ADDITIONAL REMARKS ON BLEMMYES, BEJA AND EASTERN DESERT WARE

By H. Barnard[1]

In the 2005 issue of this journal we wrote, in an article on the pottery corpus now identified as Eastern Desert Ware, that "... recovered data, however, leaves the former scholarly association of these vessels with the Blemmyes less plausible (BARNARD *et al.* 2005:49)." In his summary of the article the editor wrote in his introduction that "[t]hese ceramics are very probably ascribable to the Blemmyes, Nomads of the Eastern Desert ... (BIETAK 2005:13)." Here I would like to elucidate these seemingly contradictory statements, and try to find common ground between them, by presenting an overview of what is currently known about Blemmyes, Beja and Eastern Desert Ware.

Eastern Desert Ware vessels are hand-made cups and bowls with a careful surface treatment and remarkable decorations (Fig. 1). They are found in 4th–6th entury CE contexts in the Nile Valley between the first and the 5th cataract, as well as in the Eastern Desert between there and the Red Sea coast. Eastern Desert Ware sherds and vessels invariably form only a small percentage of the ceramic finds from the same and associated contexts, the majority being the remains of wheel-thrown vessels from the Nile Valley. These usually include C-ware and R-ware, associated with the Nubian Late Meroitic and X-group (Fig. 2; STROUHAL 1984), or ERSA and ERSB, associated with Late Roman Egypt (Fig. 3; TOMBER 1998; 1999).[2] A selection of Eastern Desert Ware sherds from Egypt and Sudan has recently been studied in some detail, the result of which is published in a series of articles (BARNARD 2002; BARNARD *et al.* 2005; BARNARD 2006; BARNARD and MAGID 2006; BARNARD and STROUHAL 2004; STROUHAL 1984). The preliminary conclusion of this research is that Eastern Desert Ware was made and used by one of the indigenous groups in the area at the time. This is concurrent with earlier assumptions, based on more cursory studies of the material (LUFT *et al.* 2002:384; RICKE 1967:34; ROSE 1995:43; SIDE-

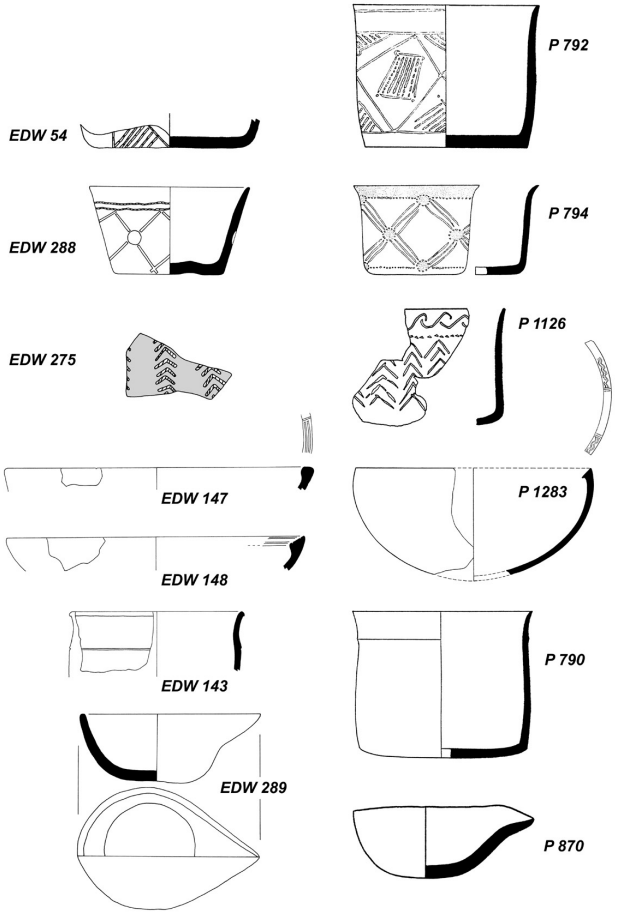

Fig. 1 Eastern Desert Ware from different sites in Egypt and Sudan, on the left, compared with vessels excavated in Wadi Qitna (after STROUHAL 1984), on the right

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[2] C-ware = cream ware; R-ware = red ware (cf. STROUHAL 1984:103–129, 144–154; also ADAMS 1986; TRIGGER 1967); ERSA = Egyptian red slip A; ERSB = Egyptian red slip B (cf. TOMBER 1998:170–177; 1999:146–151; also HAYES 1995).

