

Eötvös Lóránd University of Sciences
Faculty of Arts

The PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) School of Historical Studies
PhD Program in Egyptology

On the Verge of Antiquity
The Eastern Desert in AD 1st – 7th century

PhD dissertation
Abstract

By Gábor Lassányi

Directors of studies: László Török, academician and Tamás Bács, head of the
Egyptology Department at Eötvös Lóránd University of Sciences Faculty of
Arts, habilitated associate professor

2009

The main theme of this dissertation is the population of the Eastern Desert, its cultural connections and history in the Roman Period and in the Late Antiquity.

The territory under examination is the desert zone lying between the Valley of the Nile and the Red Sea, from the Delta of the Nile in the north as far as the Ethiopian Highland in the south.

The principal questions of the dissertation are the followings: Who inhabited the territory between the Valley of the Nile and the Red Sea that today belongs to the modern states of Egypt and the Sudan from the Roman conquest of Egypt until the Arab invasion? What sort of material and intellectual culture did the different groups of the population of the Eastern Desert develop? Who used the quarries and roads lying in the desert? In what ways were they used? How and up to what extent did the northern part of the Eastern Desert become attached to the Roman or Byzantine Empire during the centuries of the discussed period? What connections did the inhabitants of the Eastern Desert have with the population of the Nile Valley?

The details on the clarification of the concept of the Eastern Desert and its geographical and climatic situations are going to be discussed in the first chapter. The second chapter will be dealing with the research history of the same territory. The third chapter is to outline the history of the Eastern Desert relying upon the written sources at disposal. The fourth chapter considers the archaeological sites in the Eastern Desert as well as highlights the archaeological traces of the desert-dwellers found in the Valley of the Nile. The fifth chapter will thoroughly analyse the primarily archaeological and natural-scientific data concerning the material culture, the lifestyle and funeral customs of the population of the Eastern Desert. The last, summing chapter of this dissertation is to answer the previously formulated thesis questions by comparing historical and archaeological sources and to describe the history of the Eastern Desert and its cultural progress in the period between the end of the 1st century BC and the 7th century AD.

1 The desert in the 1st - 3rd centuries BC

In the first two decades after the Roman conquest of Egypt, the Roman government did not pay much attention to the resources in the Eastern Desert and to the harbours by the Red Sea shore, with the exception of Myos Hormos. At that time the most important logistic routes were the ones, which were the most frequently used in the Ptolemaic times, leading from Edfu to Berenike and via the Wādi Hammamat to Myos Hormos. Some of the late Ptolemaic gold mines in the south probably were still functioning in the first part of the Roman era.

From the last years of the 1st century BC, the role of Apollonopolis Magna (Edfu) was taken over by Coptos, and like in the former millennia Coptos could become 'the Gate of the Desert' again and a well-known customs centre in the Valley of the Nile. The mining activity started during the reign of the Julius-Claudius dynasty in the area of Wādi 'Umm Wiqāla, in the quarries of Wādi Hammamat and at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus.

The desert roads and mine camps were overseen by an equestrian military officer, a *praefectus Montis Berenicidis* (ἑπάρχος Βερνίκης), already from the reign of Augustus.

Lucrative trade must have been carried out in the 1st century AD from the Valley of the Nile towards the just then flourishing Red Sea harbours, Myos Hormos and Berenike. Even in the first half of the century, cisterns and smaller road stations were built between the mountains in order to safeguard the crossings in the Eastern Desert.

From the Flavian times, the former road stations probably without any significant fortification were converted into *praesidium* that continued functioning as fortified watering stations, road stations and check-points.

The *praesidium* by the desert roads were garrisoned by smaller, 10-20 strong military units that contained 3-5 cavalymen in the 2nd century AD. The superiors of the *praesidium* were the *curatoris* who directly had to report to the *praefectus Montis Berenicidis* or to the commanders of the bodies of troops stationing in the base camps at the end of the desert roads in the Nile Valley, especially in Coptos.

The establishment and fortification of the desert road stations not only provided a solid base for the secured circulation of overtaxed commodities and for the support of imperial post network, but was also a reaction against the mobilization and raiding of the indigenous groups of the desert.

One of the presently yet unsolved archaeological problems of the Eastern Desert research is the apparent absence of indigenous archaeological material and sites from the 1st millennium BC to the 2nd – 3rd centuries AD, except for the most southward territories.

