



AN ENIGMATIC SITE NEAR DEBABIYA: DESERT AND NILOTIC INTERCONNECTIONS DURING THE LATE ROMAN PERIOD

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Since 2008, the Moalla Survey Project (MSP)¹ has conducted archaeological survey on the east bank of the Nile in an area approximately thirty kilometers in length, extending from Debabiya in the north to ed-Deir in the south, and centered on the necropolis of Moalla.² In the northern portion of the concession area, in December 2010, the MSP discovered an extensive late Roman/Byzantine site (M10-11/S1) within a wadi (Wadi Schech Nassr) cutting roughly northeast-southwest through the high desert behind el-Moalla.³ Other than the large site M10-11/S1, the only other sites within this wadi are a rock art concentration to the south and two small scatters of Predynastic/Early Dynastic sherds.⁴

Within a .75 kilometer stretch of the Wadi Schech Nassr are several concentrations of dry-stone structures, situated along the lower slopes of the sides of the wadi, with a few simple structures built in the wadi bottom. The 104 structures at M10-11/S1 (including 8 possible ring-cairn tombs) are the most prominent feature of the site (Figure 1). Each building is constructed of locally available stone (Figure 2) and many of the structures are situated around large boulders, which are incorporated into the walls of the building.⁵ The walls of the structures were originally one to two meters in height, a perishable material—wood, cloth, or leather—probably serving to roof the structures.⁶

Five different building types can be identified at the site.⁷ Type I, II, and III buildings have one, two and three enclosed spaces respectively, while Type IV buildings have more than three enclosed spaces. Types III and IV at M10-11/S1 show a diversity of ground-plans similar to those present at Hitan Rayan and Bir Minayh; thus far, all of the buildings appear to represent a single phase of construction, rather than the transformation of simpler ground plans into more complex structures. Type V buildings contain enclosed spaces connected by a central natural boulder.

Ceramic remains at M10-11/S1 provide a means to date the settlement; the ceramic corpus appears to represent a single period and—based on parallel sites—to be contemporaneous with the architectural remains (Figure 3). The predominant pottery forms at the site are amphorae; surface collection in a 4m x 4m square (south of Structure A-2), revealed that 82 percent of such sherds belonged to the fine silt Late Roman Amphora Type 7, with the

remaining 18 percent of amphorae sherds from the region of Aswan. The former amphora type begins to be produced during the late fourth century and continues through the eighth century CE. One painted, handled jar with swag decoration in black and cream paint is an example of painted decoration in late Roman/Byzantine wares.⁸ The fine wares and cooking pots from M10-11/S1 further support a date in the fifth through the early seventh centuries CE. The ceramics at M10-11/S1 closely parallel those of several Eastern Desert sites that also provide architectural parallels, further enhancing the relationship between M10-11/S1 and the five “enigmatic” sites of the Eastern Desert,⁹ along with a site in Wadi Minayh.¹⁰

At least fifteen sites have comparable architecture to M10-11/S1, and all of the surveyed sites (about half of those identified) have similar ceramics.¹¹ All of the sites contain groups of buildings scattered across the lower portions of wadis without an obvious pattern of distribution. While the function of these sites remains enigmatic, one can characterize their multiplicity and geographic range as a widespread Eastern Desert phenomenon of the Late Roman/Byzantine period. Geographically, the Eastern Desert sites divide roughly into three zones: those north of the Wadi Hammamat (e.g. Wadi Umm Diqal,¹² Umm Howitat al-Bahri,¹³ Bir Waseef,¹⁴ Bir Gadami,¹⁵ and Bir an-Nakhil¹⁶), those between the Wadi Hammamat and the route linking Edfu with Marsa Nakari (e.g. al-Garayat, Bir Minayh,¹⁷ and Bir Handosi), and those sites south of that route and extending to the region of Berenike (e.g. Umm Mureer, Umm Arba’een,¹⁸ Wadi al-Alam,¹⁹ Umm Heiran,²⁰ Nugrus West,²¹ Qaria Mustafa Amr Gamaa²² and Hitan Rayan²³). The sites range from immediately east of Debabiya to a north-south row of such sites beginning near Mons Claudianus and continuing south to Berenike.