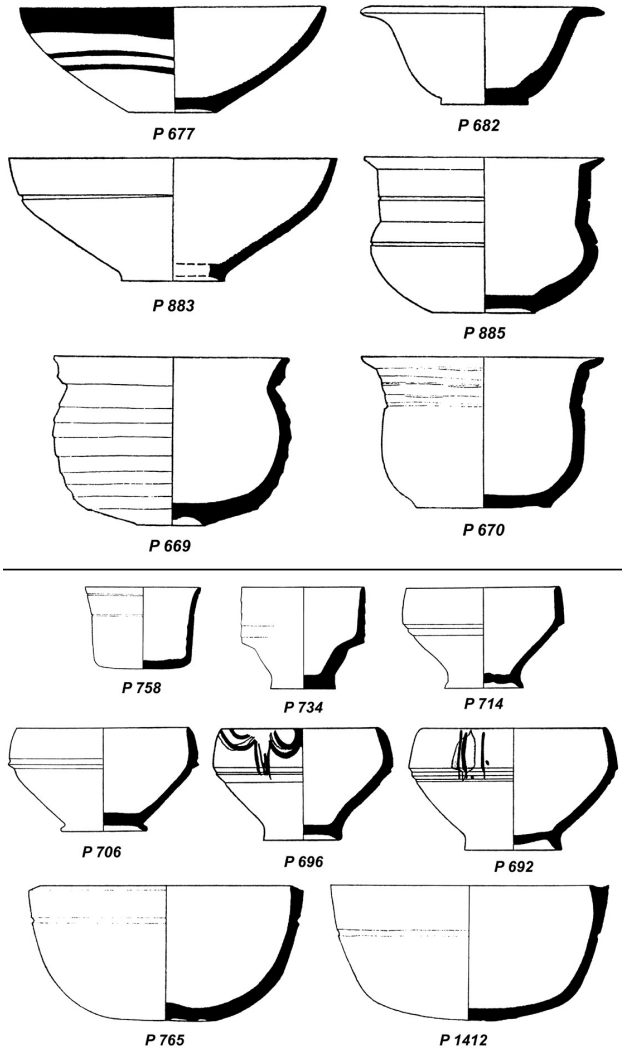

Fig. 2 Selection of Late Meroitic C-ware, at the top, and X-group R-ware, at the bottom, excavated in Wadi Qitna (after STROUHAL 1984). The presence of these vessels indicates contacts with areas to the south (the kingdoms of Meroe, Nobatia or Makuria, Table 1)

