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Mobile peoples - permanent places : the construction and use of stone-built architecture by nomadic communities in the Jebel Qurma region of the Black Desert (Jordan) between the Hellenistic and Early Islamic periods.

Huigens, H.O.

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7 Conclusion

7.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter concludes the research presented in this dissertation, and aims to summarise its most important conclusions by formulating an answer to the main research question posed in Chapter 1. This is followed by an overview of the broader implications of this research and the conclusions drawn from it. The chapter concludes with a number of suggestions for future research, as many questions stem from this research in addition to answers.

7.2. CONCLUSIONS

The research presented in this dissertation set out to explore the rich archaeological landscapes of the Jebel Qurma region. It sought to explore the degree to which nomadic communities who inhabited the region between the Hellenistic and Early Islamic periods modified their living space through the construction of stone-built features, how these features were used, and what their significance was to nomadic lifeways. Based on the research presented in this dissertation, the following can be concluded.

What has become clear is that the Jebel Qurma region, similar to other regions of the Black Desert, hosts a wealth of stone-built features. Many of these features are evidently prehistoric, and their persistence in the landscape for thousands of years after their initial construction has considerably impacted future engagements with the landscape. Those who visited the region in historical times were able to make use of features such as enclosures for their own purpose, sometimes with minor modifications. Thus, the nomads who came to inhabit the region in the late 1st millennium BC did not enter a pristine, natural environment but a landscape that was already cultivated to some extent since prehistory, to the benefit of the new inhabitants.

But the relict prehistoric landscape was not simply reoccupied, it was restructured to a considerable degree. During the Hellenistic and Roman period, when the Jebel Qurma region was reoccupied after a seeming period of abandonment in the 2nd and early 1st millennium BC, new camping areas were created in the landscape by clearing the basalt surface cover in many places, and burial cairns were erected in the landscape that were much larger than those already present and of entirely different configurations. The period is also broadly contemporaneous with the creation of Safaitic inscriptions and petroglyphs in the region.

The Hellenistic and Roman period can be regarded as the period during which the landscape was transformed most vigorously. From about the 3rd or 4th century AD onwards burial cairns and pendants seem to get out of use. Their use as funerary monuments seems to have come to a near-complete stop during Late Antiquity. Instead, in this period the dead were interred underground in poorly marked graves. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the rock art in the Jebel Qurma region continued to be made in the Byzantine or Early Islamic period. At the campsites, clearings and enclosures continued to be used, however, for residential purposes.

The construction and use of various stone-built features in the Hellenistic and Roman period has been explained in several ways. Campsites were not only created or modified for a single, short-lived visit, but for the occupation on multiple occasions. This strong adherence to certain places is a stable and structured way of inhabiting the landscape. The reason for this may be the potential instability of the environment and its resources nomadic communities came to exploit. The position of campsites on the transitional zone between *harra* and *hamad* landscapes allowed for the exploitation of environments offering different resources, and were thus geared towards a flexible use of the landscape from

more or less the same locations. It would have been possible for nomads to camp in the same locations year after year irrespective of whether sources of water or pastures were situated in the *harra* or *hamad* landscapes. Instead of having to change campsite location following resource availability, the inhabitants of the Jebel Qurma region created campsites that could be used on the long term and in anticipation of variable environmental conditions. The creation of campsites with permanent features thus facilitated an efficient exploitation of the environments of the Jebel Qurma region.

Such strategies are furthermore indicative of a strong adherence of the nomads to particular places – places that they intended to inhabit not only at one moment in time, but also in the future. This sense of spatial attachment may have been both reinforced and communicated through the construction and use on multiple occasions of funerary cairns and pendants and their high perceptibility in the landscape. These must have been powerful symbols of the attachment of people with the landscape, vested in the memory of ancestors and their associated histories.

While the inhabitation of the Jebel Qurma region by nomadic communities continued in the Late Antique period up to the Abbasid period, the importance of stone-built architecture in nomadic lifeways considerably diminished relative to the preceding period. The construction and use of funerary cairns and pendants came to a near-complete stop. Furthermore, campsites came to be situated in a wider diversity of locations, and the number of campsites consisting only of clearings increased relative to campsites with enclosures. These developments seem to signify a less rigid adherence to the episodic use of the same locations as was the case during the preceding Hellenistic and Roman periods.

