

1 The Red Land

The ancient Egyptians conceptualized their world as a series of balanced pairs, even opposites, held in equilibrium by the force of *maat*, cosmic order and rectitude. The duality of the diurnal and nocturnal solar cycle corresponded to the annual opposites of the north to south and south to north journey of the sun, and the yearly round of the high and low Niles. Geographically, the major divisions of the ordered world could appear as Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, the southern and northern realms over which the king ruled as “Lord of the Two Lands”; the Nilotic world could also take the form of eastern and western divisions as the Two Banks. An equally significant pairing was *Kemet*, the Black Land, the extent of the rich alluvial soil, and *Deshret*, the Red Land, the vast deserts that stretched east and west of the Nile Valley. One could be a short distance out in the desert, with a clear view of the green ribbons of cultivation flanking the shimmering blue band of the Nile (Figure 1), and still describe a walk to that cultivation as “going down to the Black Land” – as “hill country” was synonymous with “desert” and “foreign land,” an immense and conceptually outer realm was but a stone’s throw from the waters of the Nile flood.

In the fifth century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus applied to Egypt the now hoary designation “the gift of the Nile.” Indeed, ancient Egyptian civilization would never have attained the heights of achievement to which it rose without the reliable water source and relatively predictable flooding of the river. Herodotus was correct that the black alluvial soil – the substance of which the Black Land is composed – was a literal gift of the Nile inundation. Modern historians and Egyptologists alike sometimes take Herodotus’s characterization too far, however, assuming that ancient Egypt was all but exclusively the narrow strip of alluvium bordering the Nile. Some have suggested that the ancient Egyptians avoided the deserts except when mining or military expeditions forced them reluctantly into the rocky and sandy barrenness. In the minds of some recent authors, the deserts bordering the Nile Valley were realms of terror and chaos for the ancient Egyptians.¹ As archaeology and epigraphy have revealed, with increasing clarity over the past several decades, the truth of ancient Egypt’s relationship with the Eastern and Western Deserts was far from random, insignificant, or fearful.

Marching along the outer edges of Middle Kingdom hunting scenes at Beni Hasan, griffins and other imaginary creatures mark the outer edges of the already outer desert regions (Gerke, 2014). At the rim of the world that the far corner of the tomb wall mirrors, the desert beasts that are the hunter’s quarry eventually become the mythical creatures that might populate the twilight lands

¹ Keimer, 1944; Aufrère, 2007: 139; Quack, 2010: 349; Lazaridis, 2019: 129.



Figure 1 At the site of Moalla, looking across the Nile and its narrow bands of cultivation to the western escarpment

at the rims of the horizons. Yet fantastic fauna are relatively rare at desert rock inscription sites (Darnell, 2013a: 68–69) – even at a remote desert pass the Egyptians apparently did not feel themselves to be approaching a dangerous liminal region, nor do they seem to have feared such creatures as aspects of real desert travel. Even in those Beni Hasan scenes in which the hunter – through the presence of desert monsters – might appear to brag about hunting at the ends of the earth, the monstrous beings wear collars. The desert might eventually become truly uncanny if one journeyed far enough, but the desert prowess of the ancient Egyptians seems to have led them to believe that any such monsters could be incorporated into a rational and practical, inhabited desert environment. Desert monsters, like the deserts themselves, could be domesticated.

Most of the mobile hunter-gatherer groups who roamed the seasonally moist eastern Sahara, accompanied by expanding herds of cattle and caprids by ca. 6000 BCE, began to settle down to lives of farming and herding under the influence of a drying climate around 5000 BCE (Riemer, 2007). Although the deserts went from center to periphery, the Nile Valley dwellers never entirely left the drying hinterlands of the river and oases. Ancient Egyptians exploited the vast geological and mineralogical wealth of the Eastern Desert, and utilized the oases of the Western Desert of Egypt and Nubia as hubs for far-flung caravan

travel. Far from being empty terra incognita, the ancient Egyptian deserts were highly interconnected regions crisscrossed by well-marked and intensively traveled tracks, with numerous oasis settlements and high desert campsites revealing evidence of the products of Mediterranean and North African commerce. During the three millennia of pharaonic history, the Egyptians maintained a desert infrastructure of varying complexity, with bureaucratic offices to oversee the smooth functioning of inhabited desert areas and the caravans passing through them. A history of Egypt or Nubia that excludes the Red Land is but a fragment of the entire story of Egyptian and Nubian cultures.