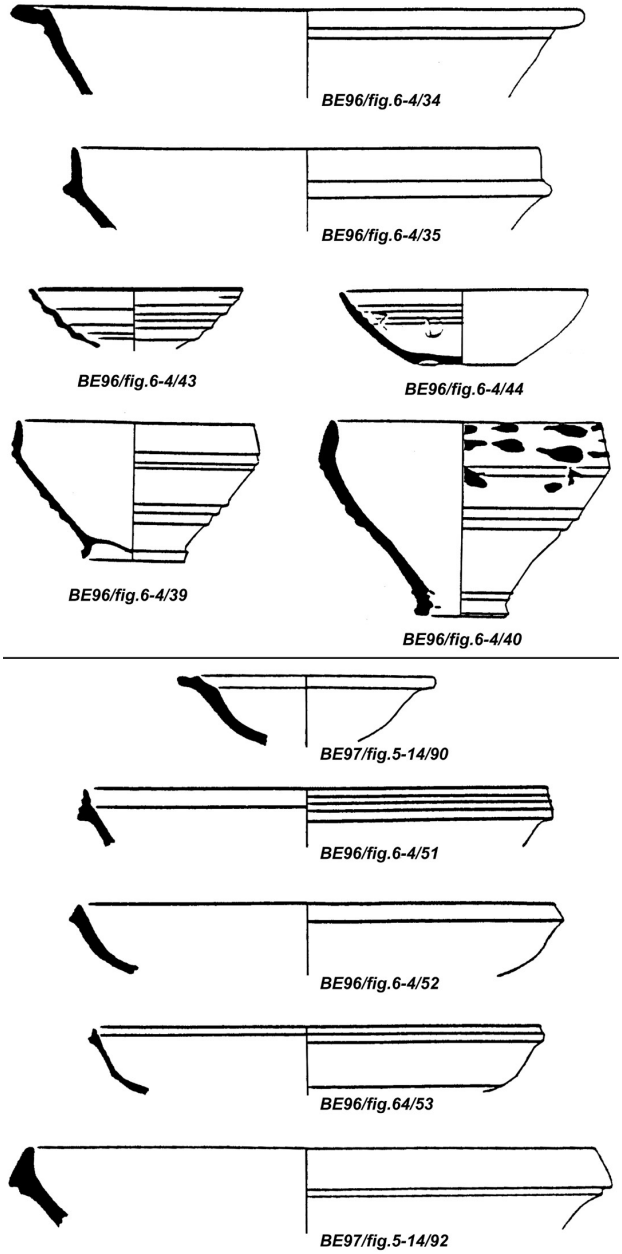

Fig. 3 Selection of ERSA, at the top, and ERSB, at the bottom, excavated in Shenshef (after TOMBER 1998; 1999). The presence of these vessels indicates contacts with areas to the north (Late Roman or Byzantine Egypt, Table 1)

BOTHAM and WENDRICH 1996:16; 2001:256). More definite conclusion will be presented in a future monograph on the subject. The identification of this group and their motivations to start and stop producing their own pottery, however, remain problematic.

First is the dearth of archaeological and historical information. Lower Nubia was lost under Lake Nasser in the 1960's and a similar fate awaits the areas upstream of the 4th cataract, where another dam across the Nile is now under construction. Research in the region has been focussed on pre-historic and early historic remains, taken here as before the Common Era, rather than the period in which Eastern Desert Ware was produced and used, and necessarily entailed many rescue excavations. The more recent history of the area is characterized by the fact that the region has been on the fringes of, or between large cultural spheres to the north or to the south during most of the Common Era (Table 1). During this period the region was apparently invaded from as far as the Arabian Peninsula (by Banu Kanz, Maᶜaza and Rashaida tribes, in the 10th, 18th and the 19th century respectively) and the Sudd (by the Funj, which later established the Sultanate of Sinnar), as well

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">SOUTHEAST EGYPT</th><th colspan="2">NORTHEAST SUDAN</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Pharaonic Egypt</td><td>Late Period
(25th–30th Dynasty)
715–343 BCE</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="3">Kingdom of Meroe
(Kushite Kingdom)
ca. 800 BCE–350 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>2nd Persian Period
343–332 BCE</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Graeco-Roman Egypt</td><td>Ptolemaic Empire
332 BCE–30 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Roman Empire
30–330 CE</td><td colspan="2">EASTERN DESERT WARE</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Byzantine Egypt</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Byzantine Empire
330–616 CE</td><td rowspan="5">Kingdom of Nobatia
(Ballana Culture)
ca. 300–700 CE</td><td rowspan="5">Kingdom of Makuria
(protected by the baqt)
ca. 500–1323 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Persian Invasion
616–628 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Byzantine Empire
629–641 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="6">Islamic Egypt</td><td>Rashidun caliphs
641–658 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Umayyad Caliphate
658–750 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Abbasid Caliphate
750-969 CE</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="3"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Fatimid caliphs
969–1171 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ayyubid Sultanate
1171–1250 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Mamluk sultans
1250–1517 CE</td><td colspan="2">Banu Kanz (Awlad Kenz, Beni Kenz)
1323–1517 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Ottoman Egypt</td><td colspan="2">Ottoman Empire
1517–1798 CE</td><td rowspan="2">Sultanate of Sinnar (Funj)
1504–1821 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Invasion of Napoleon
1798–1801 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Modern Egypt</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Khedives and kings of the Dynasty of Mohamed Ali
Mohamed Ali (1805–1848) – Fu᾽ad II (1952–1953)
increasingly controlled by the British Empire</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Mahdi Revolt
1883–1898 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Unilateral independence
22 February 1922</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Anglo-Egyptian Sudan
1899–1956 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Republic of Egypt
18 June 1953</td></tr>
<tr><td>Full independence
18 June 1956</td><td colspan="2">Republic of Sudan
1 January 1956</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1 Chronologic overview of historic events with a direct influence on life in the Eastern Desert (after Adams 1984). The period in which Eastern Desert Ware occurs in the archaeological record is marked in grey