In terms of historical context, the occupation of M10-11/S1 and the other “enigmatic” sites (middle of the fifth to the middle of the seventh centuries CE) corresponds to the centuries between a military set-back for the Blemmyes and the Arab conquest. The identification of these sites as “Blemmye settlements” is thus one hypothesis to consider.²⁴ Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, and probably beyond, a population of Blemmyes may have inhabited the Eastern Desert. Papyrus documents provide

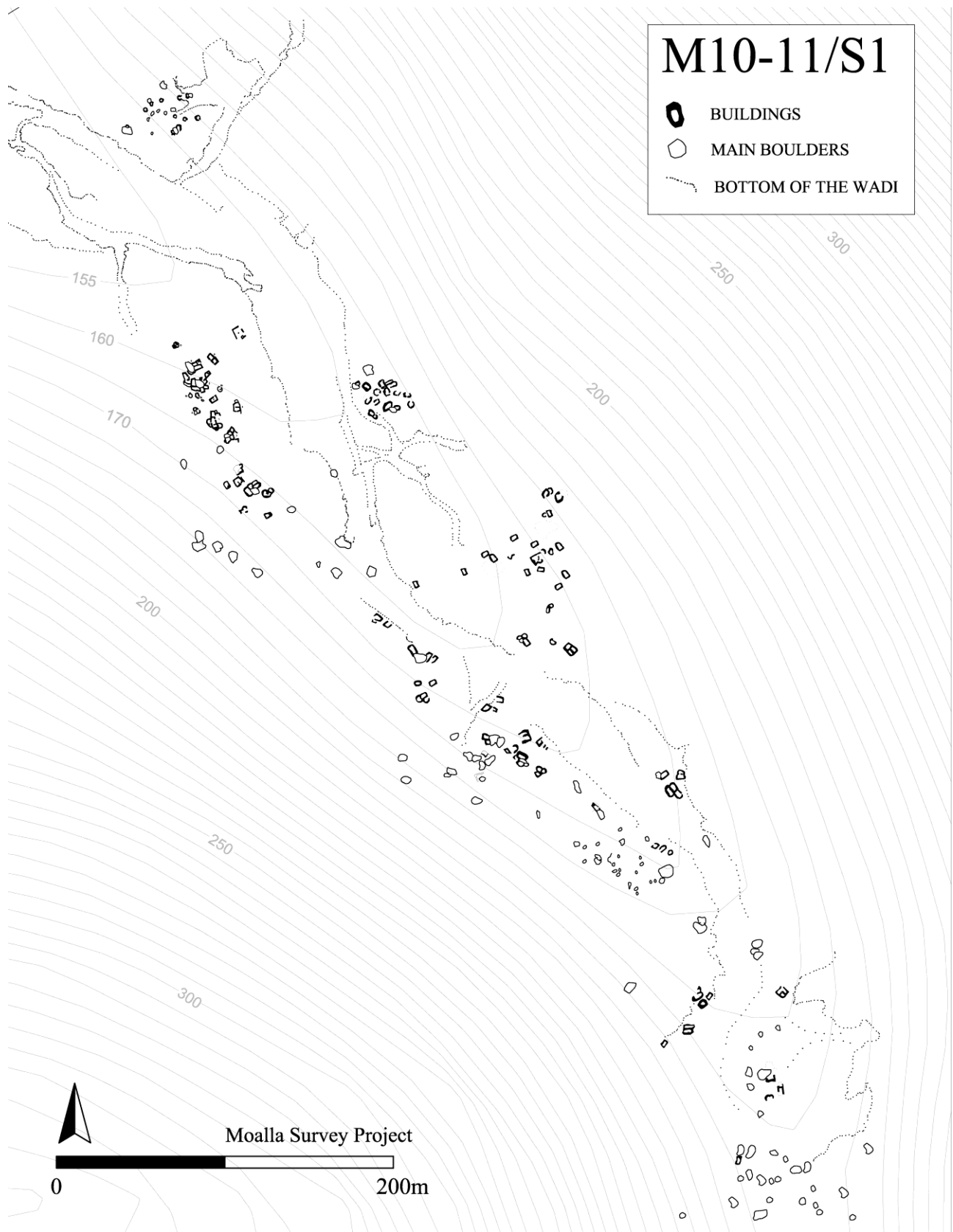


Figure 1: Overall plan of the structures at M10-11/S1; contour lines are at 5m intervals (plan by Alberto Urcia)

evidence for a group of Blemmyes settled on an island near Gebelein;²⁵ whether this settlement of Blemmyes or any other population of Blemmyes has a connection with the settlement at M10-11/S1 is uncertain.²⁶



Figure 2: View (looking west) of structure A-1 at M10-11/S1

Monastic communities offer another potential function for these types of sites.²⁷ However, with the exception of one structure with a possible “apse” from Umm Howeitat Bahri,²⁸ no architectural forms at M10-11/S1 or any of the parallel Eastern Desert sites reveal overt Christian features, and no structure appears sufficiently large to be classified in any way as a “public” or “communal” building. Nevertheless, the site of Bir an-Nakhil has been identified as a monastic settlement,²⁹ and the Wadi Umm

Diqla site has been specifically associated with *laura*-type monasteries.³⁰ The surveyors of Bir an-Nakhil suggested that the identity of the desert sites as a form of monastic community is to be found in their very lack of evidence for major economic or industrial activities.³¹ Such a judgment rests, however, on debatable preconceptions about the natures and functions of monastic sites in the Egyptian deserts.

