CHAPTER ONE
Historical Background
of the Eastern Desert and Eastern Desert Ware

This study presents the first comprehensive description of a small corpus of ceramic vessels, now defined as Eastern Desert Ware (EDW). The vessels that comprise this corpus are hand-made cups and bowls, shaped without the use of a potter's wheel, with proportionally thin walls and well-finished surfaces. Larger vessels and closed forms do occur very sporadically, although these forms may so far have escaped recognition. Many of the outside and several inside surfaces of the vessels are burnished (polished before firing) and decorated with geometrical patterns impressed or incised in the unfired clay. These patterns are often remarkably asymmetric and frequently enhanced by a white inlay or a partial red slip (Chapter 2; Appendix 5). Eastern Desert Ware has been found in archaeological contexts predominantly dated to the 4th-6th centuries CE, by associated pottery, coins (Sidebotham 2000; Strouhal 1984), and radiocarbon analysis (Magid 2004; Magid et al. 1995), in the Nile Valley between the Fifth Cataract, just north of where the Atbara debouches into the Nile, and the First Cataract near Aswan, as well as in the desert to the east, between Quseir and Port Sudan, an area of roughly 350,000 km² (Figures 1-1 through 1-3). No sites have so far been identified that exclusively or predominantly produced Eastern Desert Ware and it invariably forms only a very small proportion of the ceramic finds that comprise numerous sherds of wheel-thrown vessels from the Nile Valley (Graeco-Roman Egypt or the Kingdoms of Meroe, Nobatia or Makuria) or from further afield (for instance Gaza, Cyprus, Italy, Gaul, Mauretania, Axum and India). The presence of Eastern Desert Ware, previously identified as Blemmyes, native, Nubian, hand-made or H-Ware, is mentioned in many archaeological reports (Appendix 2), most detailed in the description of the excavation of the cemeteries at Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha South (Strouhal 1984). The remarkable appearance of Eastern Desert Ware allows even small sherds to be recognized, but their small number and the lack of reference material, connecting the pottery to a specific cultural context, have so far discouraged a detailed study of this material.

In Chapter 2 (with Appendices 4-5) the physical and macroscopic characteristics of 290 sherds of Eastern Desert Ware vessels, from 18 sites in the Nile Valley and the Eastern Desert, are presented and discussed. Based on the evidence in hand it seems safe to assume that Eastern Desert Ware is indeed a distinct corpus of pottery, of mostly serving vessels, that must have distinguished the owners among the users of the more common vessels of which such a multitude of remains are found in the region. In Chapters 3 and 4 the results of the mass spectrometric research of a selection of these 290 sherds are presented and discussed. Chapter 3 (with Appendices 6-9) concentrates on the chemical composition of the ceramic matrix of the vessels in an effort to establish areas of production. These appear most likely not to have been located in the Nile Valley, but rather in a number of unknown localities, probably scattered in the Eastern Desert. Chapter 4 (with Appendix 10) concentrates on the organic residues preserved in the matrix of vessels. It appears that all tested vessels most likely contained food at some point in time and were not solely used as drinking vessels or as grave goods. In Chapter 5 (with Appendix 11) the landscape of the region and its present day inhabitants are described, followed by the report on a series of experiments to reproduce Eastern Desert Ware. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the conclusion reached, while in this first chapter the backgrounds of the research as well as the history of the region will be discussed.

History of the Research

Eastern Desert Ware was first defined as such in the Spring of 1994 at Berenike (Barnard and Rose 2007; Hayes 1995; Rose 1995), a Graeco-Roman harbour on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (Figure 1-1), when the striking similarities were noted between a number of hand-made vessels found on site and those described at both the cemeteries of Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha South (Barnard and Strouhal 2004; Strouhal 1984), as well as at Tabot (Barnard and Magid 2006; Magid 2004, Magid et al. 1995). A search of the archaeological literature subsequently revealed a total of 23 sites that produced Eastern Desert Ware; eight in the Nile Valley (six of which were submerged in Lake Nasser in the 1960's) and 15 in the Eastern Desert (Appendix 2). Two additional sites, Gabati and Bir Abraq, produced pottery that is probably Eastern Desert Ware, but which was interpreted differently by the excavators (Sadr 1994; Smith 1998). Four more sites were newly found to have yielded Eastern Desert Ware, adding up to a total of 29 known archaeological sources (Table 1-2). These include cemeteries, like those of Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha South, but also several of the settlements associated with the beryl mines in the Mons Smaragdus area (Figure 1-2), three of the Graeco-Roman harbours on the Red Sea coast, as well as way-stations, rest houses (*Weinstuben*, Badawi 1976; Barnard et al. 2005; Kromer 1967) and a number of settlements of unclear purpose (Sidebotham et al. 2002; 2005).

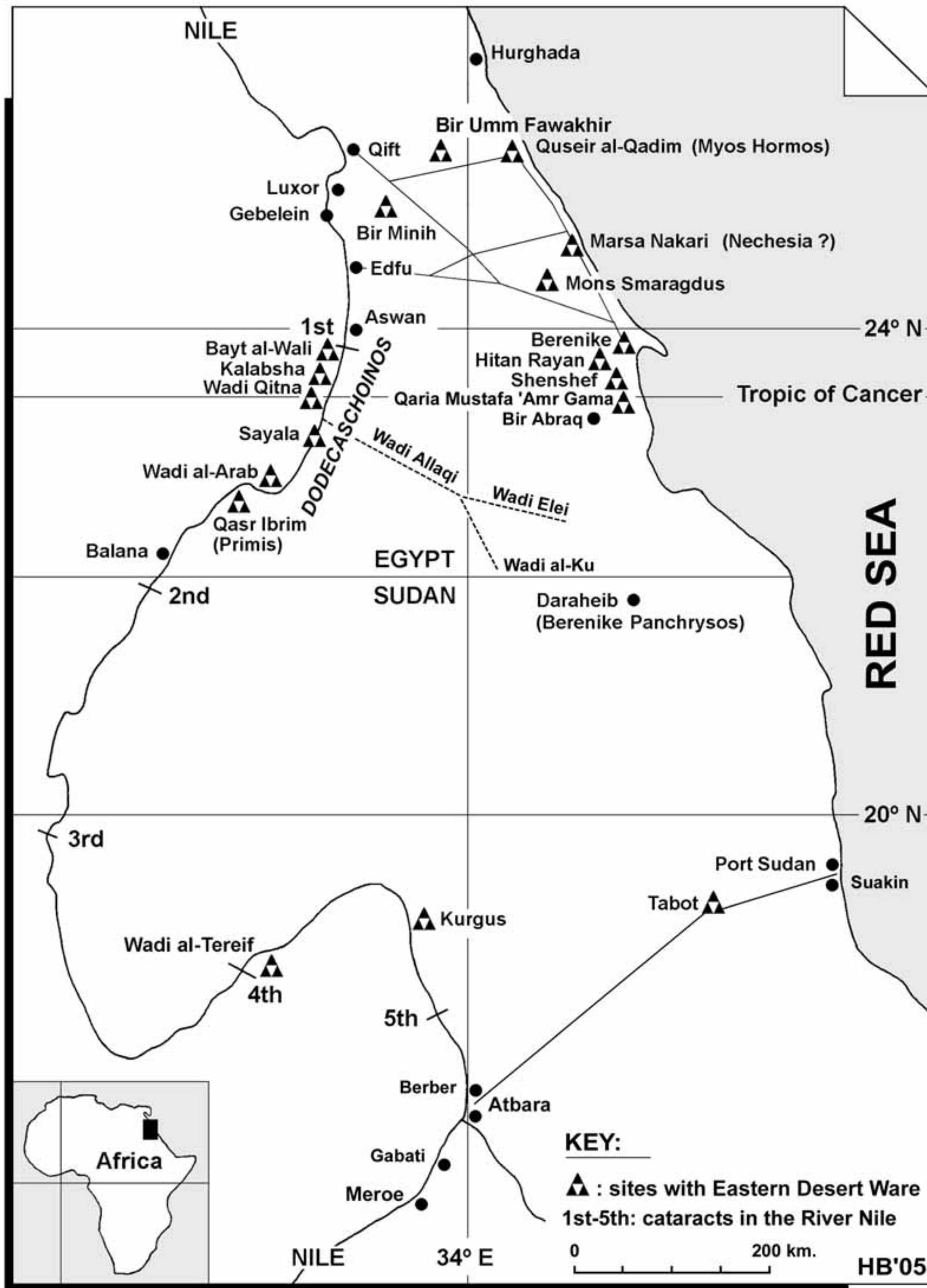

Figure 1-1: Map of Southeast Egypt and Northeast Sudan, showing the locations where Eastern Desert Ware has been found (Tables 1-1 through 1-3; Figure 1-2).