as armies from the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and British Empires (Adams 1984; Cappers 2006; Dahl and Hjort-af-Ornas 2006; Hobbs 1990; Krzywinski and Pierce 2001; Murray 1935; Paul 1954). Archaeological research in the Eastern Desert has understandably concentrated on the Pharaonic, Ptolemaic and Roman quarries, mines and harbours as well as the numerous pre-

historic and Pharaonic inscriptions in the region, at the detriment of the more ephemeral traces of the nomadic inhabitants of the Eastern Desert.

These nomadic inhabitants are often identified as the Blemmyes, a group mentioned in several of the contemporary ancient sources, but also both before and after the 4th–6th centuries CE (Krall 1900; Updegraff 1988). The most influential remark about the Blemmyes has been the first century CE statement by Pliny the Elder that „[t]he Blemmyes are reported have no heads, their mouths and eyes being attached to their chests (Natural History 5,46, translation H. Rackham 1961)." This bizarre image has made its way onto medieval *mappae mundi*,[3] and manuscripts,[4] as well as into later literary works of, for instance, William Shakespeare (Othello,[5] Act I, Scene II) and Umberto Eco (*Baudolino).*[6] It has been suggested by Dr. Eugen Strouhal that this remark may be traced back to the large shields that were used to protect the body from the nose down to the knees (Barnard 2005:34; Plumley 1975:24). Around the same time as Pliny the Elder, the geographer Strabo (Strabo 17.1.53–54) described the Blemmyes as „... nomads and neither many nor warlike, although they were believed to be so by the ancients because of their frequent raids on defenceless people (Eide *et al.* 1998:830)." In an earlier text (Strabo 16.4.8–13, 17) he has already provided a list of people living in the desert between the Nile and the Red Sea with fanciful names such as *Rhizophagoi* (Root-eaters), *Spermaphagoi* (Seed-eaters), *Kynamolgoi* (Dog-milkers), *Elephantophagoi* (Elephant-eaters), *Strouthophagoi* (Ostrich-eaters), *Akridophagoi* (Locust-eaters), *Ichthyophagoi* (Fish-eaters), *Kreophagoi* (Meat-eaters) and *Troglodytes* (Cave-dwellers) or Trogodytes (Eide *et al.* 1998:823–826).[7] The two most reliable ancient sources on the Blemmyes are the reports of the Egyptian diplomat Olympiodorus, who visited Lower Nubia around 420 CE (quoted by Photius in *Bibliotheca* 80, 62a9–26), and the historian Procopius, who described the Roman retreat from the area by Emperor Diocletian in *ca.* 298 CE (*De Bellis* 1,19.27–37), albeit about 250 years after this took place. Olympiodorus informs us that he met with the chiefs and priests of the Blemmyes in Talmis (Kalabsha), who convinced him that they controlled the area as far as Prima (Qurta or Qasr Ibrim) as well as the emerald mines (Mons Smaragdus) in the vicinity (Eide *et al.* 1998:1127), although in reality a considerable distance to the northeast (Barnard 2005:33–34). Procopius tells us that Diocletian (284–305 CE) ordered the Roman troops to retreat from Hiera Sycaminos (Maharraqa in Lower Nubia) to Syene (Aswan), while asking the Nobatai to move from around the city of Oasis (Kharga?) to the deserted Nile Valley in order to prevent further attacks from the Blemmyes. Both the Blemmyes and the Nobatai were given a yearly amount in gold on the condition that they would stop attacking Roman property. This agreement was subsequently broken by both the Nobatai and the Blemmyes, still according to Procopius, showing that they should not be trusted. Procopius implies that things were even worse by stating that although Emperor Justinian (527–565 CE, a contemporary of Procopius) ordered the temple in Philae to be closed, both groups still revere pagan gods (Isis, Osiris and especially Priapus), while the Blemmyes also make human sacrifices to the sun (Eide *et al.* 1998:1188–1193).

