



Who was who in Elephantine of the third millennium BC?

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Since 1969, the German Archaeological Institute has been working in cooperation with the Swiss Institute of Architectural Research and Archaeology on the island of Elephantine. During the past decades, the mission established the general outline of the history and the development of settlement on Elephantine Island.¹

In the fourth millennium BC, a settlement with a small island necropolis to its south started to develop in a restricted area in the eastern part of the southern tip of the island (fig. 1). In about 2700 BC, the town occupied the entire eastern part of the southern tip of the island; later on, the western part was used as the necropolis. During the Middle Kingdom both the town, and the area taken up with its sanctuaries, expanded. Thereafter, the temple of Satet was rebuilt and enlarged in stone. In the early Middle Kingdom, a temple was built for the god Khnum on top of the *tell*. Until then, his cult had been performed in the precinct of the temple of Satet. A sanctuary was also established for the Old Kingdom official Heqaib, who was worshipped constantly from the late third millennium BC onwards. This sanctuary was erected in the area west of the temple of Satet where a metropolitan zone had developed in the Eleventh Dynasty. It was abandoned in around 1650 BC.

The increasing size of the temple correlates well with the enhanced importance of the settlement of Aswan on the east bank. More and more, the character of Elephantine evolved into that of a conservative, sacred Egyptian town with temples and their administration, including the Nilometers. The city retained its importance also in Late Antiquity. In the medieval period, the settlement was abandoned at the same time as Aswan.² Much is known about the history of the town, but who were its inhabitants?

The mission's aim is to better understand the social and economic processes that helped create the town on Elephantine. This is being achieved through extensive study seasons, and by resuming excavations in certain areas of the town to clarify any additional questions. This combined approach will hopefully pave the way for a detailed description of the living conditions at the First Cataract on the one hand and, on the other hand, the effect of external interferences, either from the north or from the south. Three sections shall illustrate the diversity of these circumstances.

How Nubian can a Naqada culture be to be still called Naqada culture?

Some years ago, while working on the pottery finds of the third millennium BC, an attempt was made to distinguish the Egyptian from the Nubian material culture.³ Is this always possible?

¹ Kaiser, *MDAIK* 55, 232–4, figs. 55–8; Seidlmayer, *Nilstände*.

² Von Pilgrim, *MDAIK* 60, 120–1.

³ Raue, *MDAIK* 55, 173–89; id., *Sudan and Nubia* 6, 20–4.

What leads us to distinguish cultures within the wider framework of northeastern African cultural development, and thereafter to discuss Egyptians as distinct from neighbouring cultures? Was there a mixed population, or was the mixed character actually a characteristic of a group that can be archaeologically attested around 3000 BC? Perhaps we should be more open to the second hypothesis.

The flood levels of the river Nile did not allow for any larger permanent settlements on the islands of the First Cataract during the Naqada Period. Small habitations did exist, but a natural sinkhole that was excavated in 2005 illustrates how disastrous the annual flood may have been (fig. 2). The hole was used for a burial in the late Neolithic period. Shortly afterwards, the flood filled the hole and broke the pots and ivory bracelets. The pieces were turned around and around, until the complete assemblage was rounded like river pebbles. The flood even covered the sinkhole with about 50cm of coarse sediments of sand and pebbles.

This early context can be dated to the earlier fourth millennium and features Neolithic fabrics in connection with early A-Group wares. All following contexts at Elephantine have a different character: various Egyptian vessels for storage or baking bread can be found next to different types of cooking and serving vessels of rather prehistoric and late-Neolithic manufacture. Usually, the latter vessels appear in Nubian sites to the south, the others in Egyptian sites to the north. However, on Elephantine a complete set always consists of both features: Nubian and Egyptian.

The same distribution was observed in material found in the temple of Satet and in the settlement to its east and south;⁴ this also seems to be valid for finds from the earliest necropolis as well. At the beginning of the third millennium BC, several people were buried in a geologic pothole.⁵ The pottery assemblage again points to the observation that the joint appearance of what is called Egyptian and Nubian features is rather systematic and should be described less in terms of ‘imports’.

But it is not only the pottery that displays features that seem strange or at least unfamiliar. At the period when the Satet cult was started in the natural niche between two granite boulders around 100m to the north of the pothole, another unusual feature appeared. During Naqada III, the dead were buried in sand deposits with simple fire places on top of the burials.⁶ One tomb, discovered in 2005,⁷ shows another remarkable feature that, to my knowledge, is thus far unattested in the burial practices of the Naqada Period, throughout the Egyptian Nile Valley (fig. 4): the head of the deceased was placed upon a heap of barley grains. This represents a very understandable but unique, in the Early Dynastic Period, solution to supply the deceased with food in his afterlife.