		First Cataract	Second Cataract	Third Cataract	Fourth Cataract	Fifth Cataract	Atbara	Port Sudan	Quseir	Luxor
Mons Smaragdus (Wadi Sikait)	*24°N 37' 54" 34°E 47' 44"*	*200*	*490*	*720*	*680*	*700*	*770*	*600*	*180*	*250*
First Cataract (near Aswan)	24°N 02' 11" 32°E 52' 24"		300	550	560	640	710	660	270	190
Second Cataract (near Wadi Halfa)	21°N 45' 49" 31°E 11' 38"			250	330	470	530	670	580	460
Third Cataract (near Tombos)	19°N 36' 09" 30°E 23' 11"				200	390	430	710	830	720
Fourth Cataract (near Hamdab)	18°N 55' 26" 32°E 16' 40"					180	220	520	830	760
Fifth Cataract (near Berber)	18°N 18' 20" 33°E 51' 54"						**60**	380	870	830
Atbara	17°N 40' 43" 33°E 58' 11"							400	**930**	900
Port Sudan	19°N 36' 34" 37°E 13' 42"								780	820
Quseir	26°N 06' 39" 34°E 16' 46"									170
Luxor	25°N 41' 58" 32°E 38' 20"									

Table 1-1: Latitude and longitude (WGS84 geode) of Mons Smaragdus (Figure 1-2) and selected points along the boundaries of the area in which Eastern Desert Ware has been found, enclosing approximately 350,000 km², followed by the great circle distances (in km.) between them (Figure 1-3; Table 1-3).

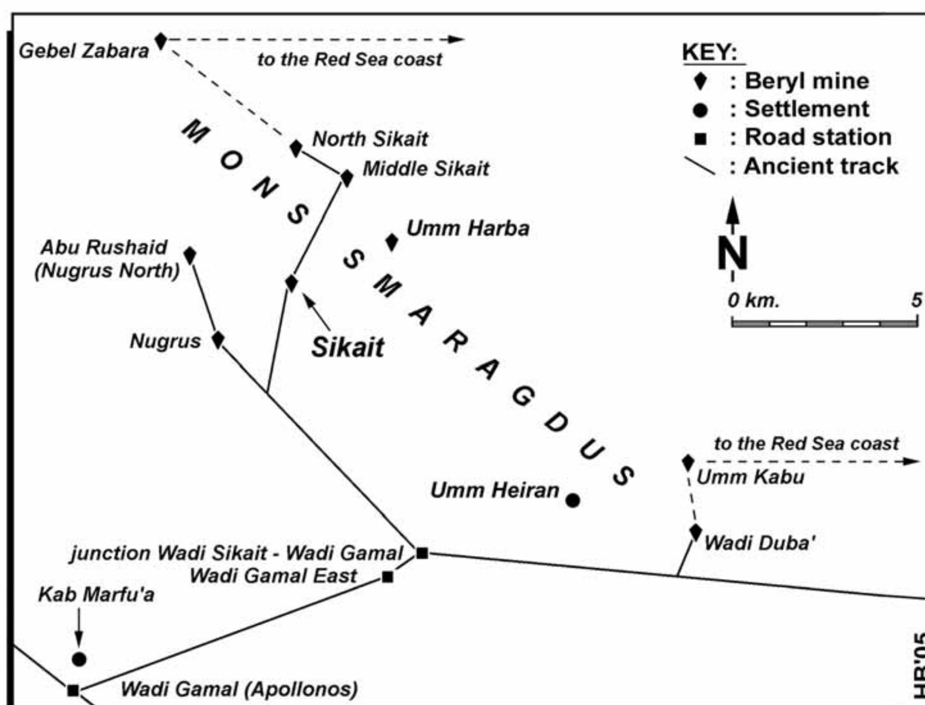

Figure 1-2: Map of the location of the Graeco-Roman beryl mines and other settlements in the Mons Smaragdus area (information courtesy of Dr. Steve Sidebotham and Martin Hense, Figure 1-1).

Eastern Desert Ware

Site	Approximate date	Location				Function of settlement						Cemetery site	Represented in this study
		Nile Valley	Mons Smaragdus	Red Sea coast	Eastern Desert	Mine / quarry	Way-station / fort	Rest house	Harbour	Other	Unclear		
Bayt al-Wali	350-400 CE	●										●	
Berenike	250 BCE-550 CE			●					●				●
Bir Abraq	50 BCE-50 CE				●		●						
Bir Minih	250-650 CE				●						●		●
Bir al-Murayr	250-550 CE				●					●			●
Bir Umm Fawakhir	450-550 CE				●	●							
Gabati	150 BCE-550 CE	●										●	
Gebel Zabara	450-550 CE		●			●							●
Gelli (Wadi Gamal South)	250-550 CE		●							●			●
Hitan Rayan	450-650 CE				●						●		
(Hitan) Shenshef	450-550 CE				●						●		
Kab Marfu'a (Wadi Gamal North)	50-450 CE		●							●			●
Kalabsha North	300-400 CE	●								●		●	
Kalabsha South	250-550 CE	●										●	●
Kurgus	1500 BCE-1000 CE	●					●						●
Marsa Nakari *(Nechesia?)*	50-350 CE			●					●				●
Nubt	650-1000 CE				●							●	●
Qaria Mustafa 'Amr	450-550 CE				●						●		
Qasr Ibrim *(Primis)*	650 BCE-1850 CE	●								●			●
Quseir al-Qadim *(Myos Hormos)*	250 BCE-550 CE			●					●				●
Sayala (near *Hiera Sycaminos)*	50-350 CE	●						●				●	●
Tabot	250-350 CE				●		●						●
Umm Heiran	450-550 CE		●								●		●
Wadi Abu Qreiya	250-550 CE				●					●			●
Wadi Alaqi	650-750 CE				●							●	
Wadi al-Arab	250-550 CE	●						●					
Wadi Qitna	250-550 CE	●										●	●
(Wadi) Sikait	450-550 CE		●			●							●
Wadi al-Tareif	350-550 CE	●										●	

Table 1-2: Approximate date, location and function of the sites where Eastern Desert Ware has been described (Figures 1-1 and 1-2, Appendix 2). The 18 sites that have produced the 290 sherds in this study are indicated in the last column on the right (Appendix 5). *Bayt* (بيت) = house, tent; *wali* (ولي) = governor, saint; *bir* (بئر) = well, spring; *gebel* (جبل) = mountain, hill; *hitan* (حيطان) = walls, ruins; *marsa* (مرسى) = anchorage, beach; *qadim* (قديم) = old, ancient; *qaria* (قرية) = village, hamlet; *qasr* (قصر) = castle, palace; *wadi* (وادي) = valley, river bed.

	Zone	Eastings	Northings
First Cataract	36R	487120	2658261
Second Cataract	36Q	313242	2407754
Third Cataract	36Q	225849	2169594
Fourth Cataract	36Q	423950	2092561
Fifth Cataract	36Q	591415	2024208
Atbara	36Q	602846	1954893
Port Sudan	37Q	314199	2169228
Quseir	36R	627930	2888587
Luxor	36R	463769	2842449
Wadi Sikait	*36R*	*681745*	*2725351*

Table 1-3: UTM coordinates (WSG84 geode) of Mons Smaragdus (Figure 1-2) and selected points along the boundaries of the area in which Eastern Desert Ware has been found, enclosing approximately 350,000 km² (Figure 1-3; Table 1-1).

