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Archaeology of Nubia

Week 5: 05 March 2012

**Response to Lanny Bell, et al. “The Eastern Desert of Upper Egypt: Routes and Inscriptions” JNES 43 vol.1(1984)**

Lanny Bell, Janet Johnson and Donald Whitcomb (here on out to be jointly referred to as Bell) begin this article by acknowledging the tendency in Egyptology to study the grand monuments that inhabit the Nile valley, at the expense of desert roads, sites, and landscapes. While they describe this tendency as ‘natural’ they push for an expansion of scholarship and research to be more inclusive of evidence from the deserts. In particular the Eastern desert was an incredibly active region during antiquity, in which mining expeditions, quarry settlements, military garrisons and trade networks can be recovered from the archaeological and textual record. The impetus for this article was the discovery of rock inscriptions and desert sites under Oriental Institute’s Quseir al-Qadim project, from 1978-82.

Bell breaks the article into a discussion of two Wadi’s and their related finds: Wadi ‘Isa and Wadi Qash. The majority of the article is dedicated to a discussion of the epigraphic evidence from the Wadi ‘Isa.

The Wadi ‘Isa is a North-South route connecting the Wadi Hammamat and the Wadi Qash to its south. There exists a locus of graffiti approximately 12 miles to the south of the entrance to the wadi via the Wadi Hammamat. This graffiti is really interesting! It is carved on both sides of the wadi, where granite outcrops narrows it. This would be a wonderful place to investigate the interplay between graffiti, the relative location of graffiti, and the manipulation of epigraphic landscapes in developing cultural ones. Also notable is the presence of royal and private inscriptions which makes me wonder about issues like decorum and who were writing these graffiti in the first place. We also have depictions of animals like we discussed last week, in conjunction with 10 hieroglyphic inscriptions. How do these inscriptions relate to each other? What does this say about site memory and reuse?

Bell makes some assertions that are not supported extremely well (a fact which the authors admit!), but are indeed suggestive. For instance, Bell attempts to identify the authors of the inscriptions to authors of other known graffiti and stele. Bell argues for the authors’ base being that of Coptos based on individual names and associated finds near Coptos that may have been produced by some of the same individuals. Bell also concludes that the numerous naval titles, may indicate that this route was used as sort of side street, along the way to the Red Sea – perhaps bypassing either the Wadi Hammamat or the Wadi Qash due to challenges along the roads. Military titles, like overseer of mercenaries, may indicate (Bell suggests) that this was a frontier zone, being patrolled to control nomadic tribes. The most interesting conclusion raised by the authors is that we may be able to reconstruct the limits of power of nomes – like Coptos – in the Eastern desert by the range of graffiti left. There seems to be an imaginary north-south line roughly in the center of the Eastern Desert, to the east of which no inscriptions are found. This line would therefore be the eastern frontier for Upper Egypt during the late Old Kingdom.

The second section of the article addresses Wadi Qash, beginning on page 43. The Wadi Qash connected the Roman settlement site of Bir Kareim near the modern Quseir to the Nile Valley. Used in the Roman period, the wadi was also frequently used in the modern period until the paving of the Wadi Hammamat road became an easier form of travel. This wadi also provides inscriptions dating to the time of Narmer. Winckler, while studying the western portion of this route, discovered a Narmer serekh among other inscriptions with a wide date range. The Narmer serekh here is interesting in light of our discussion from last week on Early Dynastic rock art and graffiti. What does this indicate about the use of this wadi in the ED period? What are the social/political implications of Narmer inscribing his serekh along this route. What do we know about who was populating/traveling through the Eastern desert in this area in the Early Dynastic period? This indeed could have been a frontier zone, as Bell suggests that there seems to have existed an imaginary boundary, bounding off the western portion of the east desert in the early periods of Egyptian history.

I though this article was productive in showing how we can use non-monumental, evidence from the deserts to inform our understanding of Egypt even during periods of centralized power like the Middle Kingdom and Roman period. Epigraphic evidence, while challenging to date and contextualize, can still play an integral role in our understanding of travel, frontier zones, trade, and just about anything we hope to gain from the study of more traditional monumental installations. With all its caveats, I really see a trend (and I hope this continues!) in utilizing non-traditional evidence like graffiti in our reconstructions of histories in Egypt. Indeed, I criticize that this article did what always upsets me about graffiti studies in that the authors do not try to contextualize the graffiti very well! They show them as separate, distinct inscriptions and make no mention of the inscriptions’ relationships with the other visual elements of the landscape – natural or manmade. Are the royal inscriptions located at significant positions within the visual landscape of this narrow region of the wadi? Are there images of animals near the royal inscriptions? Or does there seem to be some decorum dictating how royal inscriptions interact with the tableaux of graffiti versus private inscriptions?

Especially because I am so interested in popular religion and individual activities in the archaeological record, I find desert graffiti fascinating and challenging. To what degree were these graffiti acts of personal empowerment, or even personal freedom? If these people were apart of military missions or royal quarrying expeditions, was this a prescribed act with an ideological function to mark space as belonging to a region or patrol group? Does this hieroglyphic evidence differ from how we can treat and use pictographic evidence? We tend to translate images of gazelle and bovines as religious, but perhaps should we look at them within the same framework that we use to investigate these inscriptions?