It might make sense to make a differentiation between cultural units and temporary topographical units that induce, for example, Nubians and Egyptians living around the First Cataract to use a similar material culture with elements of both roots. Hopefully, the new surveys on the west bank⁸ will help answer the question of the cultural description of these

⁴ Kopp, *Naqadazeit*.

⁵ Jaritz, *MDAIK* 26, 135–8.

⁶ Raue, *MDAIK* 61, 19, pl. 5a.

⁷ Raue, *MDAIK* 64.

⁸ Such as that of M. C. Gatto, ‘The British Museum/University of Rome ‘La Sapienza’ archaeological project in the Aswan-Kom Ombo Region’ presented at the 2007 Annual Egyptological Colloquium at the British

early strata, which date to the occupation after the flood levels decreased and allowed for larger settlements. The full publication of old excavation finds from Shellal and Qubaniya is urgently needed, since the description of the finds of the region as ‘A-Group’ or ‘Naqada’ remains unsatisfying.

A ‘Dynastic A-Group’ in local dynastic conditions

Nubian material regularly appears in Old Kingdom contexts at Elephantine, in small quantities.⁹ One of the possible reasons for this is the raids of early Old Kingdom kings. The increasing centralization led to an increasing need for luxury items, which were needed, for example, in the households and the tombs of tens of thousands of people close to Helwan in the Second Dynasty.

The Nubian producers of these vessels cannot necessarily be termed prisoners of war only. If the raids had been half as successful as they claimed to be in stealing the Nubian cattle, goats and sheep,¹⁰ they would have very effectively destroyed the economic basis of these semi-nomadic cultures. Textile production, transport and milk supply, amongst other aspects, would have ceased, forcing the populations to seek a place close to the Egyptian settlements. Those ready for service may have been part of the Egyptian expeditions sent to the deserts to explore them for precious materials like the diorite for Khafra, or other materials from the west of Dakhla Oasis that were needed during the reign of Khufu and Djedefra.¹¹

Natural places for such an encounter between Nubians and Egyptians would have been places such as Buhen¹² and Elephantine. In these locations, we find traces of a cultural unit that is called ‘Dynastic A-Group’. One remarkable feature of the lower Nubian A-Group can be observed on Elephantine until the later third millennium BC: the typical v-shaped cooking vessel that occurs regularly in the Second, Third and Fourth Dynasty contexts of the island; many of them appear in prominent places such as the temple of Satet.¹³ During the Second to Fifth Dynasties, the single row of incised triangles that is known from A-Group inventories is also attested.¹⁴ Furthermore, the early Fourth Dynasty on Elephantine still sees the presence of the *dent du loup*-pattern. There is a successor of the ‘eggshell ware’ (fig. 3) in the Fifth Dynasty as well as the chevron frieze, well known from A-Group times. A late successor of vessel type N70 shows up in Elephantine during the Fourth and Fifth Dynasty.

The latest examples of v-shaped vessels appear in the middle of the Sixth Dynasty; in addition, the last parallels of fine wares that are similar to the luxury fabrics of Qustul date to this time.

Excavations between 2003 and 2005 concentrated on the strata of the late Fifth

Museum: *The ‘Head of the South’ Current research in Upper Egypt, south of Thebes* (July 12–13, 2007).

⁹ First identified by S. Seidlmayer, in *Ägypten im afro-orientalischen Kontext*.

¹⁰ Meurer, *Nubier*, 57–60.

¹¹ Kuhlmann, *MDAIK* 61, 243–89.

¹² Gratién, *JEA* 81, 43–56.

¹³ Raue, *MDAIK* 55, 188–9, fig. 41.6.

¹⁴ Firth, *Archaeological Survey (1910-1911)*, 201 [8.1].

Dynasty. For the first time, clear evidence for a group of features was found that are also known from the earliest pottery phases of Kerma Ancien and, somewhat later in the published contexts, of the so-called ‘early C-Group’ in Lower Nubia. We should probably not attempt to arrange these findspots in a chronological order. With the recent finds from Elephantine at hand, I would prefer to consider the new techniques and vessel proportions as evidence for a population with common roots, who appear at different places throughout the Nile Valley at the same time, around 2400–2350 BC; the archaeological remains have several identical features in the earliest phase. After two or three generations, the people developed in the places of their arrival – Kerma, the former central part A-Group territory and the Aswan area – and diverged. This was also caused by the different conditions they encountered: the less densely inhabited pre-Kerma area, the almost void former A-Group territory, and at Elephantine the gateway to the urban society of the Egyptian Nile Valley. Therefore, they developed differently and are clearly differentiated: the Kerma civilization and the C-Group. Residents such as the ‘Dynastic A-Group’ people combine the material culture of both Lower Nubian cultural entities, the ‘A-Group’ and the ‘C-Group’.