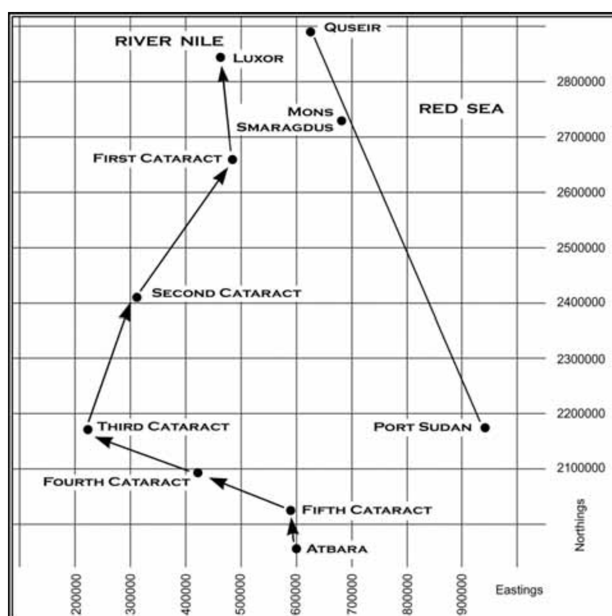

Figure 1-3: The boundaries of the 350,000 km² area in which Eastern Desert Ware has been found within the UTM grid, gridlines are 100 km apart making each box 10,000 km² (Figure 1-1; Tables 1-1 and 1-2).

Material from 18 sites was accessible for study in the University of Bergen (Norway, visited August 2002), the *Náprstek Muzeum* (Prague, visited August 2003), The British Museum (London, visited September 2003), the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Qift (Egypt, visited January 2004) and the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* (Vienna, visited September 2004). Due to logistical limitations the Eastern Desert Ware from (Hitan) Shenshef, now in the storerooms of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Qift, and the material kept in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago could not be included in this study. Preliminary reports have been published in several journal articles (Appendix 12); these will be referred to throughout this study.

In early 2003 the points of attention for the research project that resulted in this study were expressed in the following 14 questions:

1- Is the name 'Eastern Desert Dwellers' preferable over 'Blemmyes', 'Megabari' and 'Trogodytes', or vice versa, and should the name 'Blemmyes' be considered a collective word, more like 'Belgian', 'Arab' or even 'gypsy'?
2- What was the livelihood of the dwellers of the Eastern Desert in the 4th-6th centuries CE and how does their lifestyle compare to that of the present-day nomads?
3- What artefacts other than pottery can be attributed with any certainty to the dwellers of the Eastern Desert in the 4th-6th centuries CE?
4- What archaeological finds would be expected when reading the historical sources concerning the southeast of Egypt and the northeast of Sudan in the 4th-6th centuries CE and what references would be expected in those sources when looking at the actual finds?
5- How can the geographical distribution of the Eastern Desert Ware be explained and how can its remarkable archaeological distribution, always among a much larger selection of other sherds?
6- Where was the pottery now known as Eastern Desert Ware produced, close to the Nile or in the desert proper, in one or more specific areas or where ever the need occurred and was this done by men or women, in specialized workshops or as household production?
7- What were the routes, annual or over another period of time, of the nomads through the Eastern Desert in the 4th-6th centuries CE and how do these compare to those of the present-day dwellers of the Eastern Desert?
8- Would the dwellers of the Eastern Desert in the 4th-6th centuries CE have considered themselves an ethnic unity as suggested by the similarities of Eastern Desert Ware found in far removed regions?
9- What can be the reason that so few precursors of Eastern Desert Ware have been found and why did its production so suddenly stop?
10- Can firm results, like the actual geographical source or the contents of the vessel, be expected from the laboratory research of the Eastern Desert Ware, or will this just provide additional attributes by which individual sherds can be grouped?
11- Are the current inhabitants of the Eastern Desert to be considered the ethnic descendants or the cultural

heirs of their ancient counterparts, in other words, can the present-day nomadic group that calls itself 'Beja' be identified with the 'Blemmyes' which are mentioned in the ancient sources?

12- Can all the graves which resemble the graves containing Eastern Desert Ware, like those in Wadi Qitna, be attributed to the 'Eastern Desert Dwellers' and are the sherds found in those graves from re-used utilitarian vessels or representatives of a separate corpus?

13- What was the true relation of the Eastern Desert Dwellers with their neighbours, ranging from assisting with the harvest in the Nile Valley to raiding early Christian monasteries, and how were internal conflicts solved?

14- Can the desert settlements described as '*Fluchtdörfer*' by Ricke (1967) and as 'enigmatic settlements' by Sidebotham, Barnard and Pyke (2002) be attributed to Eastern Desert Dwellers as suggested by the authors?

These questions were circulated among the following experts of the history or the archaeology of the region, or of specific aspects of ceramic analysis, that showed an interest in the ensuing research project: Dr. Anwar Abdel-Magid, Dr.J.L. Bintliff, Dr.J.F. Borghouts, Dr.S.M. Burstein, Dr.J.H.F. Dijkstra, Dr.J.W. Eerkens, Dr.A. Manzo, Dr.H. Neff, Dr.P.T. Nicholson, Dr.R.H. Pierce, Dr.G. Pyke, Dr.C.C. Rapp, Dr.P.J. Rose, Dr.S.A. Rosen, Dr.M. Serpico, Dr.S.E. Sidebotham, Dr.S.T. Smith, Dr.E. Strouhal, Dr.R.S. Tomber, Dr.J. van der Vliet, Dr.W.Z. Wendrich and Dr.K.A. Willemse. Their responses, given before any of the results of this research were available, are listed (anonymously) in Appendix 1. My own discussion, taking into account the research presented in this and the following chapters, is part of Chapter 6.

History of the Eastern Desert

The large area in which Eastern Desert Ware occurs consists of three different regions: the Nile Valley between the First-Fifth Cataracts, the Red Sea coast between Quseir and Suakin, and the Eastern Desert in between. Although there have always been interactions between these regions, either peaceful or belligerent, their inhabitants and history cannot simply be equated or juxtaposed. The history of the area as a whole is characterized by two factors, which at the same time seriously impede our understanding of the facts. First is that during most periods important political, military or cultural borders were located in this area, respectively those between Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Early Islamic and Ottoman Egypt, part of the larger Eastern Mediterranean sphere of influence, and the Kerma, Napatan, Meroitic, Early Christian and Funj states (Table 1-4). Second is that there appear to have been large migrations and fluctuations in population. At times the Nile Valley between the First-Second Cataract seems to have been all but deserted (Adams 1984), while at other times the whole area, between the First-Fifth Cataract, was invaded by, among others, Noba (from which the modern name of the region may have been derived), Funj (from the south), Banu Kanz (from the east), Axumites (from the southeast) and Egyptians (Table 1-4; Adams 1984; Dahl and Hjort-af-Ornas 2006; Smith 2003). Migration within the area was a factor in the dispersal of the C-Horizon (2300-1500 BCE, Chapter 2) and the rise of the Napatan state (Bietak 1966; Dahl and Hjort-af-Ornas 2006).

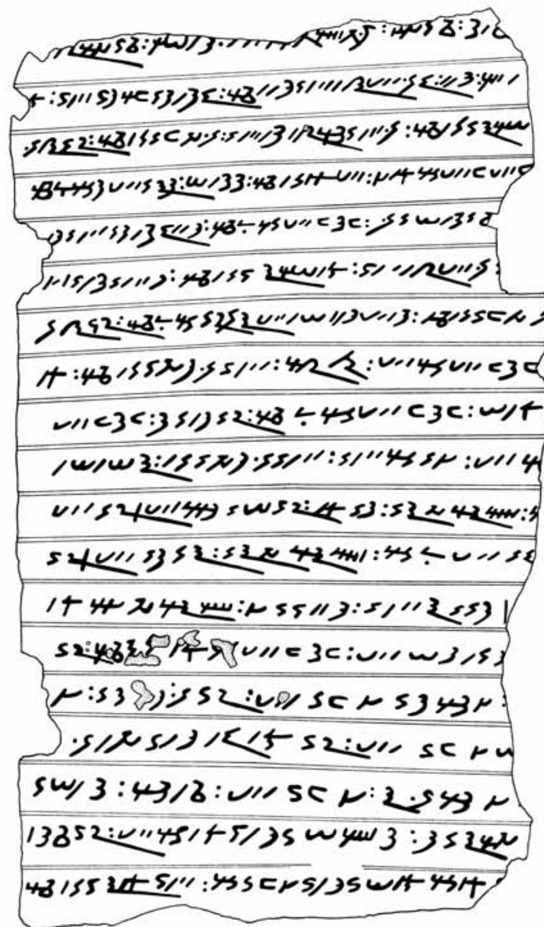

Figure 1-4 (after Millet 1982:74, Figure 2): Meroitic funerary inscription, 0-300 CE, on sandstone stele 192B.8.2 (now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, *Journal d'entrée 89700*) from the cemeteries around Qasr Ibrim.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">SOUTHEAST EGYPT</th><th colspan="2">NORTHEAST SUDAN</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Pharaonic Egypt</td><td colspan="3">New Kingdom
(18th-20th Dynasty)
1539-1075 BCE *)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Third Intermediate Period
1075-715 BCE</td><td rowspan="3" colspan="2">Kingdom of Napata
(Kushite Kingdom)
1075-300 BCE</td></tr>
<tr><td>25th Dynasty
770-657 BCE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Late Period
(Persian invasions)
657-332 BCE</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Graeco-Roman Egypt</td><td>Ptolemaic Empire
332 BCE-30 CE</td><td rowspan="2" colspan="2">Kingdom of Meroe
(Kushite Kingdom)
300 BCE - 350 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td>Roman Empire
30-330 CE</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">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)
300-700 CE</td><td rowspan="8">Kingdom of Makuria
(protected by the baqt)
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 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)
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="2">Modern Egypt</td><td colspan="3">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></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2"></td><td>Mahdi Revolt
1883-1898 CE</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1-4: Chronologic overview of historic events with a direct influence on life in the Eastern Desert (Adams 1984; Baines and Malek 2000; Barnard 2007). The period in which Eastern Desert Ware occurs in the archaeological record is marked in grey. *) Pharaonic dates are after Baines and Malek 2000:36-37.

