On Ostrich Eggs and Libyans

Traces of a Bronze Age People from Bates' Island, Egypt

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[The Libyans] schemed to plot rebellion a second time, to finish their lifetime on the frontier of Egypt. They gathered the hill-countries and plains of their district. They laid death upon themselves [by coming] against Egypt...

(Records of Ramesses III, translated by Edgerton and Wilson 1936:91)

Introduction

During the Mediterranean Bronze Age (ca. 2000 to 1000 B.C.) the Libyans were well known to Pharaonic Egypt, appearing frequently in Egyptian texts, reliefs and wall-paintings (Fig. 1). As the opening quote indicates, during the late 2nd millennium B.C. the Egyptians were very much concerned with the migration of large numbers of these tribal people towards the Nile Delta, where they sometimes engaged in battle with the armies of the Pharaoh (see O'Connor, this issue). But until

1 Four Tjchemu or Libyan princes from the Tomb of Seti (1301-1289 B.C.). They wear highly decorated robes, the length of which may have signified high status. The ostrich plumes in the princes' hair also seem to have been a mark of importance. (From O. Bates 1914: Pl. 3. Reproduced by permission of Macmillan Publishers Ltd., London)
eggs in the shell, and it is these bits of shell that may provide our first material evidence of the Bronze Age Libyans (White 1986: 79, n.71: 82). They also serve as a starting point for a reassessment of our understanding of life on the northeast coast of Africa during the Late Bronze Age, and the Libyans’ relationships with non-Egyptian foreigners. As this essay was substantially completed before the 1987 season of excavations, the focus throughout is on material found in 1985. The archaeological evidence from 1987 supports the conclusions made here.

**Bates’ Island and Marmarica**

The resort town of Marna Matruh is located at the eastern limit of the rugged Marmaric coast. According to most conventional definitions, Marmarica ran west from Matruh to Derna in eastern Cyrenaica, and was sandwiched between the Mediterranean Sea and Egypt’s Western Desert directly to the south. Today the eastern Marmaric coast is a semi-arid zone, and while its terrain is barren and forbidding at the height of summer, this coastal strip is potentially fertile, especially around Marna Matruh.

Bates’ Island lies at the eastern end of Matruh’s first East Lagoon (Figs. 4, 5). This islet is small in size, about 136 m long by 55 m wide. A low sandstone coastal ridge separates the lagoon system from the Mediterranean Sea just to the north. Composed mainly of hardened layers of course sand atop bedrock, the island lacks any true soil cover, is bare of vegetation except for a limited range of low scrub, and has no source of fresh water. Though the site may have been connected to the mainland to the east during its Roman-period occupation, preliminary observations indicate that it was an island in the Late Bronze Age. It is even possible that the lagoon’s waters were somewhat higher at that time than they are today. While a higher sea level would not have reduced the size of Bates’ Island, it might also have made the more easterly portions of Matruh’s lagoon system accessible.

Bates’ Island in honor of the man who first suspected its archaeological importance.

While the work of the Marna Matruh Expedition is still at a preliminary stage, a wide range of material from the 14th century B.C. has been recovered. Excavation has exposed the remains of semi-permanent buildings with stone foundations (Fig. 3). Most of the domestic pottery from this period is apparently of Cyproit origin, but other vessels were imported from Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, and the Levant. Most recently, substantial quantities of Pharaonic Egyptian pottery have been identified.

This settlement also yielded nearly 56 small fragments of ostrich
they confirm the supposition that herding was an essential aspect of Late Bronze Age Libyans. We have, for example, references to very large numbers of cattle, sheep, goats, and asses which the Egyptians had captured from the Libyans. Ramesses III (1184–1153 B.C.) claimed to have taken as booty almost 43,000 animals following his defeat of the Libyans in his second war with them (Edgerton and Wilson 1936: 87–9). Second, written records confirm that Libyan society was indeed tribally organized, with kin groups led by hereditary chiefs inhabiting clearly defined geographic areas (see O'Connor, this issue). Further, Egyptian documents show that the Libyans possessed a written language, developed a litigating apparatus over which a single leader exercised supreme control when the tribes were allied. Finally, fixed settlements apparently existed among the ancient Libyans, and at least some of these people seem to have engaged in trade with the outside world. (For a more complete review of the points treated here see O'Connor, forthcoming.)

Limited archaeological evidence supports much of this general and incomplete picture of life among the Late Bronze Age Libyans. Digging in Cyrenaica, directly west of Mar- marica, the late British prehistorian C.B.M. McBurney discovered deposits dated to the 3rd and 2nd millennium B.C. in the cave shelter at Huna Fteha (Fig. 2: McBurney 1990). The cave shelters were used by local people to document the material culture of the cave’s occupants, McBurney did identify remains of domesticated coasts, and the artifacts gave little indication of contact between this particular group of Libyans and Pharaonic Egypt. This is contrary to what we might have expected, given the prominence of coastal tribes in Egyptian texts and reliefs.