The Change of Elites

Elephantine was probably not the favourite place of residence for officials of the Fourth Dynasty. This changed considerably towards the Sixth Dynasty and was closely connected with the end of the central state of the Old Kingdom.¹⁵ However, evidence for inconsistencies in this development emerges.

The first hints of elite burials on the island date to the second half of the Fifth Dynasty: a relief gives evidence for a doorway or for a representative facade and must have belonged to a mastaba.¹⁶ However, these structures suffered from immediate destruction shortly after the officials were buried. Merely one or two generations later, such funerary monuments were being taken out of their original context. A frieze-block of the late Fifth Dynasty, belonging to a mastaba of the expedition official Niankhmin, was reused in a workshop of only slightly later date.¹⁷ Furthermore, a fragment of a very well made limestone statuette was found in a late 5th Dynasty context. A limestone column base also hints that there was an elite necropolis at this time. It seems highly unlikely that limestone would have been brought 200km from the north just to be plastered and used as a post support in a simple workshop of the reign of Pepi II (fig. 5). The same speed of neglect can be observed in the harbour at the southern landing place. Within two generations, inscriptions of the early Sixth Dynasty were covered by simple harbour habitations and storage facilities (figs. 6–7).¹⁸

On the other hand, there is much evidence to suggest that the town was inhabited by an increasing number of people. Most of the Elephantine papyri of the Old Kingdom, either those from current excavations or those now in the Berlin Museum, can be dated to this

¹⁵ Raue, *BSFE* 163, 8–26.

¹⁶ Raue, *BSFE* 163, fig. 4.

¹⁷ Seidlmayer and Ziermann, *MDAIK* 48, 161–75.

¹⁸ Seidlmayer, *MDAIK* 58, 35–7.

period. In one of them, the ‘removal of persons’ is a matter of debate for a higher ranking lady.¹⁹ It is certainly not a coincidence that all evidence for these observations stops when the first rock-cut tombs are built on the west bank, late in or after the reign of Pepi I (figs. 8–9).²⁰

Two phases can be distinguished amongst the tombs at Qubbet el-Hawa. The first one starts in the time of Djedkara in the late Fifth Dynasty, around 2375 BC. This phase is proof of the elite’s new esteem for the southern part of Egypt. Of course it is tempting to connect this observation with the introduction of reforms and new administrative structures in the advanced Fifth Dynasty, which resulted, for example, in the new office of the ‘Overseer of Upper Egypt’.²¹ Also, it has to be noted that this is the period in which 20-30 year old tomb architecture and burials in Saqqara were back-filled and covered by the causeway of Unas.²² Whatever relation may have existed between these processes in the first phase, the esteem centred on the island-territory, but the new elites were unable to develop a joint culture of memory. Evidently, officials and potential tomb owners did not manage to create a society interested in the memory of their leaders, and their families are either not wealthy enough, or too distant, to maintain the tombs.

The second phase probably began with the famous expedition leaders Sabni, Mehu and Harkhuf. Their careers started in the reign of Pepi I, but their tombs belong to the first half of the long reign of Pepi II. The rock-cut tombs of the late Old Kingdom are well known for hundreds of small, inscribed vessels pointing to a remarkably increasing interest in jointly celebrated funerals of the elites.²³

Parallel to this, there is evidence for a cult for the successful leaders of these expeditions:²⁴ a group of shrines was discovered in 1996–1998, in strata of the late First Intermediate Period/Eleventh Dynasty, within the building complex of the Old Kingdom.²⁵ They attest to cult activities for Heqaib, Sabni, Mehu and Sobekhotep. Additional recent stratigraphical evidence supports a date for the first cult activity taking place in the late 6th

¹⁹ Fischer-Elfert, *MDAIK* 61, 215–16.

²⁰ The very first generation of rock cut tombs does not seem to be preserved, e.g. the tomb of Harkhuf is built in the place of an older tomb whose owner remains anonymous (personal communication, K.-J. Seyfried). Thus, there is, for example, time and space for officials of the time of Merenra or even the latter part of the reign of Pepi I on Qubbet el-Hawa. Similar movements from mastaba cemeteries to rock cut tombs are also to be expected at sites like Edfu, where the last noble tombs in form of mastabas do not seem to postdate the time of Pepi I; in Elkab, the situation seems to be different since the mastaba tombs there never developed a more elaborate form towards the later Old Kingdom and major parts of the social stratigraphy moved on to the rock-cut necropolis. On the other hand, it is interesting to see that due to the lack of a hill at Dendera, the elites continue to build elaborate mastaba tombs (Fischer, *Dendera*).