Figure 1-5: Satellite images of the environs of the First Cataract, near Aswan (top), and the Fourth Cataract, near Hamdab (bottom), showing how dams across the Nile cause the Nile Valley to be filled with water (courtesy of Google Earth, January 2007).

An issue limiting our knowledge and understanding of the area is the insufficient number of archaeological and other scientific projects, as well as the nature of many of the past and present projects. The Nile Valley between the First-Second Cataracts has been lost under the water of Lake Nasser since the 1960s and the same fate awaits the Nile Valley between the Fourth-Fifth Cataracts after the closing of the Merowe High Dam near Hamdab (Figure 1-5). Because of these events, many projects in the Nile Valley have necessarily been rescue projects and much information has been irretrievably lost. Access to the Eastern Desert, on the other hand, has often been restricted by central or local (military) authorities and, when allowed, has been logistically vexing. The political situation in Sudan, including civil war and an international boycott, has been another factor in the observation that the Nile Valley north of the First Cataract is among the best studied regions in the world, while the Nile Valley south of the Second Cataract is among the least (Adams 1984). A final constraint is the fact that the Meroitic language and script (Figure 1-4, Table 1-4, Appendix 3), in use between 200 BCE and 400 CE, is not yet completely understood.

The First Cataract in the Nile near Aswan (اسوان, Roman *Syene*, Egyptian *Swenet*), which is actually the last (sixth) cataract as the river flows, has been the natural southern border of the Egyptian heartland throughout history. However, only with the closing of the Aswan High Dam (Figure 1-5), and the subsequent transformation of Lower Nubia into Lake Nasser and the relocation of the Nubians to the Kom Ombo Plain (north of Aswan), has this border effectively been sealed. Until then, the Nile Valley south of the First Cataract was the transition zone ('corridor') between Egypt and the Mediterranean to the north, and East Africa to the south (Adams 1984). The region is now referred to as Nubia, the Nile Valley between the First-Second Cataracts being Lower Nubia, the area between the Second and the Fourth, Fifth or Sixth Cataract being Upper Nubia. The name is problematic as it seems to refer to the Noba people that invaded parts of the Nile Valley from the southwest as late as 300 CE, causing the collapse of the Meroitic Kingdom. It may also be derived from the Egyptian word for gold (*nub*), although gold was actually mined in the Eastern Desert and the Egyptians seem to have used '*Wawat*' for Lower Nubia, which was often considered part of Egypt, and '*Kush*' for those parts of Upper Nubia that were outside Egyptian control.

The influence of Egypt in Nubia was sometimes limited to trade contacts (the name *Swenet-Syene-Aswan* is derived from the Egyptian word for trade). More often it also included Egyptian settlements associated with mines, quarries and military installations (such as Buhen and Askut, near the Second Cataract, and Tombos, near the Third Cataract), especially during the New Kingdom (1539-1075 BCE). The latter is reflected by the settlement and sanctuaries at Gebel Barkal (Napata), founded around 1479-1425 BCE and a World Heritage Site since 2003, and the temples at Abu Simbel, built around 1279-1213 BCE near the Second Cataract and famously moved during the UNESCO Nubian Monuments Salvage Campaign in the 1960s. At other times the Nubian influence extended north past the First Cataract, in particular during the 25th Dynasty (715-657 BCE) when individuals of Kushite (C-Horizon) descent, most famously Taharqa (690-664 BCE), controlled most of Egypt.

Around 300 BCE the capital of the Kushite Kingdom, which had been ruling the Nile Valley south of the First Cataract since the end of the New Kingdom, around 1075 BCE, was moved from Napata (near Gebel Barkal upstream of the Fourth Cataract) to Meroe, south of the Atbara-Nile confluence (Table 1-4; Figure 1-11). Around 600 years later, between 250-350 CE, the Kingdom of Meroe was apparently invaded from the south by different groups, often identified as the *Nobatae* and the *Noba* from the southwest and the *Blemmyes* and the *Axumites* from the southeast (Adams 1984). This eventually caused the collapse of the Kingdom of Meroe; the last Meroitic inscription is dated to 260 CE, and gave rise to the 'post-Meroitic' Ballana Culture (X-Group). This comprised mostly remnants of the Meroitic material culture, with influences from further south as well as from the Roman and Byzantine Empires.

In the period that Eastern Desert Ware appears in the archaeological record Egypt was part of the Roman Empire, and subsequently of its direct successors the Eastern Roman and Byzantine Empires. Nubia, on the other hand, was transforming from being part of the Meroitic Kingdom into a number of more or less independent states (Nobatia, Makuria and Alodia), a transition partly fuelled by the influx of Noba from outside the region. In 23 BCE Meroitic troops had sacked Aswan (*Syene*) after which Pretonius, Prefect of Egypt, marched his troops to Napata (Gebel Barkal), destroyed that city and returned to the capital Alexandria with prisoners and booty. On the way back he left troops, with provisions for two years, at Qasr Ibrim (*Primis?*, Rose 1992), but later moved the southern border of the Roman Empire to Hiera Sycaminos, later Maharraqa, just north of Sayala (Figure 1-1). Since Ptolemaic times (332-30 BCE), the Nile Valley between Aswan and Wadi Alaqi was known as the *Dodecaschoinos* ('Twelve miles', which equalled about 120 km.). In Roman times this name was used for the entire area south of Aswan under Roman control, until Emperor Diocletian withdrew the border to Aswan around 295 CE (Adams 1984; Eide et al. 1998; Updegraff 1988).

After Petronius's campaign, the inhabitants of the Nile Valley between Hiera Sycaminos and the Second Cataract (Meroitic Lower Nubia) saw a dramatic increase in population and wealth. The exact reasons for this are unclear, but a major factor seems to have been the replacing of the age-old, man-powered water-lifts (*shaduf*) with animal-driven water-wheels (*saqia*). Another development that had profound effects was the introduction and spread of the camel. This empowered the pastoral nomads and caravaneers that used to survive in marginal areas outside or on the fringes of the Nile Valley. Their influx, combined with the political and military pressure from the Axumite Kingdom to the south, seem to have been a major factor in the collapse of the Meroitic Kingdom and the rise of the Ballana Culture (previously referred to as the X-Group). After the border of the Roman Empire was moved from Hiera Sycaminos to Aswan, with a request to the *Nobatai* (Noba?) to move from around the city of *Oasis* (Kharga?) into the Nile Valley in order to prevent attacks from the *Blemmyes* (Barnard 2005; 2007; Eide et al. 1998; Updegraff 1988), the Ballana Culture could spread throughout Lower Nubia. Precious little historical and archaeological information is available about this 'Post-Meroitic Dark Age' (Adams 1984), the heyday of Eastern Desert Ware, until Christianity came to Nubia around 550 CE.

