitations. The presence of pastoralists in this region is mentioned in textual traditions but thus far archaeological investigation is oriented to mine-sites or monastic settlements.¹¹⁶ Nomadic habitations are fairly well documented in the Sinai borderlands, especially neolithic and Early Bronze Age occupations, a cultural complex which extended into the southern Levant.¹¹⁷ The status of this region as a borderland between Canaan and Egypt has made the Sinai subject to many projects, surveys, and excavations, but again the majority of these investigations are aimed at fortresses, settlements, and conspicuous archaeological sites like mines, monasteries, and rock art tableaux. This brief summary of archaeological knowledge and surveying is meant as an outline only but is generally indicative of the epistemology of ancient nomadic pastoralism in the para-Nilotic zone.

¹¹⁶ For surveys oriented to explicating nomad habitations, see Bomann & Young (1994); Tristant (2012).

¹¹⁷ Summarized in Finkelstein (1995).

12. Some concluding thoughts

The basis of this paper is to assess commonalities in nomad-state relations in the Nile basin and Northeast Africa, a theme which is much better developed in the historiographical traditions of other parts of the world, especially 'inner Asia'. This absence of historical models is all the more surprising in a Nile world so easily and emphatically divided into an 'urban' river and a 'nomadic' desert. What strikes the historian of this region is the constant struggle for urban suzerainty over this desert world. Most iterations of Egyptian and Kushite states attempted to wrest control of desert resources, or at least funnel them into their own exchange networks, all the while being prevented from doing so by the designs of desert indigenes. Flipping the perspective, nomads attempted to profit from their wealth in livestock, while attempting to manipulate foreigner's interest in their minerals and trade networks to their benefit. Likewise, all the nomads living beyond the Nile had a 'second life' on the Nile, in the form of employment, a diasporic community, or more transiently in the form of seasonal grazing and trading sojourns. Such processes created a constant flow of nomads to and from the Nile, a feature which was evidently symbiotic to both peoples in terms of subsistence, labour, and trade. Such divides between nomads on one hand and sedentary Egyptians and Kushites on the other was also more pronounced than just subsistence and kinship patterns, and in the majority of cases involved differences in language. The nomads of the Atbai, Libya, and Sinai all spoke different languages to their neighbours on the Nile, a demographic situation that has endured until fairly recent history.

It is true that in many cases that the demographic weight and concentration of desert nomads did not allow for the formation of a concerted 'nomadic polity', but in some cases, especially in the Nubian deserts and Mediterranean littoral, the ecological carrying capacity provided for a population density that could challenge Nile regimes. The triggers for forming nomadic polities in the Nile basin remain largely elusive, a situation that will likely remain until intensive archaeological work is conducted in nomadic heartlands in the desert. Models and hypotheses for emerging 'nomadic polities' must be multivalent and take into account both external pressures from Nile regimes as well as structural developments in the desert and local economies. Moreover, simple historical transformations like the introduction and domestication of the horse and camel seem to completely change the trajectory of nomadic peoples. Both Bruce Trigger and George Murray hypothesized that the arrival of these ruminants played a large part in upsetting

the status quo of power in the Nile world in favour of pastoralists.¹¹⁸ The models of nomadic formations in the Nile basin do not replicate in speed, violence, or in general pattern, the typical model of nomadic invasion and state building in Central Asia. Rather what is witnessed in the Nile basin is a long equilibrium and symbiosis between Nile and para-Nilotic peoples punctuated by contracted episodes ‘nomadic rises’. These highpoints of nomadic power usually coincided with indications of unifying processes amongst tribal kinship groups, centralizing key decision making. Even when the nomads remained in the desert and did not attempt to exercise any hegemony over the Nile, there is reason to suggest that they routinely exhibited their own sophisticated political alliances and kinship agreements. This created an ill-defined patchwork of nomadic political entities beyond the Nile.

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¹¹⁸ Murray (1935, p. 20); Trigger (1965, p. 131). In both cases, it seems there were centuries-long delay from the initial introduction of a ruminant to the nomadic group until the ruminant made a large impact to their foodways, economy, and military.

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**ALÉM DO NILO:
PADRÕES DE LONGA DURAÇÃO NAS INTERAÇÕES DOS ESTADOS-NÔMADES
ATRAVÉS DO NORDESTE DA ÁFRICA**

RESUMO

A história do Nordeste da África é dominada pela “Narrativa do Nilo”, uma história comum que coloca as culturas urbanas e ribeirinhas do Egito e da Núbia sem seu centro. Enquanto as várias interações dos Estados territoriais egípcio e núbio (kushita) moldaram a macro-história da região, essa narrativa duradoura frequentemente hegemoniza e reduz um mundo muito mais complexo, que consistia em um ambiente de povos nômades. Nativos dos vastos desertos a Leste e Oeste do rio, esses nômades são um elemento vital na macro-história da bacia do Nilo, interagindo constantemente com seus vizinhos urbanos, formando diásporas, conduzindo trocas e impedindo a exploração de suas terras natais. Ainda que esses padrões tenham perdurado por milênios, episódios pronunciados de conflito, subjugação e até formação de Estado abundam nos registros. Esta análise toma uma visão macro-histórica para os nômades na história nilótica, propondo um novo modelo para as organizações políticas nômades e os Estados do Nilo no Nordeste da África.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Antigo Egito; Núbia; Nomadismo; Estados.