The reason for this is probably the extremely limited number of systematic research. The earliest tomb-type that perhaps belongs to the indigenous population of the Eastern Desert and can be found at the entrance of the Hitan Rayan and along the Via Hadriana is rimmed by an oval stone layer and covered by small flat pieces of slabs. Tombs of this early type can be dated to the 1st – 2nd centuries AD on the basis of the ceramic finds lying in the vicinity; however, it is still uncertain whether this pottery can at all be associated with any local indigenous culture.

We cannot still be certain about the exact extension of the Roman occupation in the Eastern Desert; even so, taking a few scattered archaeological data into consideration, it is not impossible that there could have been some advanced gold mines in Deraheib in the Wādi Allaqi.

During the reign of Hadrian, in 137 AD, a new desert road leading north from Antinoopolis was built. After leaving a rather barren part of the desert in east – west direction, it followed the shoreline of the Red Sea. The real commercial importance of this road is not yet clarified.

From the second half of the 1st century AD, we know about minor clashes between the locals and certain Roman military units in the mountains and from the beginning of the 2nd century we find abruptly more and more information in the military reports about the attacks of the nomads of the desert who travelled on camelback and stole camels.

This definitely gives us particulars on the mobilization of the population of the desert; nevertheless, according to literal sources, the nomads could not have had effective military forces at the time. The first objects that can definitely be connected to native tribes seem to appear in the same period. Shreds of handmade, scratched and glazed potteries (Eastern Desert Ware) were found in Berenike and Myos Hormos.

The process of acculturation of the desert population is well extractable in the currently preliminarily published correspondence of the *praesidium*. From the Severan era barbarian names of those who were given military allowances in Roman camps more frequently appeared in the correspondence. Baratit, the so-called tyrant of these barbarians, even had a letter in Greek written to one of the *curator* of the road to Berenike. A barbarian whose name is included in one of the letters bore the title *dekanos*.

As it appears from a report of a *monomakhos* (probably an armed caravan guardian) expelled from his *praesidium*, these barbarians got hold of effective control of the desert roads after a certain period of time.

Several tribes living in the south of the Red Sea Mountains, among them the Bedjas as well, at least for a time between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, came under the influence of the rising Aksumite Kingdom.

As a consequence of the inner crisis of the Roman Empire, the military presence halted in the desert *praesidium* by the middle of the 3rd century AD. According to archaeological

data, this took place without any serious destruction. Presently, relying upon the available archaeological information, it cannot be testified that any kind of mining activity would have been undertaken in the Eastern Desert quite up until the time of the Tetrarch. We have some scattered and debatable written sources of Blemmyan raids on the area of Coptos already from the second half of the 3rd century AD.

2 The desert in the 4th - 7th centuries AD

During the Tetrarch and in the first decades of the Constantine dynasty, essential military and administrative steps were taken towards the stabilization of the security of the Thebais. New fortresses were built on the border near Aswan and in Upper Egypt, Coptos, Luxor, and next to Ombos. The fort in Abū Ša'ar on the shore of the Red Sea can probably be connected with the protection of the desert trade routes.

It seems probable that the classical south desert roads were used by caravans in the last prospering period of Berenike from the middle of the 4th century to the 5th century AD. They must have paid indigenous guides or guardians for their services.

From among the north mining camps Mons Porphyrites and the joint restored network of road stations operated until the second half of the 4th century AD.

After the collapse of the Kushite Kingdom, in the second half of the 4th century AD, the Dodekaschoinos became the seat of war operations between the Nobades and the Blemmyes. As a result of this, by the last decade of the 4th century AD, the Blemmyes managed to bring Kalabsha and its territory under their authority. In these decades Upper Egypt was not safe either from the plunder of the barbarians.

Written sources and archaeological evidence assure us that at the latest from the end of the 4th century AD the Mons Smaragdinus and the territory of Berenike became parts of the sphere of influence of the Blemmyes, just like Phoinikon (Laqita) at the entrance of the Wādi Hammamat. Also, at the very latest by the end of the 4th century or in the beginning of the 5th century AD the Roman – Byzantine mining camps ceased to function in the northern part of the Eastern Desert.

The Dodekaschoinos came under the rule of the Blemmyes at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries. The inscriptions written on the wall of the temple of Kalabsha, chiefly dated to the first part of the 5th century AD, attested to the fast acculturation of the elite of the nomadic groups that had settled previously in the Nile Valley. The necropolises comprised of circle cairns on the fringe of the desert near Kalabsha are the burials of these settled groups.