Christianity had been made the official religion of the Roman Empire, including Egypt, in 391 CE by Emperor Flavius Theodosius (379-395 CE) and all temples had been closed, with the exception of the temple of Isis at Philae (two adjoining islands in the Nile at the First Cataract), just south of Aswan. This temple was used and maintained by visitors from Nubia, south of the border of the Roman Empire. In 453 CE a treaty was negotiated for the yearly procession from this temple to be allowed for another hundred years (Eide et al. 1998). The temple was finally closed and converted into a church dedicated to Saint Stephan around 540 CE by Emperor Justinian (527-565 CE). At that time most of Nubia had accepted Christianity, after both Melkite (Dyophysite) and Monophysite (Coptic) evangelization campaigns. Already in 524 CE the predecessor of Justinian, Emperor Justin (518-527 CE), had tried to organize a campaign by an army of *Nobades* and *Blemmyes*, likely from Lower Nubia and presumably Christian, to rescue the Christians prosecuted in Himyar, on the Arabian Peninsula (Eide et al. 1998). Christian Nubia consisted of a series of fiefdoms within three larger states, from north to south, the kingdoms of Nobatia (Maris) in Lower Nubia (with its capital at Faras), Makuria between the Second Cataract and the Atbara River (with its capital at Dongola) and Alodia (Alwa) between the Atbara River and the Blue Nile (with its capital at Soba). Around 700 CE Makuria and Nobatia appear to have merged into one country (Table 1-4; Figure 1-9).

In 640 CE, soon after Nubia had followed Egypt into Christianity (Dijkstra 2005; 2008), Egypt was invaded by Arab forces, headed by Amr ibn al-As (عمرو بن العص) bringing Islam into the region. Egypt was soon under Arab control, but two military expeditions to Dongola failed to secure the area south of Aswan. The political stalemate that was the result of this unprecedented defeat was resolved by an unprecedented treaty, later referred to as 'the *baqt*' (from πακτου ?), which came into effect after 652 CE. Under its terms, Nubia and Egypt promised not to attack each other and to allow free trade and travel. Immigration between the two states was forbidden, but visitors would be free to practise their own religion. Yearly payments were agreed upon, 360 slaves going north and an equal value in wheat, barley, wine and other goods going south (Adams 1984). Although it can be debated whether this outcome favoured the defenders or the invaders, it certainly gave Nubia a unique position that would last until the arrival of the Banu Kanz around 1300 CE.

Around 800-1000 CE members of the Ra'iba tribe, originally from Mesopotamia, migrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea Mountains where they intermarried with the local Hadariba tribe (Adams 1984; Dahl and Hjort-af-Ornas 2006). In 1006 CE the eccentric Fatimid caliph al-Mansour al-Hakim rewarded the leader of this confederation the hereditary title 'Treasure of the State' (كنز الدولة, *Kanz al-Dawlah*) after which the tribe adopted the name Banu Kanz (بنو الكنز, *Sons of 'the Treasure'*). Over time the Banu Kanz grew in number and influence, challenging the traffic though the Eastern Desert and settling in the Nile Valley. After several military campaigns during the 12th century CE, many Banu Kanz moved to Lower Nubia where they mixed with the local population, but kept their Muslim faith. In the 14th century CE the first Islamic king ascended the throne in Dongola and the subsequent struggle for power between the king and the Kanz al-Dawlah (perceived to be the legitimate leader of the Muslim community) led to the disintegration of Makuria (Adams 1984). This situation was brought to an end at the beginning of the 16th century CE by another wave of invasions, first by the Funj, from the Sudd swamps in Southern Sudan, followed shortly afterwards by the Ottoman Turks, who controlled the Nile Valley as far south as the Third Cataract between 1517 CE and the invasion of Napoleon in 1798 CE (Table 1-4).

Figure 1-6: Part of a New Kingdom map of the Eastern Desert, showing the mines and quarries in the Wadi Hammamat (kept in the Museo Egizio in Turin, photograph by J.A. Harrell).

Small groups from the Nile Valley have at times settled on the coastal plain between the Red Sea Mountains and the Red Sea to facilitate the trade with Arabia and sub-Saharan Africa, including the mysterious 'Land of Punt' (Phillips 1997). The oldest archaeological evidence of this long-distance maritime trade are the remains of an ancient port at Marsa Gawasis (or Marsa Gasus), near modern Safaga (Bard and Fattovich 2003; Sayed 1978; 1980). Excavations at this site revealed pottery, stone anchors, ship timbers and ropes as well as shrines, all firmly associated with the Nile Valley at the end of the Middle Kingdom (1975-1640 BCE). A few hand-made sherds were also found, interpreted by the excavators as Nubian (Chapter 2), or associated with the inhabitants of the Eastern Desert.

The most famous and most complete ancient source on the Red Sea trade is the report of the expedition mounted by the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut (1473-1458 BCE), depicted in her mortuary temple at Deir al-Bahri, near Luxor. This shows the entire operation, including the traded goods, but also the crossing of the desert and the assembling of the boats once the coast is reached. Another source dating to the New Kingdom is the 'Turin map' of the Eastern Desert (Figure 1-6; Table 1-4), drawn by Amennakte, son of Ipuy, for the Pharaoh Ramesses IV (1156-1150 BCE). This map shows the route between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea coast, including the mines and quarries along the way (Harrell and Brown 1992). This route apparently passed through the Wadi Hammamat, between modern Luxor and Quseir (Figure 1-1), on its way to and from an as yet unidentified harbour on the coast.

In Graeco-Roman times (332 BCE-395 CE) the number of harbours and desert routes increased manifold, first for the transport of African elephants and the mining of gold, both primarily for warfare, but soon employed for the trade in luxury items, such as spices, gemstones, pearls and wine (Peacock and Blue 2006; Seeger 2001; Sidebotham and Wendrich 1998; 1999; 2000; Whitcomb 1982). The most important contemporary source is the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a handbook for merchants written in the first century CE by an anonymous author. This is a list of many Red Sea harbours, and settlements in the hinterland, indicating which goods to bring for sale, and which to expect to be on offer for purchase (Casson 1989; Crowfoot 1911; Hinkel 1992; Meredith 1958; Seeger et al. 2006; Sidebotham 1995; Wendrich et al. 2006). Ports on the stretch of coast bordering the area where Eastern Desert Ware has been found include Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim), Philoteras, Leucos Limen, Nechesia (Marsa Nakari?), Berenike, Profundus Portus, Dioscurorum Portus, Evangelon Portus (Suakin?) and Ptolemais Theron (Aqiq?). These were probably not all active simultaneously and the exact location of many is still uncertain.

After the Arab invasions into the area during the 7th-10th centuries CE quarrying, mining and trade activities decreased dramatically and most harbours were deserted. Safaga (just south of modern Hurghada), Aydhab (just south of the current Egyptian-Sudanese border) and Suakin remained active, partly to facilitate the *hajj* (حجّ , the pilgrimage to Mecca that is one of the five pillars of Islam). The groundwater below the sandy coastal plain is brackish, not only because of the direct influx of sea water, but also because of salts blowing in from the tidal flats (Aldsworth and Barnard 1998). This is reflected in the vegetation, which is characterized by mangrove and tamarix (Cappers 2006; Vermeeren 1999; 2000), but also salt-tolerant succulents (غردق , plural: غردقة , *ghardaqah* which is reflected in the place name Hurghada, Figures 1-1 and 1-10). These environmental

particularities make this area less favourable for permanent habitation, by pastoral nomads, than the desert proper (Chapter 5).

The history of the desert between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea coast is rather more enigmatic. The Eastern Desert has never been a separate political entity and was always more or less open to outside invaders and settlers. The events in the Nile Valley, and beyond, will have had direct repercussions on life in the desert, although often delayed and mitigated by great distances and small populations. At times, however, events taking place in the desert extended into the Nile Valley and influenced the history of the region as a whole, as is clearly shown by the case of the Banu Kanz. For millennia, the Eastern Desert has been inhabited by miners, quarrymen and pastoral nomads, herding cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys and later also camels (Chapter 5). Even though our historical and archaeological sources are fragmentary at best, it is clear that their history cannot simply be equated with that of the inhabitants of the Nile Valley or the Red Sea coast.