To summarize, when excavation began at Bates Island, we had a general picture of Late Bronze Age Libyan life. The peoples residing in the coastal settlements of Bates Island and Muraa Maruts would have been members of a semi-nomadic tribe, who moved with the seasons to take advantage of widely scattered resources. Their economy would have been based mainly on pastoralism, supplemented by small-scale agriculture. Though basically self-sufficient, these Libyans probably engaged in some trade with other peoples. Relations with foreigners might have been dominated by the Libyans’ interaction with their powerful and wealthy neighbors to the east—Pharaonic Egypt—although McBurney’s finds in Cyrenaica would caution against that assumption.

Ostrich Eggshell From Bates’ Island

The distribution of ostriches was much broader in the past than it is today, extending in Bronze Age times from North Africa, across the Middle East, to the Far East. In Egypt, they persisted as late as the end of the 19th century. Given the presence of ostrich birds in the coastal region near Bates’ Island in antiquity, it seems highly likely that the shells recovered from this small isolated outpost were obtained locally rather than from more distant regions.

Seven of the fifteen ostrich eggshell fragments found on Bates’ Island in 1955 occurred in pure Bronze Age contexts dated to the 14th century B.C. The remaining fragments were found in disturbed Late Bronze Age contexts in Roman Islamic, or surface deposits. An additional 33 pieces with a similar broad chronological distribution were recovered in 1987. The shell fragments from late levels may document the continuing use of such eggs, but they could also have been derived from Bronze Age strata which were disturbed in later
Ostrich Eggs

The exotic and easily recognized ostrich egg is found surprisingly often by archaeologists working all around the Mediterranean. Evidence for its use is found as early as the 7th millennium B.C. While it yields large amounts of protein and is thus best known as a dietary supplement, it has many other uses, and is therefore of substantial interest to scholars who study ancient art, crafts, trade, and religion (Canuto 1983, Finet 1982, Lauer 1928, Reese 1985). A survey of these may help us to understand why the ancient Libyans offered ostrich eggs as their special gift to the king—a gift that was presumably the most desirable of the products of their lands (Fig. 12). The shells at Bates’ Island may have been brought to the island by Libyans, supplying material evidence of their presence in the area. Second, since ostrich eggs were traded around the eastern Mediterranean during the Late Bronze Age, our ostrich egg materials could also be important remains of trade between the Libyans and foreigners.

The Ancient Residents of Bates’ Island

The 14th-century B.C. occupation on Bates’ Island was contemporary with the 12th-century B.C. beginning of an extended period of armed confrontation and large-scale Libyan movement east into the Nile Delta region (see Canuto, this issue). By the later 13th and early 12th centuries, migrating Libyan tribes were seen as threats to Egyptian security, engaging in battle with Egypt on at least three occasions (Conson 9. Bates’ Island, by virtue of its geographic location, would necessarily have played a part in any significant regional developments during the 14th century. Ostrich eggs as the overall role of Bates’ Island in Late Bronze Age events, the precise nature of activities there, and the significance of the fragmentary ostrich egg shell in such activities are all inevitably linked with the people who were using the site. The Libyans surely knew the site, and could conceivably have lived on it themselves, but this need not have been the case. Might the Pharaohs have located a small military outpost here, as they did during the next century at Umm El Bakhani just to the west of Marias Matruh? Or could the site’s occupants have been foreigners, part of a network of trading posts placed at strategic locations along the Mediterranean shores?

Despite the newly recognized presence of a major Egyptian pottery, we can probably eliminate the Egyptians as actual residents on
prove to be ancient (that is, Bronze Age in date), Shell Tempered Ware would appear to mark the location of the original excavations of the Libyans. Accordingly, we might infer that the Libyans did not occupy the island itself, but instead established temporary campsites nearby in order to trade with its non-Egyptian (and non-Libyan) occupants.

Pottery also provides the rather sparse evidence as to who the islanders were in contrast with the paucity of material of North African origin, the excavations recovered an abundance of pottery manufactured outside of Egypt, with Cyprus as the main source (Fig. 13a, b). Various Cypriot ‘fine wares’ are well-represented, but it is the high proportion of coarse ware shards, some of which belonged to very large storage and cooking vessels, which indicates that the small settlement was supplied and perhaps settled by Cypriots. Another intriguing indication that foreign peoples used the site is that the evidence that metalworking took place there. On the assumption that this skill was not likely to have been known to the nomadic Libyans, the Bates’ Island bronzeworkers must have been foreigners.

