

Commentary: Desert Shaped by People, or People Shaped by Desert? Reflections of an Egyptologist

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The papers in this wide-ranging collection span four continents and vary in their chronological focus from prehistory to the modern age. However, two broad trends run across them all. The first trend is a consistent highlighting of how humans shape desert environments to suit both socio-economic and ideological or spiritual need. For instance, the articles by Moulin, Boza Cuadros, Stone and Alaica and Gonzalez La Rosa all emphasise how humans have transformed the Peruvian and Bolivian desert into a network of transport routes reflective of both commercial necessity and a desire for access to sites of particular religious significance. Likewise, Bird explains in his paper how people in Western Australia have used rock art and stone arrangements to create a sacred desert landscape that not only relates to their beliefs, but also has implications for practical matters of staking claim to territory. Similar processes have been shown to be at work in Namibia by Breunig, while Roberts et al have further backed up these observations by demonstrating how nomadic populations in Qatar have sought to appropriate the desert on both a level of political ideology, and as a physical environment for pastoralism, commerce and conflict. As an Egyptologist, in this commentary I will be adding my thoughts on comparable phenomena in the Egyptian desert.

However, before doing this, I also wish to throw into relief the existence of a second trend across all papers: the emphasis on the role played by

the desert environments themselves in shaping human behaviour, be it through land use, material culture, or intangible beliefs. Simply put, not only do peoples shape deserts, but deserts also shape peoples. The unique cultural and socio-economic realities surrounding camelid herding would not have arisen in any environment other than the Peruvian desert, as Alaica and Gonzalez La Rosa reveal. Desert roads, moulded by the landscape in which they were located, influenced the development of culture-specific traditions of communication, be it in Qatar as described by Roberts et al., or in Peru as highlighted by Moulin and Stone. Desert geological features, occupying prominent positions within the physical landscape, could be exploited for rock art designed to transform it into a ritual landscape owned by specific communities, as argued by Bird's study of Western Australia and Breunig's treatment of Namibian material. Finally, there is the ever-present question of water availability, brought to the forefront by Boza Cuadros in a piece which underlines the way physical environments incorporating both water and desert can inspire the creation of complex narratives around them. Once again, looking at all of these elements from an Egyptological angle, I see numerous points in common with my own area of specialism, and I will be elaborating on some of these further.

Of the two trends outlined above, I will initially discuss how humans have shaped and exploited the desert environment within the context of Egyptian archaeology, before moving on to how the Egyptian desert has shaped humans. First and foremost, the ancient Egyptians knew that the desert contained massive mineral wealth, if only they could modify the environment in a manner that would make it extractable. Perhaps the most famous description of Egyptian mining practices in the desert is by Diodorus Siculus, who states that:

The gold-bearing earth which is hardest they first burn with a hot fire, and when they have crumbled it in this way they continue the working of it by hand; and the soft rock which can yield to moderate effort is crushed with a sledge by myriads of unfortunate wretches (Oldfather 1935: 116–117).

In the same passage, he emphasises the complex infrastructure associated with gold extraction in the Egyptian desert, which he claims involved a

complex network of tunnels and relied heavily on convict labour¹. While this account should not necessarily be taken at face value, being written by a commentator who was not Egyptian himself, much of it is duly supported by archaeological evidence. Recent discoveries of skeletal remains at Tombos (Buzon 2006: 30–35; Buzon 2008: 177–180) and Amara West (Binder & Spencer 2014: 123–136) point to there being populations of possibly convict workers engaged in manual labour in Egyptian desert environments as early as the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE), and this is brought out also by a common oath from the same period evoking ‘banishment to Kush’, a desert environment known for its quarries². Thus, one way in which the Egyptians appear to have harnessed the desert environment was as a place of hard labour: on the one hand, using the geology for economic gain, while on the other, exploiting the harshness of the environment to transform it into a punitive landscape.

This having been said, for the Egyptians the desert was not solely a place of hard work or sanction: it could also be a venue for celebrating achievement; a place which could be inscribed with stories of success. For instance, the turquoise quarry at Serabit el-Khadim, in the Sinai desert near the northernmost boundaries of Egypt, gave rise to a temple of the goddess Hathor in the Middle Kingdom (c. 2050–1700 BCE)³. In a noteworthy inscription at this site dating to this period, the high official Harwerre highlighted the importance of keeping faith in the goddess when working in the desert, while simultaneously praising his own triumph over the adverse landscape. To quote him directly⁴:

This treasurer of the god (Harwerre) says to the officials who will come to this quarry at this time: let not your faces be exhausted on account of it. Look, Hathor is going to give it for the good. I have seen it myself, I have done the same thing myself. I came over Egypt in a state of exhaustion. I

¹For a wider discussion of the work of Diodorus Siculus within a context of Egyptian mining, see Notton 1974. For a detailed case study of one Egyptian desert mine, see Meyer 1997.

²For more on this oath and punishments associated with it, see Loktionov 2017A: 264–265. This provides further references.

³For a comprehensive treatment of this site, see Valbelle & Bonnet 1996. Photographs and maps of the site, alongside a detailed commentary in Hebrew, are available in Givon 1971.

⁴Transcription in Sethe 1929: 86 (text 26), lines 3–8. Translation by the present writer.

thought it difficult to extract the mineral vein while the desert was so hot in summer, the mountains being aflame with heat and the mineral veins blotted out (Sethe 1929: 86).