Since pre-dynastic times (*circa* 3000 BCE), people from the Nile Valley have explored the Eastern Desert for gold and ornamental stone, and traversed the area on their way to and from the Red Sea. In their wake they have left textual and pictorial witnesses (Figure 1-6), including petroglyphs and graffiti (Winkler 1938), as well as settlement sites with associated archaeological finds, graves and connecting routes. At the time that Eastern Desert Ware was made and used, the influx of such outsiders was particularly pronounced, putting pressure on the indigenous population of the desert (Kaper 1998). The continuous conflicts with the Seleucids had forced the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt (332-30 BCE) to intensify the gold mining operations in the Eastern Desert and to look for alternative sources of supplies. Around 275 BCE, Ptolemy II Philadelphus initiated a program to bring elephants from Africa to Berenike (Figure 1-1), walk these across the Eastern Desert and train them for warfare (Murray 1967; Murray and Warmington 1967; Scullard 1974; Sidebotham 1995). Although this program was not very successful and was soon abandoned, its related infrastructure of harbours, desert routes and way-stations was then used for trade with sub-Saharan Africa, *Arabia Felix* and India (Sidebotham and Wendrich 1996a; b; c; 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001), as well as new gold mines and stone quarries (Maxfield and Peacock 2006; Meredith 1958; Peacock 1992; Peacock and Maxfield 1997; 2001; Sidebotham and Zitterkopf 1995; 1996; Sidebotham et al. 1991; Zitterkopf and Sidebotham 1989). Another group competing for the limited resources of the desert were early Christian hermits that came to the desert to live in solitude, but also in *laura* (or *lavra*) communities and monasteries (Chitty 1966; Sidebotham et al. 2002). As is evident from the archaeological finds at the harbours, mines, quarries and at the way-stations (Kaper 1998; Peacock and Maxfield 1997; Sidebotham and Wendrich 2000), water, food and possibly also fuel were supplemented with imports from outside the desert. This was probably less an option for the pastoral nomads and hermits, which may partly explain their frequent violent clashes on water and other resources (Eide et al. 1998).

The traces of the long-term, more or less nomadic inhabitants of the Eastern Desert are likely to be more ephemeral (Dahl and Hjort-af-Ornas 2006). Roughly contemporary with the C-Horizon are the remains of the Pan-Grave People: shallow burials in which weaponry, polished or comb-impressed pottery and shell beads were included (Bietak 1966). As these graves were found in small clusters just outside the Nile Valley, on both the east and west bank, between Assyut (north of Luxor) and the Second Cataract (Sadr 1987; 1990), and no architecture could be associated with them, they were associated with the Medjay (*Md̠3.w*, Figure 1-7) of the historical sources (Adams 1984; Bietak 1966; Eide et al. 1994; Posener 1958; Sadr 1987; 1990). These describe the Medjay as a nomadic people living in the Eastern Desert around 2300-1800 BCE. In later times, 1800-1300 BCE, Medjay were employed as mercenaries and guards until they became fully assimilated within Egyptian society and disappeared from the historical and archaeological records. This interpretation has never been completely satisfactory (Bietak 1966; Sadr 1987; 1990), for reasons very similar to the problems concerning the association of Eastern Desert Ware with the Blemmyes of the textual sources (Chapter 6).

Figure 1-7: Medjay (Md̠3·w, Faulkner 1962; Gardiner 1947) is written with the bound prisoner or the throw stick determinative (top), both signifying enemies in this context (Redford 1963), or with the foreign land determinative (bottom), indicating a geographical area outside the Egyptian heartland (the Nile Valley north of Aswan).

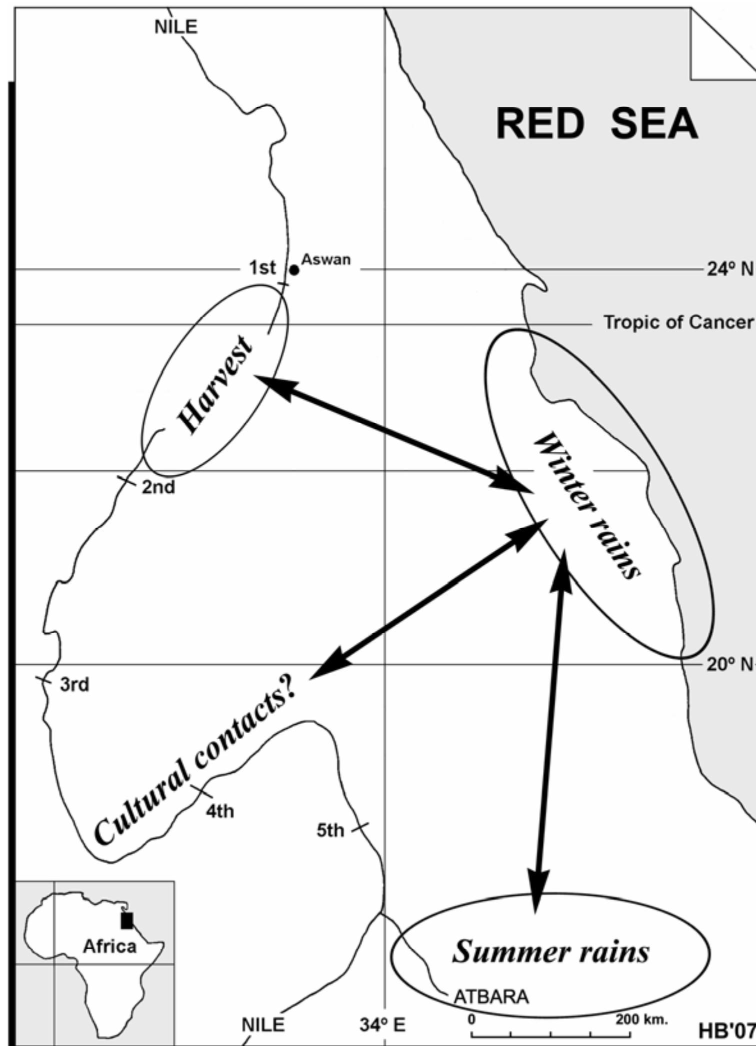

Figure 1-8 (after Sadr 1987: Figure 2): The long-distance migratory routes through the Eastern Desert before the 20th century CE (cf. Figure 5-4).

Migratory Routes

The conditions for human habitation in the Eastern Desert are marginal at best (Chapter 5). This imposed on the desert dwellers a constant readiness to relocate whenever the local supply failed of any of the vital resources (such as water, fodder and fuel). The resulting migrations were opportunistic and did not go any further than the closest source, or the one that was reach first, of water, food or firewood. There were, however, a number of fixed points in space and time that provided some certainty in the life of the desert dwellers (Figure 1-8). First were the winter rains in the Red Sea Mountains, and the adjacent costal plain. The reliability of these rains, especially south of the current Egyptian-Sudanese border (22ºN latitude), made this area the virtual heartland of the desert dwellers (Newbold 1935; Paul 1954; Sadr 1987). At times that the resources here were insufficient to provide for all desert dwellers, some may have decided to move south, towards the Atbara River, where rain falls during the summer. Their return to the Red Sea Mountains will again have been opportunistic and will only have taken place when the local resources ran out. Others will have migrated into the Nile Valley where they helped with the harvest, which took place in late spring and early summer (Kemp 2006), in exchange for food and permission to have their flocks graze on the stubbles. This was especially the case in the region between the First and Second Cataracts. The introduction of the water-wheel, in the first centuries CE, led to a dramatic increase in the agricultural potential of the Lower Nubian Nile Valley and a relative shortage of labour. The latter was supplemented by pastoral nomads from the Wadi Allaqi region (Adams 1984; Sadr 1987). This symbiotic relationship lasted until the depopulation of Lower Nubia, just before the closing of the Aswan

High Dam in the 1960's (Figure 1-5). A third area of contact was the length of the Nile Valley between Aswan and the Atbara-Nile confluence, which was visited by the nomads of the Eastern Desert for trade, such as the selling of animals, herbs and charcoal in order to purchase 'luxury' items such as textiles and jewellery, but also violent raids or as a place of refuge (Eide et al. 1994; 1996; 1998; Murray 1935; Paul 1954).

These migratory routes reflect the different long-distance options of the dwellers of the Eastern Desert, and with that part of the basis on which they decide when and where to go (Chang and Kostner 1994; Cribb 1991; Irons and Dyson-Hudson 1972; Khazanov 1984; Khazanov and Wink 2001; Nelson 1973), but certainly not their seasonal migration pattern (Sadr 1987). Indeed, before the introduction of the camel in the area, around the first century CE, it would have been impossible to travel the distances between the different areas on a yearly basis. Camel breeders in the area now regularly travel to the Nile Valley to sell their animals, but those herding goats, sheep or cattle can do so much less frequently (Newbold 1935; Paul 1954; Sadr 1987). Developments in the 20th century CE have fundamentally changed the situation in the Eastern Desert. On the one hand, roads and cars have made travel easier and faster while, on the other hand, modern borders and regulations seriously impede the migration of people. The lack of economical and political power of the nomadic desert dwellers has made the impact of the latter much greater than that of the former (Chapter 5).