All relevant ancient sources on the Middle Nile region have been collected in the four volumes of the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* (Eide *et al.* 1994; 1996; 1998; 2000). According to the indices, these contain 73 texts that somehow refer to the Blemmyes or the Beja. The editors consider these names as more of less synonymous, an assumption that will be discussed later.

[3] World maps, such as the map drawn on vellum around 1290 CE by Richard de Bello of Haldingham, which is kept in Hereford Cathedral, Great Britain.

[4] Such as Cotton Tiberius B. V, part 1, *Marvels of the East*, f. 82 (before 1025 CE) and Royal 15 E. VI, *Shrewsbury Talbot Book of Romances*, f. 21v (before 1445 CE).

[5] Othello: It was my hint to speak, such was the process / and of the Cannibals that each other eat / the Anthropophagi and men whose heads / do grow beneath their shoulders.

[6] Then, receiving a shy reaction from the panotian he tried to approach, he took a fancy to a blemmy female. He found that, apart from the lack of a head, she had a slender waist, an inviting vagina, and furthermore it would be great to kiss a woman on the mouth as if he were kissing her womb (translation William Weaver 2002).

[7] For the spelling of Trog(l)odytes see Burstein 1989:109; Murray and Warmington 1967:24.

The texts are written in hieroglyphic Egyptian, Demotic, Coptic, Greek, Latin and the only partially understood Meroitic language and script. Indications for a Blemmyan language are limited to unusual names of persons and gods (300, 306, 310–315, 319, 321, 331–343) and the use of 'pidgin Greek' in some of the texts (310–313; see also EIDE *et al.* 1998:1135).[8] Of these 73 texts (100%), 37 (42%) can possibly contain first-hand knowledge on the subject matter, as the author may have visited the area, while only 31 (42%) mention the Blemmyes or the Beja by name. In 37 texts (51%) they can be considered active participants, in the remaining 36 they are mentioned in the context of a geographical description or as the enemies of the state or the religion of the author. Only 13 texts (18%) meet all three criteria (BARNARD 2005). In the same way that the most reliable textual sources (Strabo, Olympiodorus and Procopius) do not seem to agree on the lifestyle or territory of the inhabitants of the region, other texts portray them as living in the Nile Valley (308, 311), pastoral nomads (56, 109, 189, 190, 274, 296, 309), subjects of overlords (278, 283, 293), ruled by chiefs, kings or queens (294, 301, 310–311, 319, 320); pagans (324), enemies of Christianity (278, 293, 296, 301), Christians (327); barbarians (282, 296, 309, 328) or parties in contracts for marriage or loans (123, 331–343). It is noteworthy that the son of the Blemmyer mentioned in PHauswaldt VI (123) is identified as a Megabaroi in PHauswaldt XV (EIDE *et al.* 1996:579–580). This is only one of many tribal names from other sources that can be added to Strabo's list above. Others include Adulites (202), Aithiopians (56, 57, 66, 109, 116, 171, 189, 190, 218, 224, 233, 274, 279, 280, 281, 293, 294, 298, 303, 307, 308, 317), Aksumites (298, 299), Annoubades (314, 320), Arabs (218, 274), Balahau (34), Beja (234), Bougaites (298, 299), Catadupians (303), Himyarites (298, 299, 327), Indians (57, 280, 283, 293), Nobatai (328), Noubades (317, 318, 327), Noubai (109, 190), Nubians (302) and Saracens (283, 303). Some of these names, such as Indians, appear to refer to modern groups but are placed in northeast Africa by the ancient authors (MAYERSON 1993). This is another warning, more subtle than the fantastic description of Pliny, that the ancient textual sources should be read with a healthy dose of scepticism (BARNARD 2005; BURSTEIN, in press; ROSEN 2006; WENDRICH *et al.* 2006).