²¹ See the contribution of W. Grajetzki, ‘Aspects of local administration in the Head of the South: the late Old to early New Kingdom’, presented at the 2007 Annual Egyptological Colloquium at the British Museum: The ‘Head of the South’ Current research in Upper Egypt, south of Thebes (July 12–13, 2007).

²² Altenmüller and Moussa, *Nianchchnum*.

²³ Edel, *Qubbet el-Hawa*. It is important to note that such vessels are absent in the lower part of the social stratigraphy in the contemporary cemetery on Elephantine Island.

²⁴ Dorn, *Älteres Heqaibheiligtum*.

²⁵ Pilgrim, *MDAIK* 55, 85–90; id. *Studies Bietak*, 403–5.

Dynasty,²⁶ which matches parallel developments in the settlement of Ain Asyl in the oasis of Dakhla.²⁷

In this second phase, the necropolis of the elite becomes separated from the island. Only after this has happened does the island cemetery gain ‘stratigraphical stability’: single tombs are replaced every two, three or four generations, but the entire stratum of a cemetery is not removed at once.

With this separation one wonders whether the elites really spent a lot of time in town, or whether they mainly lived out on their estates. According to the biography of Harkhuf, his house contained a garden with plants and a lake.²⁸ Was this reality or is this phrase just part of an ideal biography? Given the special situation of Elephantine and its surroundings, I would take this statement seriously; if such a house and park really existed, it certainly was not realised on top of the tell of Elephantine, far away from ground water on a granite outcrop, but rather in the countryside.

Another important figure of the time of Pepi II is the official Khunes: the causeway of his tomb, which lies in the rock-cut necropolis on the Qubbet el-Hawa, is among the earliest examples facing north, leading to the cultivation north of the necropolis. In the last part of that strip, a rock-inscription of Khunes can be found at the top of the cliff (fig. 10). This text may have functioned like a boundary stela.

The gap, caused by this separation of elites, their burials and probably also their mansions, was also filled by celebrations. Material evidence for such feasts was found in the building complex of the Sixth Dynasty on Elephantine, where boxes of Sabni, Heqaib and others had been deposited. These wooden shrines are depicted in the rock cut tombs of the Qubbet el-Hawa. The festival required streets of a width that did not exist before in the settlement and that were invented at this moment in time to allow for proper processions.

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²⁶ Jeuthe, *MDAIK* 61, 25–9.

²⁷ Soukiassian *et al.*, *Balat* VI.

²⁸ Sethe, *Urkunden* I, 121, lines 13–17.

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Fig. 1: Island of Elephantine.

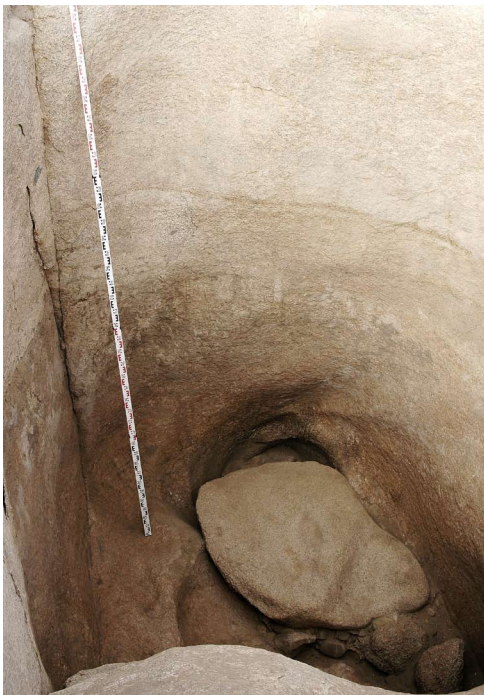


Fig. 2: Elephantine, Area XXXIV; natural sinkhole.



Fig. 3: Elephantine, Nubian Trichrome Ware, Fifth Dynasty.



Fig. 4: Elephantine, Area XXXIV; Early Dynastic burial.



Fig. 5: Elephantine, Area XXIV; column base in workshop of the Sixth Dynasty.



Fig. 6: Elephantine, Area XII; inscription of the Sixth Dynasty.



Fig. 7: Elephantine, Area XII; inscription of the Sixth Dynasty.



Fig 8: Qubbet el-Hawa; rock-cut tombs of the Old and Middle Kingdom, from the south.



Fig 9: Qubbet el-Hawa; rock-cut tombs of the Old and Middle Kingdom, from the east.



Fig. 10: West bank of Aswan, north of Qubbet el-Hawa; inscription of Khunes, Sixth Dynasty.