The Historical Sources

Archaeological artefacts that have been linked to the Blemmyes include not only Eastern Desert Ware (Bietak 2005; Lassányi 2005; Luft et al. 2002; Ricke 1967; Rose 1995; Sidebotham and Wendrich 1996a; b; 2001), but also a number of petroglyphs in the Nile Valley as well as in the Eastern Desert (Figure 1-9) and a series of tumulus graves (*ekratels*) scattered throughout the region (Krzywinski and Pierce 2001; Lassányi 2005; Sadr et al. 1994).

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, which are considered more or less synonymous by the editors although there is precious little evidence to support this (Chapter 5). The texts are written in hieroglyphic Egyptian, Demotic, Coptic, Greek, Latin and the only partially understood Meroitic language (Figure 1-4). The earliest text is the 7th century BCE enthronement stele of King Anlamani in the Amun Temple in Kawa (Sudan), written in Egyptian hieroglyphs (number 34 in the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, Appendix 3). The latest (331-343) are the so-called 'Blemmyan documents' that are believed to originate from an island in the Nile near Gebelein (Figure 1-1). Nine of these documents are in Greek, four in a mix of Greek and Coptic. Four other texts are bilingual: 259 (Egyptian hieroglyphs/Meroitic), 305 (Latin/Coptic), 306 (Egyptian hieroglyphs/Demotic) and 307 (Greek/Latin). Texts referring to the Beja include a 5th century BCE inscription (71) in Kawa, written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and several 2nd-4th century CE inscriptions, in Greek, found much further to the south, in Meroe, Axum and Adulis (on the Red Sea coast). 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; cf. Eide et al. 1998:1135). 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%) Blemmyes or Beja are 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 of mentioning of the Blemmyes by name as active participants in a text written by an author with first-hand knowledge on the subject matter (Appendix 3; Barnard 2005).

The most influential remark about the Blemmyes is the first century CE statement by Pliny the Elder that "[t]he Blemmyes are reported to have no heads, their mouths and eyes being attached to their chests (Natural History 5,46, translation by H. Rackham 1961)." This bizarre image has made its way onto medieval manuscripts (Figure 1-10, Barnard 2007) and *mappae mundi*, such as the map by Richard de Bello of Haldingham in Hereford Cathedral, as well as into later literary works of, for instance, William Shakespeare (Othello, Act I, Scene II) and Umberto Eco's Baudolino (2000). It has been suggested by Dr. Eugen Strouhal that this puzzling 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). It possibly acquired its popularity because of it use in the efforts of early Christians to demonize foreign pagan peoples.

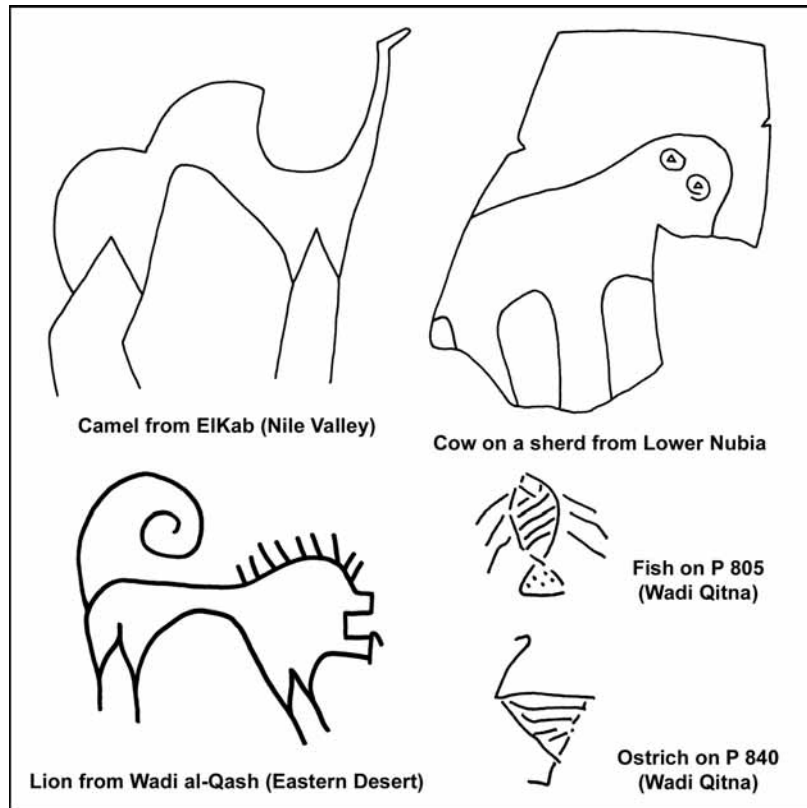

Figure 1-9: Petroglyphs depicting a camel, in the forecourt of the temple of Shesmetat in Elkab, and a lion in Wadi al-Qash (cf. Derchain 1971: Plate 24; Winkler 1938: Plate III), on the left, and incised drawings of a cow, a fish and an ostrich on Eastern Desert Ware (cf. Strouhal 1984:160, 164), on the right, showing great variety in style and subject matter.

Figure 1-10: Blemmyes depicted in *Marvels of the East* (Cotton Tiberius B. V, Part 1, f.82; second quarter of 11th century CE) and *Shrewsbury Talbot Book of Romances* (Royal 15 E. VI, f.21v; before *circa* 1445 CE). Images courtesy of the British Library (Picture Library, London, UK). ©British Library Board, all rights reserved.

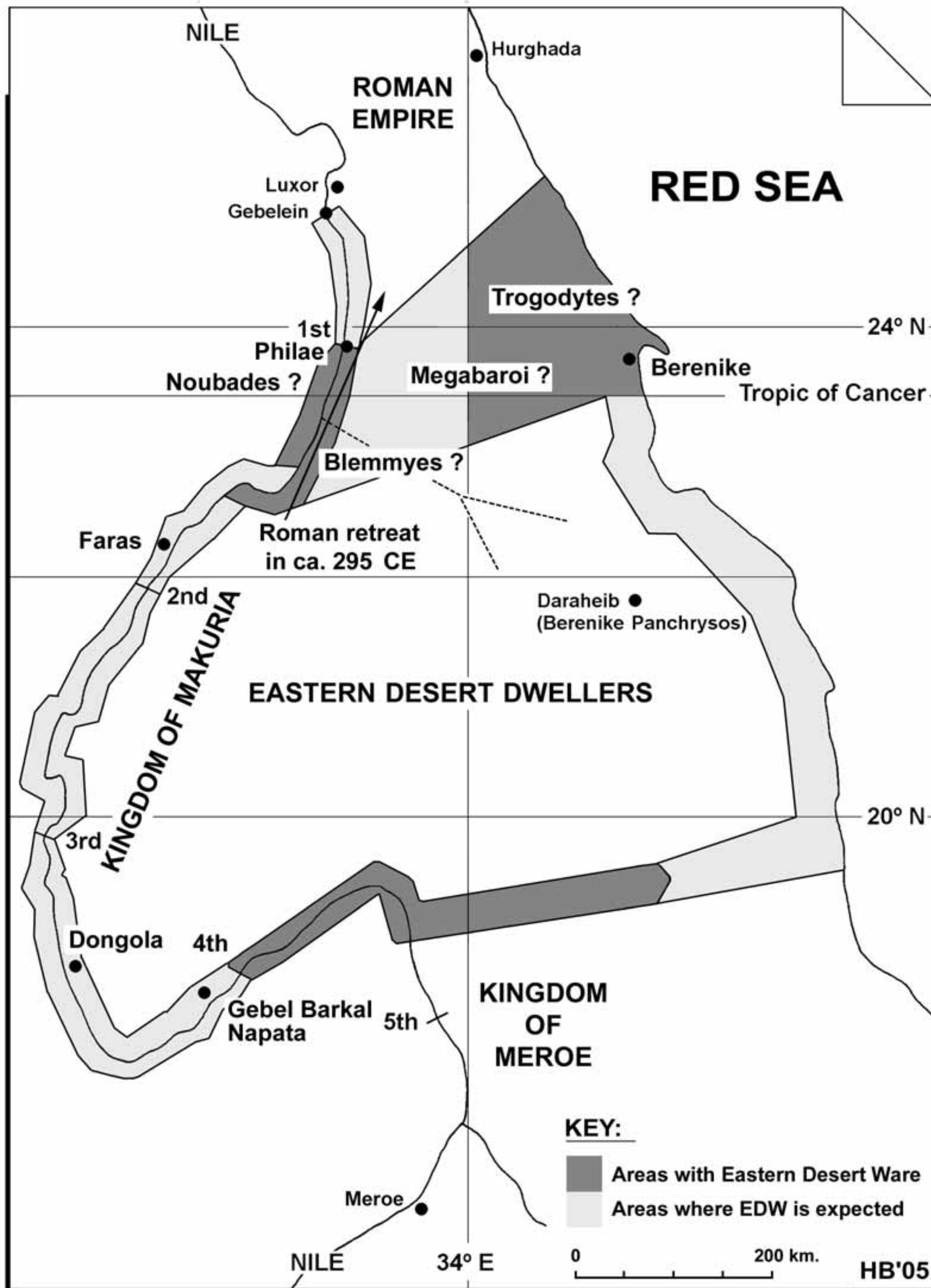

Figure 1-11 (after Barnard and Rose 2007): Map showing the region where Eastern Desert Ware has been found (Figure 1-1), and is expected to be present, in relation to the peoples mentioned in the ancient sources (Figure 1-8; cf. Figure 5-4).