Here, Harwerre is expressing not only his piety, but also his ability to take control of the desert environment in the face of severe environmental challenges. He does so not only in the text, but also in the physical act of inscribing stone taken from that location with these words. He is far from alone in commemorating desert exploits in this way – to give a territorially contrasting example, one can go to the Wadi Hammamat in Upper Egypt, near the southernmost boundaries of the traditional Ancient Egyptian state, and find hundreds of graffiti inscriptions dating across many centuries and detailing Egyptian activities in that part of the Sahara⁵ (Hikade 2006 and Lloyd 2013). Much like the peoples discussed in other papers in this issue, such as those of Namibia and Western Australia, the Egyptians were staking claim to the landscape through a form of physical interaction with the desert rock. However, in the Egyptian case, the rock art consisted of script which, while clearly visible to all, also carried an extra layer of meaning to the literate minority. For some, it was literally possible to read the desert.

Having thus made a few comments on humans shaping the desert, it is now time to address the second strand – namely how the desert shaped the people. The most self-evident point is the simple fact that throughout Egyptian history it determined where people could and should live, effectively forcing populations to cluster by the Nile. Thanks to this river, Egypt not only had an area of riparian land with an excellent water supply, but also an artery for trade and communication which was instrumental to the maintenance of a large unitary state. With desert all around, nobody had the capacity to live far from the centres of state power, which could generally be monitored from the administrative core of the country in the Nile delta. Moreover, the flatness of the terrain was perfect for the materialisation of state power, allowing impressive buildings to be seen

⁵For two summary papers on Egyptian activity in this wadi, see Hikade 2006 and Lloyd 2013. These provide further references. For a publication of a New Kingdom geological map of Wadi Hammamat, indicating exceptionally complex patterns of mineral exploitation and land appropriation, see Harrell & Brown 1992.

from considerable distances as constant reminders of the state. Thus, not only did the desert bring the Egyptians closer to government, but it also brought the physical manifestations of government visually closer to them.

Alongside this basic geographical point, the desert shaped the Egyptians in other ways too. It came to stand for the antithesis of the Egyptian Nilotic lifestyle, with one of the two Egyptian words for ‘desert’, *x3s.t*, also acquiring the broader meaning of ‘foreign land’ — a place unlike the land Egyptians could inhabit (Erman & Grapow 1971A: 234–235; Faulkner 1962: 185). Meanwhile, the other term for desert, *dSrt*, meaning ‘the red land’, came to represent the antithesis of the fertile land on which the Egyptians lived (Erman & Grapow 1971B: 494; Faulkner 1962: 316). It also came to carry connotations of the afterlife, a land of death and burial where bodies had a greater chance of preservation, as opposed to the land of daily life on the banks of the Nile⁶. Overall, considering the intellectual preoccupation with dualities that is widely recognised as a pillar of Egyptian thought (see Servajean 2008), it is apparent that the concept of the desert was central to how the Egyptians understood the world and their place in it. It may have been an inhospitable and dangerous place, more suited to death than life, but through comprehension of what it meant to not comply with standards appropriate for earthly existence, the Egyptians could better negotiate the practical and philosophical realities of the Nilotic, water-based world in which they did live from day to day.

Before concluding, there remains one more point to make: the Egyptian desert has not only shaped—and been shaped by—humans in the distant past, but it has also continued to play a part in the socio-political complexities of archaeology in the modern age. The unique hydrology of the Nile and the surrounding desert means that alterations to water flow, such as those associated with the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, can pose a substantial risk to Ancient Egyptian monuments. This led to a UNESCO-organised initiative to save international heritage⁷,

⁶ For more on Egyptian associations of the desert with death, see for instance Taylor 2001. This provides a general overview of Egyptian burial practice. For a specific example of the desert being personified as a recipient of the deceased, see Hays 2010: 7.

⁷ For a critical appraisal of the UNESCO mission, including the contributions of the various contributing states, see Hassan 2007.

which rapidly transformed into a new front for the Cold War as Western and Soviet archaeologists both sought to take advantage of the situation. In particular, it has been shown that the Soviets harnessed the crisis surrounding salvage of Egyptian monuments as a mechanism for bolstering the reputation of USSR academia, while also using Egyptologists to develop Soviet soft power and cultural capital in what was considered a critical region of the Middle East (Loktionov 2017B: 135–136). In this way, the political implications of more recent work in the Egyptian desert may profitably be compared to those in other regions: for instance, the Peruvian government has also used desert water management for its own advantage, as shown in this volume by Boza Cuadros, while Roberts et al. has illustrated how Qatar has seen politics tie the desert together with modern notions of nationhood. Thus, the desert is far from a spent political force: in Egypt and elsewhere, it continues to palpably influence the activities of both the communities and professional archaeologists working there.

Overall, what all of this illustrates is that in Egypt, as in all the cultures examined in this volume, the relationship between humans and the desert went both ways, and continues to this day. The desert sustained the Egyptian economy through provision of vitally important mineral resources, it served as a useful zone for punishing convicts, and it gave ambitious individuals the opportunity to stake claims to the landscape by successfully subjugating it and leaving inscriptions on its rocks. Politicians have continued to stake claim to it in far more recent times too. At the same time, the desert also permeated into the ideological framework of the Ancient Egyptians: by enclosing the Nile valley and delta, as well as providing a perfect setting for highly visible building works, it encouraged the formation and maintenance of a clearly defined unitary state. By existing as a form of ‘other’ on the boundaries of Egypt, it strengthened a sense of distinct cultural identity and specificity in the people inhabiting the narrow strip of fertile land between its sands. In this regard, it maintained a process of continuous reinforcement of cultural values, much in the same way as has already been shown for Peru, Namibia, Western Australia and Qatar. This is illustrative of the fact that while deserts around the world

may differ, in many regards the civilisations which develop within them exhibit remarkable socioeconomic, cultural and political similarities.

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