7.3. IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

This research sought to contribute to a better understanding of nomadic communities in the Black Desert during the Classical and Late Antique periods. Until recently these communities were mostly studied through textual sources (Chapter 1). This research has shown, however, the benefits of an archaeological contribution. Based on previous successful methodologies of locating the archaeological remains of nomads as well as on the rich archaeological landscapes in the Black Desert, this research set out from the premise that with a combination of various archaeological methods, including surface surveys and excavations, the archaeological remains of nomads would be retrievable in the Jebel Qurma region. These methods have provided a wide variety of archaeological remains that were left behind by nomadic communities, and many of the materials could be dated using a variety of methods to the period of study. These remains have the potential to be informative on many aspects of nomadic lifeways, including the history of inhabitation by nomads, their material culture, land-use strategies, burial practices, and relations with settled areas. They warrant a positive attitude to the archaeology of nomadism in the Black Desert not just with regard to the prehistoric periods, which have been investigated more thoroughly, but also with regard to more recent periods of inhabitation.

Furthermore, this research has shown that a combination of a variety of archaeological methods may be used to obtain a better understanding of nomadic engagements with the landscape. Prior to this research the combined analysis of survey and excavation data had hardly been carried out in the Black Desert. The strong focus of several research projects on remotely sensed surface data is useful to some extent, but information on the chronology and function of feature types clearly visible from above can only be obtained through pedestrian surveys and excavations. Crucial in this respect, as shown in this research, is the use of several chronometric dating methods including radiocarbon and OSL dating. Additionally, this research has presented the presence of relatively many ceramics on the surface of the Black Desert landscapes, which was not acknowledged thus far. These ceramics are important in locating and analysing nomadic activities in the Black Desert landscapes.

What this research has also shown, however, is that these datable surface remains should be regarded with caution. When studied in isolation, these remains are by themselves poor indicators for the presence or absence of people in the landscape. It has been argued that although relatively many ceramics were collected, these cannot be uncritically used to reconstruct occupational intensities, as ceramics need not have been equally widespread during the period of investigation. If it were not for the excavations, the Hellenistic and Roman period of inhabitation in the Jebel Qurma region would be poorly visible in terms of ceramics. Equally, it cannot be concluded with certainty that the early 1st millennium BC represents a phase of abandonment in the region based on ceramics alone. Although Iron Age ceramics are completely absent so far, other datable remains hint towards the possibility that nomadic communities may have been present in the region nonetheless – a possibility that requires to be further scrutinised. What is important in this respect is to take into account a broad spectrum of potentially datable remains, including ceramics, coins, radiocarbon dates and OSL dates, as was attempted in this research, to accurately reconstruct the history of inhabitation within a region.

On a more substantive note, this research has shown that an archaeological approach to nomadism has the potential to highlight a number of significant developments among nomadic communities that sharply contrast the ‘timeless’ Bedouin model, as discussed in Chapter 1. Firstly, after the development of camel nomadism in the early first millennium BC there is no reason to assume that the deserts of northern Arabia were continuously inhabited by nomads up to recent times. Research in the Jebel Qurma region suggests that there may have been periods in which the desert was largely abandoned, which thus breaks with the stereotypical view of the eternal nomad. Secondly, even within a period of relative continuation of inhabitation, such as between the Hellenistic and Early Islamic periods, there were profound changes in nomadic lifeways. This research has highlighted some of these changes, i.e., those related to nomad–landscape interactions, that are poorly compatible with Bedouin analogies and, moreover, suggest that nomadism cannot be regarded as static but as a continuously developing way of life.

Finally, this research has indicated that a broader understanding of nomadism in the Black Desert during historical times can be achieved by archaeological research. Until recently, most archaeological research focused on the region’s prehistoric remains, while the more recent periods were approached through textual sources. Most important with respect to the latter are the Safaitic inscriptions and other pre-Islamic texts. These texts, however, were mostly studied in terms of content rather than context, as exposed in Chapter 1. This research has provided some additional context to the inscriptions and indicates, importantly, that the Safaitic inscriptions and associated petroglyphs are not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a broader tradition of landscape modifications. These modifications were not meaningless but served specific socio-economic purposes, as summarised above. In view of these conclusions, it seems warranted to evaluate to potential cultural significance of carving and encountering rock art in the landscape, rather than dismissing them as meaningless.