Around the same time as Pliny the Elder, the geographer 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) had 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), *Elephanto-phagoi* (Elephant-eaters), *Strouthophagoi* (Ostrich-eaters), *Akridophagoi* (Locust-eaters), *Ichthyophagoi* (Fish-eaters), *Kreophagoi* (Meat-eaters) and *Troglodytes* (Cave-dwellers) or *Trogodytes* (Burstein 1989:109; Eide et al. 1998:823-826; Murray and Warmington 1967:24).

Among the more 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. 295 CE (*De Bellis* 1,19.27-37), albeit about 250 years after the events took place. Olympiodorus informs us that he met with the chiefs and priests of the Blemmyes in Kalabsha (*Talmis*), who convinced him that they controlled the area as far as *Prima* (Qurta or Qasr Ibrim) as well as the emerald (beryl) mines (*Mons Smaragdus*) in the vicinity (Eide et al. 1998:1127), although in reality a considerable distance to the northeast (Figure 1-1). Procopius tells us that Emperor Diocletian (284-305 CE) ordered the Roman troops to retreat from *Hiera Sycaminos* to *Syene* (Aswan), while asking the Nobatai to move from around the city of *Oasis* to the abandoned 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. According to Procopius this agreement was subsequently broken by both the Nobatai and the Blemmyes, implying that they should not be trusted (Shaw 1982). This point of view is further enforced by the observation that although Emperor Justinian (a contemporary of Procopius) ordered the temple in Philae to be closed (Dijkstra 2005; 2008), 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).

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), *Axumites* (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, may appear to refer to modern groups elsewhere but are placed in northeast Africa by the ancient authors (Mayerson 1993).

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 2008; Chapter 5), and that the ancient textual sources should be read with a healthy dose of scepticism (Barnard 2005; Burstein 2008; Rosen 2006; Wendrich et al. 2006). 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 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 (Barnard 2007). This is especially true in the case of Eastern Desert Ware that seems to appear in a much larger geographical area than traditionally assigned to the Blemmyes (Figure 1-11), but during a much shorter time period than that Blemmyes are mentioned in the historical sources (Barnard 2002; Barnard et al. 2005; Barnard 2006; Barnard and Magid 2006; Barnard and Strouhal 2004).

Pottery and People of the Eastern Desert

Ethnicity is a concept that evades definition (Ratcliffe 1994; Yinger 1994). This is perhaps best illustrated by the difficulties encountered in Nazi Germany to define who was Jewish and who was not. Not until months after the Nazi Congress of 1935, where no consensus could be reached, a decision was made which was characterized by Joseph Goebbels as "a compromise, but the best possible one" (Kershaw 1998). In the following ten years, however, it became painfully clear that everybody not only has an intuitive knowledge of his ethnicity, and that of others, but that these feelings can be a very powerful force in motivating and altering human behaviour. Ethnic differences, real or invented, thus lend

themselves to be used for pursuing political objectives, as also shown by the recent events in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia (Smith 2008). This may not have been much different in the more distant past (Hutchinson and Smith 1996). In the study of antiquity it is therefore important to also take into account evidence that may indicate ethnicity (Jones 1997). It is both tempting and problematic to connect what appear to be manifestations of a discrete material culture with a specific ethnic group (Dolukhanov 1994; Jones 1997). Especially when the finds turn up isolated or mixed with material with a seemingly different origin. Careful analysis may yield important insights (Smith 2003), although even with substantial supporting evidence it may prove difficult to securely assign a single class of archaeological finds, such as the sherds of Eastern Desert Ware, to a people (Barnard 2005; 2007; Dolukhanov 1994; Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Jones 1997; Smith 2003; 2008).

In 1912 the Belgium politician Jules Destrée wrote in a letter to King Albert I "Sire, (...) il n'y a pas de Belges (Sire, there are no Belgiums)". This remark aimed to end the confusion started two millennia earlier by Julius Caesar when he wrote "*Horum omnium fortissimi sunt Belgae*... (Of these [the Gauls] the Belgiums are the bravest... *De Bello Gallico* I, 1,2)." It is unclear on what information Caesar based this remark, but later he writes "*...plerusque Belgas esse ortos a Germanis Rhenumque antiquitus traductos*... (...most Belgiums descent from the Germans and came down the Rhine some time ago... *De Bello Gallico* II 4,2)". The latter is a considerably less firm statement. No date is given for when the Belgiums are supposed to have arrived in the area, nor is it indicated where the others identified as Belgiums may have come from. It is furthermore remarkable that most are said to have travelled down the Rhine. This river is at the edge of the region in which Caesar locates the Belgiums, rather than flowing through its centre like the Escaut or the Meuse (Barnard 2005).

The name coined by Caesar appears again on Renaissance maps and helped to form the basis for the decision of the Congress of Vienna to create a Belgium state after the Napoleonic wars. Subsequently, it fuelled its struggle for independence from the Netherlands, which ended successfully in 1830. This was the final step to make a term put forward by Caesar, possibly as a convenient way to talk about various indigenous groups in northwest Europe, into an ethnic reality. Something similar may have happened at the opposite frontier of the Roman Empire, in the southeast of *Aegyptus*, where the Blemmyes are said to have lived. Furthermore, ethnicity is a construct that may change over time but certainly between different situations. That the son of a Blemmyer is named a Megabaroi (PHauswaldt VI and XV) can indeed indicate a change over time, but equally likely a different context or different points of view of the authors. Depending on the situation, Jules Destrée will have identified himself, or be identified by others, as a Belgium, a white male, a Walloon, a Catholic, a socialist, a European, a politician or a lawyer. While he may have thought of himself as a socialist politician, and from time to time as a lawyer, others may have primarily seen him as a Catholic Walloon. Before and also after the Nazi Congress of 1935 many Jewish citizens of Germany thought of themselves as Germans adhering to the Jewish faith rather than 'Jews', especially after fighting for Germany in the First World War less than 20 years earlier. It may be difficult to grasp this aspect of life in the region where Eastern Desert has been found at the time that this pottery was produced and used.

Archaeological research in the Eastern Desert has understandably concentrated on the Pharaonic, Ptolemaic and Roman quarries, mines and harbours as well as the numerous prehistoric and Pharaonic inscriptions in the region, at the detriment of the more ephemeral traces of the indigenous inhabitants of the Eastern Desert. No systematic survey of a representative part of the desert has yet been completed, and is unlikely to be so in the near future. This study concentrates on Eastern Desert Ware in an effort to learn more about the area in which it was found, as well as the people that inhabited that area. After a careful description of 290 sherds (Chapter 2), a number of them were selected for various destructive research techniques, including petrographic thin-sectioning, trace element fingerprinting by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (Chapter 3) and organic residue analysis by combined gas chromatography mass spectrometry (Chapter 4). The technology needed to produce an Eastern Desert Ware vessel, from collecting the raw materials to firing the vessels, was also investigated. During my frequent travels through the desert, by truck or by camel, with or without Bedouin (Ma'aza, Ababda, Beni Amr) companionship, I also always tried to take note of the possibilities and the problems posed by the landscape, as well as the Bedouin response to those (Chapter 5). Whether or not ceramic archaeological artefacts as our only source of information about the people that once produced and used them, such as Eastern Desert Ware seems to be, are suitable and sufficient to address questions of lifestyle and ethnicity is a question that will be discussed in Chapter 6.