The formal self-presentation of a late Old Kingdom administrator illustrates some of the derring-do and remarkable achievements of ancient Egyptians in the Western Desert, and demonstrates how the results of recent archaeological and epigraphic work have improved our understanding of Egyptian desert activity. The Sixth Dynasty governor of the First Nome (district) of Upper Egypt, Harkhuf, commissioned an “autobiography” for the façade of his tomb on the west bank of modern Aswan, site of his capital city and the traditional border between pharaonic Egypt and Nubia. Harkhuf served under kings Merenre (ca. 2287–2278 BCE) and during the boyhood of his successor, Pepi II (who would reign an unprecedented 94 years, ca. 2278–2184 BCE). In his text, Harkhuf relates his journeys south into Nubia; in two of his exploratory and trading expeditions, Harkhuf’s goal was a now-obscure southern territory called Yam, ultimately linked to Egypt by two routes: the Elephantine Road, departing from Gebel Tingar on the west bank of Aswan, just south of Harkhuf’s tomb, and the Oasis Road, whose Nile terminus was in the Thinite Nome (the district of Abydos, the terminus to the road being close to modern Girga).

The length of his itinerary, and the Lower Nubian toponyms that Harkhuf lists for his return journey, have led to an Egyptological equation of Yam with the region of the Third Cataract of the Nile or further south, near the Fifth Cataract (O’Connor, 1986). For over two decades, the Theban Desert Road Survey (Yale University) has mapped and studied much of the Oasis Road, called the Girga Road after its major Nilotic terminus, and the ACACIA Project (University of Cologne) has traced Old Kingdom activity along the Abu Ballas Trail, connecting Dakhla Oasis with Gebel Uweinat to the southwest, near the juncture of the modern states of Egypt, Sudan, and Libya, roughly 580 kilometers southwest of Balat in Dakhla Oasis and 650 kilometers due west of the Nile. Combining archaeological work and epigraphic recording, these surveys have revealed physical evidence for Old Kingdom expeditions utilizing the Oasis Road and branches thereof leading to the far southwest, offering clues to Harkhuf’s ultimate destination in Yam. Harkhuf departed the region of Abydos via the Girga Road, on a Theban branch of which is a rock inscription of the cartouche

of a Sixth Dynasty king Pepi. He then traveled on to Kharga Oasis, past campsites now known to have functioned during the Fifth Dynasty; Harkhuf may have continued westward in his journey, arriving at the Old Kingdom outpost of Balat in Dakhla Oasis, ultimately traveling to the southwest along the Abu Ballas Trail toward Gebel Uweinat.

An inscription from the reign of Montuhotep II (ca. 2055–2004 BCE) at Gebel Uweinat, discovered in 2008, depicts the enthroned Eleventh Dynasty ruler receiving tribute from the lands of Yam and Tekhebet. While not necessarily in the territory of Yam itself, the inscription suggests that Yam was not exclusively a Nilotic location, but rather at least to some extent a region of the Western Desert, perhaps beyond Kharga and Dakhla Oases (Cooper, 2012). The inscription of Montuhotep II indicates that Egyptian missions to Uweinat received *sntr* – incense – from Yam. Increasing aridity in the Sahara ultimately restricted the movements of pastoral groups, perhaps contributing to the ultimate obsolescence of the toponym. Ongoing archaeological surveys, new epigraphic discoveries, and a resulting reappraisal of long-known hieroglyphic texts offer exciting insights into Egypt in the Eastern Sahara.

1.1 Desert Roads

The common Egyptian term for the desert, *ḥ3s.t*, was written with the hieroglyphic sign of three desert hills, with valleys in between. Most of Egypt is in fact a desert, cut through by dry water courses, wadis in Arabic. Wherever water was plentiful, in the Nile Valley or a desert oasis, that water source was for the most part in a valley or depression, since the vast region of northeast Africa is otherwise a high desert. The ancient Egyptians could therefore encapsulate the essence of a desert journey in the phrase “going up and going down” (Darnell, 2003: 82–84). The desert terrain frequently necessitates steep ascents, suitable for human travelers and the donkeys that served as the main pack animals of the pharaonic era (Förster, 2015: 385–406) (Figure 2). Donkeys carry the greatest load per pound of any beast of burden available to the ancient Egyptians, and are particularly well adapted for desert travel, able to tolerate both moderate dehydration and poor quality forage (Förster, 2015: 428–434). The introduction of the camel as a major means of transport around the middle of the first millennium BCE required roads with more gradual ascents, but the camel’s ability to go without water for extended periods allowed for more widely spaced water sources. Desert roads of pharaonic date presupposed the existence of frequent food and water depots, even cisterns or wells, with the associated administrative oversight of traffic, systems of fortifications (Vogel, 2004; Vogel, 2013), and the patrolling of roads.