Archaeological artefacts that have been linked to the Blemmyes include Eastern Desert Ware (BIETAK 2005; SIDEBOTHAM and WENDRICH 1996:16; 2001:256), a number of petroglyphs in the Nile Valley as well as in the Eastern Desert (WINKLER 1938:15–17) and a series of tumulus graves (*ekratels*) scattered throughout the region (KRZYWINSKI and PIERCE 2001:113; SADR *et al.* 1994). The relation between these diverse finds, however, remains unclear as does their connection to the Blemmyes or to any other of the many groups mentioned in the ancient sources. It is evident that the cultural and ethnic landscape of the Middle Nile region in ancient times was as much a patchwork of interlinking groups as it is today (HUYGE 1998; MURRAY 1935; PAUL 1954; WENDRICH, in press). It may be possible to extract the history of one specific group from the limited historical and archaeological data (UPDEGRAFF 1988), but this should be approached with the appropriate care. Labelling

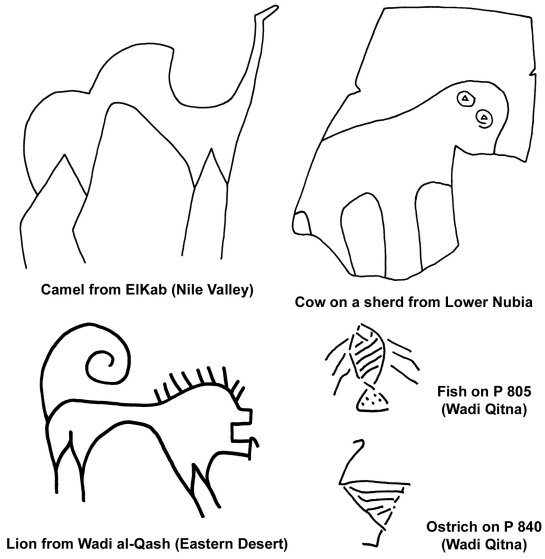

Fig. 4 Petroglyphs depicting a camel, in the forecourt of the temple of Shesmetat in Elkab, and a lion in Wadi al-Qash (cf. DERCHAIN 1971, pl. 24; WINKLER 1938, pl. III), on the left, and incised drawings of a cow, a fish and an ostrich on Eastern Desert Ware (cf. STROUHAL 1984:160, 164), on the right, showing great variety in style and subject matter (cf. Fig. 1).

[8] The numbers in parenthesis refer to those given to the texts in the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* (see also BARNARD 2005).

all archaeological artefacts of unclear origin as Blemmyes does not add to our understanding of the complex history of the region and should be abandoned until more firm associations can be established. This is especially true in the case of Eastern Desert Ware that seems to appear during a much shorter time period than Blemmyes are mentioned in the historical sources, but at the same time in a much larger geographical area than traditionally assigned to the Blemmyes (Barnard 2002; Barnard *et al.* 2005; Barnard 2006; Barnard and Magid 2006; Barnard and Strouhal 2004).