In the beginning of Blemmyan rule over the Dodekaschoinos, at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries, the first bigger settlements made up of tents and stone buildings that did not belong to mines or quarries started appearing in the heart of the desert of the Thebais. These 'enigmatic settlements' are comprised of ruins of 50-200 stone buildings. Even if the buildings were not used simultaneously, but only on separate occasions, there still could have lived a community of 50-150 in a settlement at a time. As the often nearby lying tumuli indicate, such settlements were most likely the dwelling-places of Blemmyan communities who enormously benefited from the trans-desert trade and the production of the desert quarries.

At the same time, central settlements built up from even more carefully erected buildings were in operation in the area of the mine camps of Mons Smaragdinus, at the gold mines lying in the middle of the Wādi Hammamat, and in the vicinity of Bir 'Umm Fawḥir, Berenike and Shenshef. However, it seems probable to us that the sites of Mons Smaragdinus and the Wādi Hammamat were inhabited by not only desert-dwellers, but also with communities of specialists and entrepreneurs originating from the Nile Valley. As indicated by archaeological and written data, the population of the desert settlements must chiefly have been pagan.

Around 450 AD the Byzantine government tried to force back the raiding tribes that lived on the frontier and had constantly been plundering the lands of the Empire. It is highly likely that it went with less than more success. For all this, in all likelihood there could have been Byzantine support for the sudden advance of the Nobades tribes, the king of which, Silko drove away the Blemmyes from the Valley of the Nile by the middle of the 5th century AD. The rationale behind this was probably that the triumphant Nobades must have been easier to handle for the Byzantine court and they must also have been proved more reliable allies as they converted to Christianity in the 6th century AD.

After the loss of the Dodekaschoinos and besides the gaining of the Nobades, the Byzantine government endeavoured to range itself with at least some of the Blemmyan tribes. The so-called Gebelein documents and the tumulus necropolises of El Kab and Moalla on the edge of the desert and the nearby lying settlements report on Blemmyan *foederati* groups settled in the Thebis in the 5th – 6th centuries AD.

However, to the Upper Egyptian communities these still mostly pagan groups did not always mean safety and security because they could easily be hired to take action in the manipulations of local superiors or other landowners in the area.

As it appears from a petition written in 552 AD, marauding pagan groups still caused anxiety in the territory of Ombos even after the closure of the Isis temple in Philae.

In the meanwhile, the prosperity of former activities in the desert of the Thebais gradually ceased. After the closure of the harbour of Berenike in the middle of the 6th century AD and the decline of the emerald mining camps for as yet unknown reasons, the former desert settlements were gradually abandoned. In our view, this could mainly have been brought about by economic factors. It is likely that these bigger communities in the Eastern Desert were not self-supporting and owing to the general economic decline of the territory they broke up again into smaller groups. At the same, it is feasible that this process dragged on as long as the Arab conquest.

In the 570s Upper Egypt was again struck by serious barbarian raids.

The assumed economic decline, according to our present data, only struck the desert zone of Upper Egypt. The graves filled with gold in the Wādi Allaqi and in the region further to the south attest the wealth of that land and of the Bedja kings of the early Middle Ages.

3 The Early Bedjan Culture

The most important revelation of this dissertation is the segregation and characterization of the *Early Bedja Culture*, an independent indigenous desert culture, only some aspects of which have been described earlier.

The major part of the early Bedja population was nomadic. Their most important domestic animals were the ovidae and the camel, but in the southlands bordering Ethiopia a great number of cattle were bred as well. As it was revealed in the 4th – 6th century strata of Berenike and Šenšef, in the diet of the early Bedja, besides animal products, the sorghum also dominated. Mixed with milk it is still vital nourishment for the nomads in Etbai.

Unfortunately, there is less information about the material culture of these desert-dwellers. Research connects it with a great number of remains of ropes and clothes made of ovidae hair and found in the late strata of the harbour in Berenike.

The desert environment did not provide favourable conditions for the production of pottery. The so-called Eastern Desert Ware was a local ceramic type. Its use was, however, not so wide-spread in the northern regions, as there these hand-made vessels were often displaced by the easy to reach and produced in large quantities potteries from the Nile Valley. These latter ones were mostly delicate drinking vessels and were of special forms that usually were absent from imports of pottery.

In all probability, a high number of glass beads found in Egypt help us to form a picture of the taste of the desert-dwellers in jewellery and clothing.

It is not impossible that the same northern group of the Eastern Desert, that is, the Blemmyes developed a taste for the small, barbarian *foliis*-imitations that were manufactured after the end of the 4th century AD and must have had low real commercial value.

As we see, in the period in focus, real circulation of money only existed in the Valley of the Nile and in Berenike in the Eastern Desert. Yet, the raw pieces of emerald found in Bir Minayh and Bir 'Umm Fawaḥir must also have been used as means of payment.