Figure 2 Ancient track from Aswan descending into Kurkur Oasis; inset: rock inscription of a donkey carrying a pack, from the Wadi Hilal (east of Elkab)

The Nile was not an ideal route of travel and transport year round. During the low Nile, sandbanks would have barred all but those vessels with the shallowest of drafts, while the season of the inundation would have seen the channel of the river lost beneath the muddy waters that stretched out like an inland sea from desert edge to desert edge (Bonneau, 1964). A series of rocky cataracts beginning at Aswan and continuing at intervals to just south of Meroe, and bends of the river in which both current and wind might oppose a voyage, could also discourage a total reliance on the river as a corridor for trade (Darnell, 2013a: 40–42). Although a vessel could be dragged around a cataract – and indeed an ancient slipway for hauling boats through the desert bordering the Second Cataract is known from Mirgissa² – a donkey caravan could more easily transport cargo past a cataract or other obstruction. Any north-south track in the cultivated land would have encountered a bewildering array of larger and smaller irrigation canals, making travel difficult. A caravan on a desert road, paralleling the Nile in the near desert, might be preferable to a trip on or near the Nile. For journeys to the east or the west, desert roads alone provide access.

² Vercoutter, 1970: 13–15, 173–180, 204–214. The tomb of Amunhotep, called Huy (Theban Tomb 40), depicts boats being hauled over a muddy surface, perhaps a similar use of a slipway (Davies, 1926).

An ancient Egyptian road is most often a set of slightly meandering, parallel tracks, where the traffic of human feet and donkey hooves has pushed aside the rocks and pebbles of the desert surface (Bubenzer & Bolten, 2013: 69–71). Those grooves remain visible for millennia, and are further marked by pot sherds, the remains of broken ceramic storage containers and cooking vessels (Figure 3).³ The desert surface normally required no further human augmentation, with some exceptional cases. The ancient Egyptians could engineer impressive built roads to access quarries, providing an even surface for the transportation of large stones (Shaw, 2006; 2010: 109–124). A twelve kilometer long paved road, consistently two meters wide, connects the basalt quarry at Widan el-Faras (at the northern edge of the Fayum depression) with a now vanished lake (Harrell, 2002: 235–336). A built roadway accessing the Hatnub quarry also employed dry-stone causeways to maintain an even grade when crossing wadis (Shaw, 2013). Cleared tracks could connect desert locales: a route between Dashur and the Fayum may have served as both a quarry road and military highway (Shaw, 2010: 118–19); an eighty kilometer cleared road connected the Gebel el-Asr quarries with the Nile at Toshka (Murray, 1939); paved and cleared tracks are also associated with quarries in the First Cataract region (Storemyr, et al., 2013).

Travelers, from kings and their retinues to police patrols to priests and scribes, recorded their names, and often much else, when roads passed an area of stone suitable for carving. Rock art and rock inscriptions complement

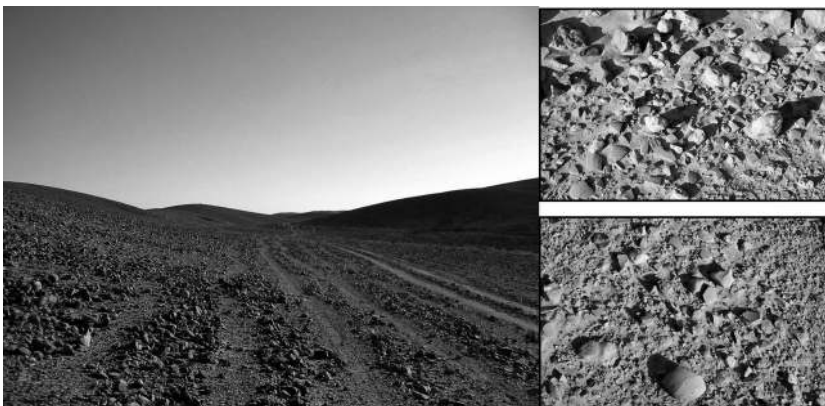


Figure 3 Ancient caravan tracks west of the Wadi Abu Medawi ascent; inset: “broken ceramics on the road,” two views of the dense ceramics on the Wadi Alamat Road