Linking an ancient name with a modern group may likewise prove difficult as can be demonstrated with the case of the Beja. The phonetic similarity between *blhm* (Eide *et al.* 1994:297), Balahau, Bougaites, Blemmyes and Beja is tempting, but hardly sufficient to connect these groups over large extents of space and time. It is often stated that "[t]he Beja (...) have literally since 'time immemorial' occupied the Eastern deserts of Sudan, Egypt and possibly Eritrea (Dahl and Hjort-af-Orna 2006:473; cf. Cappers 2006:39; Keimer 1951; 1952a; 1952b; 1953a; 1953b, 1954a; 1954b; Krzywinski and Pierce 2001:35–36)." If this is indeed the case, the 'heraldic' petroglyphs (Huyge 1998:1380), the *ekratels* and also Eastern Desert Ware should be ascribed to the Beja rather than the Blemmyes. This solution obviously disregards the historical, cultural and ethnic developments that the people living in the desert attained in the course of the past two millennia. Even if the modern Beja are the genetic descendents of the Eastern Desert Dwellers of 2000 years ago, which they are probably not (Dahl and Hjort-af-Ornas 2006; Christides 1980; Dafa'alla 1987; Table 1), they have implemented many changes to their way of life to create what is now perceived as the Beja culture. Obvious examples include their constant adaptation to the changing climate and the ecological degradation of the desert environment (Burckhardt 1822; Cappers 2006; Colston 1879; Floyer 1893; Krzywinski and Pierce 2001; Vermeeren 1999; 2000), as well as the introduction of the camel (Arnold 1995; Bulliet 1975; Davis 1978; Midant-Reynes and Braunstein-Silvestre 1977; Rowley-Conway 1998; Wilson 1984), of the 'coffee ceremony' that is so important to modern Bedouin life (Baram 1999; Birnbaum 1956; Krzywinski and Pierce 2001; Racy 1996), of Islam and the Arabic language (De Jong 2002; Hobbs 1990; Murray 1935), and more recently also of cars, plastic containers, radio, television and mobile telephones. Contacts with Graeco-Roman miners and quarrymen (Cappers 2006:39), Christianity (Eide *et al.* 1998:1185–1188), Maᶜaza and Rashaida Arabs, which invaded the area in the 18th–19th centuries CE (Hobbs 1990; Krzywinski and Pierce 2001), and especially with the Banu Kanz, an Arab group that mixed with the dwellers of the Eastern Desert during the 11th–16th centuries CE (Adams 1984), will have had profound effects on those living in the area. The successive Christian (the Kingdoms of Nobatia and Makuria), Funj (the Sultanate of Sinnar), Ottoman, British, Egyptian and Sudanese governments (Adams 1984), although relatively distant, also left their traces in past and present desert societies and cultures (Table 1).

The modern inhabitant of the Eastern Desert form an amalgam of different clans and tribes (Magid, in press; Murray 1935; Paul 1954; Wendrich, in press), including the Ababda, Amarar, Beni Amr, Bishareen, Hadendowa, Ma'aza, Otman and the Rashaida. Many speak Arabic as a first or a second language (De Jong 2002; Morton 1988), others the Cushitic (Afro-Asiatic) *Beja* language (*To-Badawi*) or the Semitic *Tigre* (*Xasa*). Some are pastoral nomads, herding sheep, goats and camels; many others are seminomadic cattle herders, settled agriculturalists or day-labourers. They tend to mystify their history, alternatively claiming to be descendants of a variety of common ancestors (Murray 1935; Wendrich, in press), often close to the prophet Mohamed, or to be the heirs of an ancient empire such as the Kushite Kingdom or Pharaonic Egypt. Within this universe of clans, tribes and cultures, being a Beja seems to be mostly a matter of self-definition. It is often heard that the typical Beja culture, as it is perceived by outsiders, is disappearing because of increasing influences from the outside world or other reasons. Such observations echo the notion of the 'noble savage' and implicitly deny the Beja access to cars, television and the Internet (Cole and Altorki 1998; Wendrich, in press), but also modern education and healthcare (Barnard 2000). The fact that the culture of the Beja can 'disappear', or rather change to be part of our 'global village', illustrates how similar changes happened in the past. Equating the Beja with the Blemmyes is like thinking of

the Belgiums, Flemish and Walloon alike, as 'the bravest of all Gauls' (*De Bello Gallico* book I: 1–2, see also BARNARD 2005), completely ignoring Saint Hubertus (patron saint of hunters, mathematicians, metalworkers and opticians); Nobel laureates Jules Bordet, Albert Claude, Maurice Maeterlinck and Corneille Heymans; artists like Pieter Breughel, James Ensor, René Magritte and Peter Paul Rubens; inventors like Leo Baekeland, Gerardus Cremer (Mercator) and Adolphe Sax; athletes like Kim Clijsters, Justin Henin, Jacky Ickx and Eddy Merckx; and many others that had a profound influence on the development of humankind. The society and culture of the dwellers of the Eastern Desert should be considered no more rigid or frozen in time than the Belgium. The Beja definitely deserve the study and recording of their culture and history (WENDRICH, in press), such as the recently opened *Bayt al-Ababda* Museum in Wadi Gamal (Egypt). They also deserve to be the agents of their own destiny, the main opposition against which may be regional and national authorities, but also the persistent scholarly misconceptions on their past and present state of affairs.

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