7.4. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the attempt to investigate the degree to which nomads modified the landscapes of the Jebel Qurma region and the purpose of these modifications, several methods were successfully employed, as discussed above. Nonetheless, there are many lacunae remaining that require further research using different archaeological methods. While this research has established the function and date of construction of a number of stone-built feature types, a number of problems remain to be solved. For example, while it has been possible to broadly date the construction of Pendants in the Jebel Qurma region the OSL dates that were used in this respect have provided a very broad date range. This is unfortunate as they potentially shed light on the possibility of a relatively early phase of inhabitation, i.e., during the

early 1st millennium BC. A related problem is the fact that the purpose of these features is still poorly understood. Based on their consistent association with funerary cairns, and on the fact that no burials were found within or underneath the pendants, it has been suggested that they may have served as features to commemorate the dead buried within cairns. The suggestion that pendants gradually grew over time by episodically adding small cairns to the pendant remains unsubstantiated at this point, and may require a sequence of OSL dates from the pendants constituent cairns.

Similar uncertainties remain in terms of the use of enclosures. Although it has been established that some of the enclosures in the Jebel Qurma region were used, at least partly, for residential purposes, the hypothesis that they were also used as animals pens remains plausible but unconfirmed. This may be investigated in the future by investigating potential microscopic remains within the enclosures. More research is further required with regard to cairns, for which it has been suggested that they were used by members of the same social group. This may be further studied for example through the extraction and analysis of DNA from the skeletal remains within tombs to study possible kinship relations between the deceased.

There further are a number of feature types that remain relatively poorly explored in this research. For a number of reasons this research was largely limited to the investigations of two different site types, i.e. campsites and funerary sites. Features that therefore remained poorly explored include, for example, desert kites, for which there are some indications that they may have been used in historical times as well, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. Although many of these features were evidently created already in prehistoric times, through their persistence in the landscape they were possibly reused in historical periods as well. Whether this was the case or not, and how they were used exactly, may be explored in the future.

The reconstruction of environmental conditions in the Black Desert in antiquity is another issue that requires further scrutiny. The archaeological research in the Jebel Qurma region has provided hints rather than substantial evidence for past environmental conditions and changes therein. Potential proxies include charred plant material that is widely available in the remains of fire pits on ancient campsites, as this research has shown. A more widely encompassing analyses of such remains may be useful to reconstruct local environmental conditions. Other proxies that may be explored potentially include plant and faunal remains within the alluvial deposits in mudflats.

This research was based on the premise that nomadic communities in the Jebel Qurma region relied on a number of subsistence practices including pastoralism and hunting. This assumption was founded on what has been known from textual sources. The archaeological materials retrieved through fieldwork in the Jebel Qurma region hardly provided more detailed information on such practices, such as the composition of herds, the kinds of wild animals hunted, or the seasons in which people were active in the region to perform such practices. A useful observation in this respect is the fact that skeletal remains seem to be poorly preserved in the archaeological record of the region, perhaps due to the shallow nature of deposits at campsites, and a variety of unfavourable factors to which they were thus exposed. If this holds for other areas of the Black Desert as well, it is important to come up with other methods to investigate subsistence activities such as, for example, pastoral production.

Finally, this research has focused on an area of fairly restricted size, in comparison to the vast region the Black Desert entails. There is a need to extend this research to other parts of the Black Desert as well, for a number of reasons. Investigating the archaeology of nomadism on a broader geographic scale may benefit a broader understanding of the variability of nomadic lifeways in the Black Desert, as there is no reason to assume that the information of the Jebel Qurma region equally holds for other parts of the Black Desert. Furthermore, in order to better understand the relationship between nomadic communities of the Black Desert and sedentary communities in neighbouring regions, such as the Hau-

ran, it would be useful to compare archaeological data on nomadism from different locations to test models on nomad–sedentary interactions.

7.5. FINAL REMARKS

This research has been a modest attempt to shed light on a small part of enormous amount of stone-built features that can be found in the Arabian desert. Many of these features and the landscapes they are part of remain unexplored, and it is hoped that this research has shown the potential of studying this landscape to come to a better understanding of the ancient nomadic communities who created them. Investigating these landscapes can be challenging as it requires developing new methodologies and chronological frameworks, but nonetheless provides opportunities to investigate nomads who have long been regarded as invisible to the archaeologist.

Classical and Late Antiquity remain among some of the most intensively studied periods of Near Eastern history, and archaeological research has long contributed to a better understanding of many of the profound developments that occurred in this period. While much of this research initially focused on the urban populations and its monumental archaeological remains and, later, on rural settlements and their hinterland, this research has attempted to bring the people on the environmental margin into the focus of historical archaeology. While the archaeological remains of nomadic peoples may not be as spectacular as what can be found in the settled regions, the investigation of these remains is nonetheless essential. After all, although nomads resided in remote areas such as the Black Desert, they were far from isolated from Classical and Late Antique society. In order to come to a more complete understanding of that society, its nomadic component needs to be better understood, and towards this end archaeological research can offer a significant contribution.