³ The ancient Egyptians recognized the dichotomy between desert surface and the broken ceramics on the roads as “gravel of the desert and broken pots in the road” (D. Darnell, 2002: 156).

ceramic evidence from the roads, allowing a combination of archaeology and epigraphy to plot changes in desert administration. Desert rock inscriptions also reveal historical episodes otherwise unattested in Nile Valley sources, from an early Dynasty 0 ruler's defeat of an enemy, to the interactions between Middle Kingdom Dakhla and desert tribes, to Montuhotep II's far-flung expedition to Gebel Uweinat. The deserts preserve considerable evidence for religious practices, from the transformation of natural features into sacred spaces to some of the earliest attested expressions of personal piety. The uninhabited desert allowed individuals to transcend standards of decorum expected in monuments along the banks of the Nile.

1.2 Geographic Overview of the Egyptian Deserts and Road Networks

No matter how level the plateau across which an ancient Egyptian desert road traveled, inevitably almost all desert arteries would focus on a narrow pass at the escarpment leading to or from one of the water-rich depressions in which most major settlements would be situated. These passes connected the high desert plateau with the low desert border of the Nile Valley, the floor of the oasis depressions of the Western Desert, a mining or quarrying site within a valley of the Eastern Desert, or the shore of the Red Sea far to the east. Such points for ascending and descending the plateau were more easily controlled than the broad expanses of high desert, across which the parallel paths of a desert track might spread for a width of a kilometer or more. Termed a "narrow door" by the ancient Egyptians (Darnell, et al., 2002: 35–36), the desert choke point of a road pass could be open, or it might be blocked by human agency⁴ as well as a lack of water.⁵ Although the Satire of the Trades (Jäger, 2004: 144–145) suggests that the state of a pass or the security of a longer stretch of road could be one of the concerns that troubled the traveling courier (*sh3h.ty*), a properly administered road could be safe (Brunner, 1937: 43–44).

Mapping the desert roads of ancient Egypt is a process still in its initial phases. The ancient Egyptians themselves mounted exploratory missions to seek out new routes, yet only one significant desert map survives. Not all tracks on which ancient remains are present were in use at all periods of Egyptian history, and several texts reference the ancient Egyptians' own exploration of routes, blazing new trails for trade, with officials securing oasis territory and searching out its populations (Darnell, et al., 2002: 73; Förster, 2015: 269–276). A unique Twentieth Dynasty

⁴ Cf. Wadi Hammamat inscription no. 17, ll. 11–13 (Couyat & Montet, 1912: pl. 5 and p. 40); Darnell, 2008: 89–90.

⁵ An inscription of Seti I at Kanais (in the Wadi Mia) states that prior to the well dug under Seti's orders, the route was blocked (Schott, 1961: text A, ll. 2–3).

papyrus (reign of Ramesses IV, ca. 1153–1147 BCE) with a map of a portion of the Wadi Hammamat shows how the ancient Egyptians recorded tracks, water sources, and their own monuments (e.g., a stela of Seti I, ca. 1294–1279 BCE) in the landscape (Harrell & Brown, 1992).⁶