Although the exact dating of rock carvings in the desert is rather uncertain, it is feasible that the depictions of the warriors who are called Blemmyan by Winkler and Červiček and are equipped with spears, circle shields and occasionally with bows sitting on camelbacks were made in the first millennium. Presumably, the barbed arrowheads of special forms found in the sites of Sikait and Kalabsha belonged to Blemmyan warriors as well as some fragments of scale armours from Sikait that had originally been produced in the Valley of the Nile.

So far, we have only managed to obtain information on the Bedja settlements on the verges of the Thebais. It seems very probable that most of the groups of these desert-dwellers dealt with animal husbandry in the major part of the year and lived only in hastily built-up huts. In certain centres of the north, they seem to learn how to erect buildings with stone foundations besides temporary lodgings. Along the most important trade routes of the Eastern Desert and in the direct vicinity of the mining camps real stone buildings were erected between the ends of the 4th and 6th centuries.

The northern, more temporary camps were abandoned in the 6th and 7th centuries AD. According to the data that we have today, around the main royal or princely centres at Deraheib and Nubt, the buildings constructed from stone continued being used even later.

We obtained most information on the burial habits of the desert-dwellers. Although some features, like the erection of stelae or of the outbuildings, have shown regional differences, the most characteristic burial type of the population of the Eastern Desert at that time was the circular stone tumulus built over tiny stone chambers. The deceased was laid in constricted position and was supplied with abundant food and liquid sacrifice.

As it appeared from the archaeological data and literal sources, in the period under discussion and probably even later the Bedjas were pagan. In inscriptions in Kalabsha and Tafa, besides the gods of the Nile Valley, and Mandulis and Isis, some other as yet unknown gods appear that must have been worshipped by the Blemmyan.

It is evident from the inscriptions of Kalabsha that the Blemmyan who settled in the Dodekaschoinos comprised a well organized religious community. In the 6th century AD, they had pagan priests, and even in 570 they made an attempt to maintain the pagan sanctuaries of the Thebais.

In Sikait, Nugrus and Kaḳb Marfu'ab around the Mons Smaragdinus, sanctuaries with major axes were built in the 4th – 5th centuries AD. These buildings attest to the spread and take-over of the traditions and cult forms of the Nile Valley.

Principally, we can rely on literal sources in the reconstruction of the Blemmyan society. It seems rather probable that the desert at least up to the area of the Wādi Hammamat was under the control of a Blemmyan ruler (*basileos, tyrannos*) who shared his power with several chieftains (*phylarkhos, hypotyranos*) of smaller local tribes. The importance of strong tie of kindred and family relations between a great number of warriors can be detected in the Greek text of the so-called Phonen letter written in the middle of the 5th century AD. Similar tribal ranks (*basiliskos, hypotyranos, domestikos*) are also mentioned in the letters from Gebelein.

Nowadays it is still unknown over exactly how big a territory the Blemmyan rules of the north Eastern Desert excised influence in the 5th – 7th centuries. In the 9th century al-Ya'qubi mentioned six Bedjan kingdoms at the shore of the Red Sea. Upon taking the substantial size of the tombs of the vicinity into account, it seems probable that the royal centres could have lain in Deraheib and in the southern Nubt. If the modern Nubt, close to Tabot, is identical with a certain Nupt included in a so far unpublished letter from Qasr Ibrim from 758-759 AD, then it seems to be certain that at least in the middle of the 8th century the whole territory as far as the Egyptian frontier fell under the influence of one ruler.

Bibliography (the publications of the author)

Luft, U – Almásy, A – Farkas, M A – Furka, I – Horváth, Z – Lassányi, G 2002. Preliminary Report on the Fieldwork at Bir Minih, Arabian Desert, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 58, 2002, 374-390

Lassányi, G 2005. The Blemmyes and the Frontier Defence in Egypt in Late Antiquity Some Archaeological Notes, *Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*. Pécs, 2005, 783-790

Lassányi, G (forthcoming) Tumulus Burials and the Nomadic Population of the Eastern Desert in Late Antiquity. In: W. Godlewski – A. Łajtar (eds) *Between the Cataracts*, Part Two, Session Papers, Proceedings of the 11th Conference of Nubian Studies, Warsaw University, 27 August – 2 September 2006. Warsaw

Lassányi, G (forthcoming) Excavation at the Settlement. (Bir Minayh)

Lassányi, G (forthcoming) Burials. (Bir Minayh)

Lassányi, G (forthcoming) Pottery. (Bir Minayh)

Lassányi, G (forthcoming) Small finds. (Bir Minayh)