Despite all of the surveys and excavations carried out within the Eastern Desert, and the growing list of parallel sites that make up this late Roman phenomenon of building activities, more questions than answers still remain about these “enigmatic” locales.

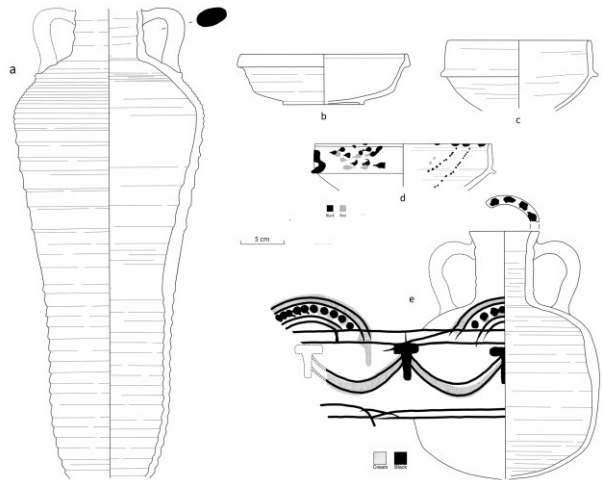


Figure 3: Ceramic forms from M10-11/S1

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank all members of the Ministry of State for Antiquities and the Inspectorate of Esna who made our work possible. The work of the MSP is supported by grants from the William K. and Marilyn M. Simpson Egyptology Endowment at Yale University.
- 2 For overviews of the work, see Colleen Manassa, “Preliminary Report for the 2008–2009 Season of the Mo’alla Survey Project,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 45 (2009), 57–77; *idem*, “The Yale University Moalla Survey Project,” *EA* 37 (2010), 38–40; *idem*, “El-Mo’alla to El-Deir,” *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* <<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4pc0w4hg>>; *idem*, “Nubians in the Third Upper Egyptian Nome: A View from Moalla,” in Irene Forstner-Müller and Pamela Rose (eds), *Nubian Pottery from Egyptian Cultural Contexts of the Middle and Early New Kingdom: Proceedings of a Workshop held at the Austrian Archaeological Institute at Cairo 1–12 December 2010* (Vienna: Verlag der

Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 117–128. Updates about the Moalla Survey Project and an overview of the work on the sites in the concession can be found at http://www.yale.edu/egyptology/ac_moalla.htm.

- 3 The mouth of the wadi debouches into the large Wadi Dababiya, the location of New Kingdom through Graeco-Roman limestone quarries, for which see Takaharu Endo and Shin-ichi Nishimoto, “The Ancient Egyptian Quarry at Dibabiya,” in Yannis Maniatis (ed.), *ASMOSLA VII* (Athens: Ecole française d’Athènes, 2009), 203–201; Rosmarie Klemm and Dietrich D. Klemm, *Stones and Quarries in Ancient Egypt* (London, 2008), 136–139.
- 4 Colleen Manassa, “The Predynastic Period in the Provinces: A View from Moalla and the Northern Portion of the Third Nome,” in Diana C. Patch and Matthew Adams (eds), *Egypt at its Origins 4*, forthcoming.
- 5 See also Zsolt Vasáros, “Catalogue of the buildings,” in Ulrich Luft (ed.), *Bi’r Minayb, Report on the Survey 1998–*