Combining our physical evidence of foreign residents on Bates’ Island with our understanding of Late Bronze Age trade in the eastern Mediterranean, we may suggest a function for the site in the 14th century it probably served as a revictualing station for passing merchant ships (White 1986: 83-4). The protected geographical location of the site, remote from other settlements in an area with an inhospitable climate, probably protected visits by foreign merchants. The northeaster African coast is at least completely without well-protected harbors, and the lagoon system at Marsa Mattru is virtually the only serviceable harbor between Tobruk and Alexandria.

Bronze Age merchant vessels traded between east Mediterranean ports doubtless sailed during the summer months when conditions were favorable; at this season, they would have followed a counter-clockwise circuit, in accordance with the summer winds and water currents (Fig. 2; White 1986: 83-4). Having set out from Crete on the southern leg of their voyage, merchants would have found at Marsa Mattru the first large, well-protected harbor in a relatively long open-sea voyage to northeast Africa. Here at Bates’ Island they would have been able to replenish their supplies before sailing to their home ports or on to more lucrative stops in Pharaonic Egypt and the Levant. The station was presumably staffed by a small crew of foreigners, perhaps Cypriots, who lived on the island during the spring to fall sailing season, protected by an expanse of water from the potentially hostile Libyan population of the mainland.

This picture of the character of trade in the east Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age and Bates’ Island’s place in that trade is, however, hypothetical, but it is strongly supported by a growing body of archeological evidence. Recent decades have brought to light physical evidence for the international trade route in the form of wrecksed ships and the ports they sailed from. In the 1960s, a University Museum expedition led by Dr. George Bass excavated a merchant ship which sank off Cape Gelidonya on the southern Turkish coast about 1200 B.C. This ship apparently went down after leaving Cyprus, in the midst of its rounds of the east Mediterranean trading stations as shown by its cargo of pottery from various lands bordering that sea.

While the Gelidonya wreck postdates the occupation of Bates’ Island by as many as two centuries, Bass is presently directing the excavation of a ship of similar character which sank near the modern Turkish port of Kaj (Cape Ulu Burnu) in the 14th century B.C.—the ship’s cargo included contemporary with the island settlement off the Libyan coast. The Kaj ship had already visited various ports throughout the eastern Mediterranean, since Cypriote, Syro-Palestinian, and Mycenaean pottery were on board when it went down—as were two complete ostrich shells (Fig. 14; see also Bass 1987). At least one example of a major Bronze Age seaport has been found, at Kommos on the southern coast of Crete (Fig. 2). Recent research at this Minoan site has yielded tangible evidence for that island’s participation in east Mediterranean trade during the 14th century, including an international range of pottery analogous to that found on the Kaj ship (as well as at Bates’ Island). In fact, it has been suggested the Kaj ship with its rich cargo may have been destined to unload the bulk of its wares in Crete (Poulak 1988).

Thus the Kaj and Gelidonya wrecks, Kommos, and Bates’ Island are different aspects of one phenomenon: the trading operations which linked the Aegean and the Near East during the Late Bronze Age. Between major ports and trading centers, ships would have stopped off at remote but well-placed sites like Bates’ Island, where their crews could have exchanged pottery and metal implements for shelter and basic supplies (see below).

In this scenario, the seasonal residents of Bates’ Island, as well as...
the foreign mariners anchored nearby at any given time, would have engaged in trade with semi-nomads who were living in the adjacent coastal area for the summer months. While imported pottery may have been part of these commercial relations with the Libyans, the foreigners had another valuable product to offer—knowledge of an advanced technology. We must presume that bronze objects, produced by methods unknown to the Libyans, were an important part of the trade between the Libyans and the people who used the island.

Exactly who the metal workers on Bates’ Island were is an interesting question. On the basis of his finds at Cape Gelidonya, Bass has shown that his tin miners traveled across the Late Bronze Age merchant ships, equipped to supply the products on demand in each port of call. Thus bronze working may have been performed either by a Bates’ Island resident, or by a craftsman from a passing ship.

The Libyans living near the revictualing station on the islet could have traded various items in return for the pottery and bronze objects. At such an isolated outpost, and given the needs of passing merchant ships, local resources must have been the primary trade goods, including water (of which there was none on Bates’ Island itself), meat, and various other foodstuffs and wild animal products—including ostrich eggs. Perhaps consumed at the site, these eggs also could have been carried off by the visiting merchants to be traded as novelties in other ports, eventually to be transformed into rhyta, dedicated in foreign sanctuaries, or offered in tombs in distant lands (see box on ostrich eggs).

**Conclusion**

Though in the past it has been suggested that people from the Aegean settled on the northeast African coast during the Bronze Age, no convincing tangible evidence has yet been furnished which would prove this hypothesis. Excavations by The University Museum on Bates’ Island have begun to provide material evidence which will help us to understand African-Aegean relationships in the Late Bronze Age. Most importantly, the site is yielding tangible evidence of interaction between Libyans and foreigners during the late second millennium B.C.