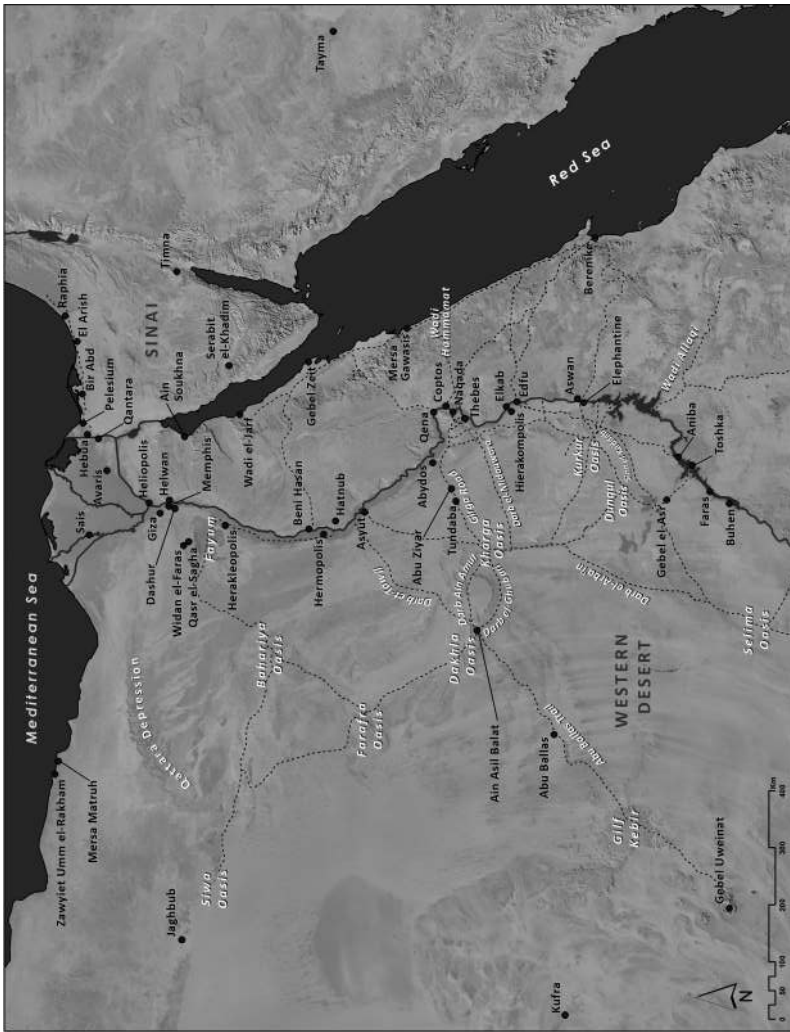
Maps of principally the nineteenth and twentieth centuries CE show a number of routes then in use in the Egyptian and Nubian deserts, and some more detailed descriptions of itineraries were published before all of those routes passed out of use (an excellent example is Gleich, 1905). More recent travelers and researchers have mapped and described desert roads (Riemer & Förster, 2013), and remote sensing techniques are being developed to combine historical map data with satellite imagery to identify the most promising areas for desert road surveys (Bubenzer & Bolton, 2013; Gasperini & Pethen, 2018). Ultimately, however, ancient tracks can be securely identified only through the physical collection of artifacts, and the recording of rock art and inscriptions requires intensive survey followed by photography and epigraphic drawings. Digital techniques have streamlined the epigraphic process, enabling entire sites and their hinterlands to be recorded in a season of work (Darnell, Darnell, & Urcia, 2018); in combination with three-dimensional modeling, such recording techniques provide a better understanding of inscription sites within the broader context of desert road archaeology.

Although a definitive description of ancient roads in Egypt is not possible, several important networks of routes and associated sites are known. The maps accompanying this Element (Maps 1–5) focus on major road networks, and include all of the major routes and toponyms mentioned herein. Many other tracks and important passes – such as those at the eastern escarpment of Kharga Oasis (Giddy, 1987: map 2) – have been omitted altogether. The following sketches of roads, and the maps that illustrate them, should provide a broad overview, and a background for more detailed study.

The Western Desert of Egypt – the Eastern Sahara from an African perspective – is bounded on the north by the Mediterranean Sea. By the reign of Ramesses II (ca. 1279–1213 BCE), fortresses guarded the desert roads that paralleled the coast (see Section 2.5). The waterless expanses of the Qattara Depression were a barrier to desert travel, so that the next viable route to the south that leads into the Nile Valley began in Siwa Oasis. During the second half of the first millennium BCE, Siwa became the latest of the Western Desert oases to be incorporated into the pharaonic state. Although Siwa may be mentioned as part of the trajectory of a combined Libyan and Sea Peoples invasion during the reign of Merneptah (ca. 1208 BCE), it was at the very edge of the “oasis ring,”

⁶ <https://collezionepapiri.museoegizio.it/en-GB/document/9/> (accessed 10/1/2020).

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Map 1 Map of Egypt and Nubia with key desert roads and toponyms mentioned in this Element (map layout and design by Alberto Urcia)

