

The Flint Artefacts from two Workshops at Wadi el-Sheikh, Eastern Desert, Egypt

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ABSTRACT. A stone quarry at Wadi el-Sheikh is recognized as an important source of flint in ancient Egypt. In 1896–1897 a substantial sample of stone artefacts, from fifteen separate workshops, was collected and placed in various museums across the world. This material remains virtually unknown, including two assemblages kept in Australia, which are analyzed in this study. It is evidenced that both workshops produced predominantly flint knives and a smaller number of cleavers for distribution away from the quarry, in an earlier part of the third millennium Before the Common Era (BCE) often referred to as the Early Dynastic Period (c. 3150–2686 BCE) and Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE). There is a strong indication that the workshops represent a tiny portion of a large supply network. Two types of tools, a pick and a hoe, are recognized as digging implements associated with a quarry, but are also present on sites in Egypt where excavation took place.

Introduction

Ancient Egypt is a prominent example of a highly-developed bronze-age civilization, later evolving into iron-age. It is often assumed that the refinement and splendour of Egyptian antiquity resulted, in large part, from the introduction of metallurgy, bronze smelting and casting that allowed production of specialized and highly effective tools—especially in contrast to the preceding stone-age period with more rudimentary technology and production capacity (Petrie, 1917; Barket & Yohe, 2011:30; Stevenson, 2011:74).

The use of copper tools and the evidence of small-scale smelting extends to the fourth millennium (and earlier), predating Dynastic Egypt of the third millennium BCE (Rothenberg *et al.*, 1998:4; Stevenson, 2011:650). Their presence and the production of sophisticated vases made of basalt, diorite and other hard stone material in the Nagada culture suggests that metallurgy indeed provided the foundation for Egyptian manufacturing capacity and

technical mastery (Bevan, 2007; Stevenson, 2011:65; Romer, 2012:104). Bronze tools, generally harder and more durable than copper, appeared in the Old Kingdom (Ogden, 2000:152). They were used and valued probably at the higher level of production associated with workshops servicing the royal court and high officials. However, stone tools, often made of flint, flaked in the manner familiar to humans for at least two million years, provided basic and essential hardware in daily life. Flaked stone tools were used in cutting, chopping, chiselling, carving, slicing and general processing of most of the organic and some non-organic materials, including fibre, reed, timber, bone, meat and hide—to name just a few (Kobusiewicz, 2006:459; Teeter, 2011:202; Graves-Brown, 2015; Lucarini, 2016:89–92). Such tools were used virtually throughout the entire ancient Egyptian history (Petrie, 1901b:80–81; Tillmann, 1994, 1999; Aston *et al.*, 2000; Graves-Brown, 2015; Barket & Yohe, 2011:30–31; Bard, 2007:73), showing that replacement of lithic technology by metallurgy took over 3000 years (Rosen, 1996:130).

Keywords: Wadi el-Sheikh; Ancient Egypt; technology; stone tools; knives; flint extraction; quarry

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