- 2004 (Budapest: Archaeolingua, 2010), 203–4 and fig. 14.
- ⁶ For possible reconstructions of such structures, see Ulrich Luft (ed.), *Bi'r Minayh*, 17.
- ⁷ The classification of building types at M10-11/S1 represents a modification of that of Fred Aldsworth and Hans Barnard for Hitan Riyan, in Steven Sidebotham and Willemina Wendrich (eds.), *Berenike '95* (Leiden: CNWS, 1996) 420–36; and Zsolt Vasáros for Bir Minayh, in Vasáros 2010, 206–7, 211.
- ⁸ Robert D. Gempeler, *Elephantine X. Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1992), 28–31.
- ⁹ Steven Sidebotham, Hans Barnard and Gillian Pyke, “Five enigmatic late Roman settlements in the eastern desert,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 88 (2002): 187–225.
- ¹⁰ Gábor Lassányi, ‘Pottery’, in Luft (ed.), *Bi'r Minayh*, 271–90.
- ¹¹ Sidebotham, Barnard, and Pyke 2002, 221 n. 59; Vasáros 2010, 205 n. 30; Gábor Lassányi, “On the Archaeology of the Native Population of the Eastern Desert in the First- Seventh Centuries CE,” in Hans Barnard and Kim Duistermaat (eds), *Peoples of the Eastern Desert* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2012) 254.
- ¹² David P. S. Peacock, ‘Wadi Umm Diqal,’ in V.A. Maxfield and David P. S. Peacock (eds), *Survey and Excavations at Mons Claudianus* (Cairo: Institut Français Archéologie Orientale, 1997), 151–8.
- ¹³ Sidebotham, Barnard, and Pyke 2002, 192–7.
- ¹⁴ James Harrell, et al., “The Ptolemaic to Early Roman Amethyst Quarry at Abu Diyeiba in Egypt’s Eastern Desert,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français Archéologie Orientale* 106 (2006), 129–30.
- ¹⁵ Sidebotham, Barnard, and Pyke 2002, 199–201.
- ¹⁶ Martha Prickett, “Quseir Regional Survey,” in Donald S. Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, *Quseir al-Qadim 1978* (Cairo: American Research Center in Egypt, 1979), 297–300; Graeme Earl and Darren Glazier, ‘Survey at Bi'r an-Nakhil’, in David Peacock and Lucy Blue (eds), *Myos-Hormos – Quesier al-Qadim: Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea, Survey and Excavations 1999-2003* (Oxford: Oxbow Books 2006), 26–31.
- ¹⁷ Luft (ed.) 2010.
- ¹⁸ Steven Sidebotham, “Survey of the Hinterland,” in Steven Sidebotham and Willemina Wendrich (ed.), *Berenike '97* (Leiden: CNWS, 1999), 367.
- ¹⁹ Sidebotham 1999, 365–7
- ²⁰ Steven E. Sidebotham, et al, “Preliminary report on archaeological fieldwork at Sikait (Eastern Desert of Egypt), and environs: 2002-2003,” *Sabara* 15 (2004): 23.
- ²¹ Sidebotham, et al. 2004, 23–4.
- ²² Steven Sidebotham, Martin Hense, and Hendrikje Nouwens, *The Red Land: the illustrated archaeology of Egypt’s Eastern Desert* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 371–3; Steven E. Sidebotham, “Survey of the Hinterland,” in Steven Sidebotham and Willemina Wendrich (eds), *Berenike '98: Report of the 1998 Excavations at Berenike and the Survey of the Egyptian Eastern Desert, including Excavations in Wadi Kalalat* (Leiden: CNWS, 2000), 367–71.
- ²³ Sidebotham, Barnard, and Pyke 2002, 187–225; Steven Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 275–7.
- ²⁴ Lassányi 2012, 258–9.
- ²⁵ Tormod Eide, et al (eds), *Fontes historiae Nubiorum* (Bergen : University of Bergen, 1998), vol. 3, 1196–216 (nos. 331–43).
- ²⁶ Thusfar, surface collection of ceramics have not recovered any examples of Eastern Desert Ware (EDW), although at least one sherd of EDW was collected from the surface of the necropolis of Moalla (Manassa, in Forstner-Müller and Rose (eds), *Nubian Pottery*, 125). Even if future seasons reveal the existence of EDW at M10-11/S1, the connection between that ceramic style and the Blemmyes is debatable—see Hans Barnard, ‘The Archaeology of the Pastoral Nomads between the Nile and the Red Sea’, in Jeffrey Szuchman (ed.), *Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (OIS 5; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2009), 15–41; *idem*, *Eastern Desert Ware: Traces of the Inhabitants of the Eastern Deserts in Egypt and Sudan during the 4th–6th Centuries CE* (BAR International Series 1824; Oxford, 2008).
- ²⁷ Sidebotham, Barnard, and Pyke 2002, 223–5.
- ²⁸ Sidebotham, Barnard, and Pyke 2002, 196.
- ²⁹ Earl and Glazier, in Peacock and Blue (eds) 2006, 31.
- ³⁰ Peacock, in Maxfield and Peacock (eds) 1997, 153–4 (but noting the lack of an obvious “church” structure).
- ³¹ Earl and Glazier, in Peacock and Blue (eds) 2006.