



# Eastern Desert Ware: fine pottery from an arid wasteland

Archaeological excavations in the deserts between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea have produced examples of a fine type of pottery which in the past has been associated with a people known as the Blemmyes. **Hans Barnard** reassesses the evidence.

Archaeological research in the Egyptian part of the desert between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea has, in the recent past, often had to be restricted for security reasons. However, between 1991 and 2001, restrictions were eased and several expeditions, in the course of their work, encountered a remarkable corpus of ceramic vessels now identified as Eastern Desert Ware.

Most of the contexts in which Eastern Desert Ware was found could be dated to the fourth–sixth centuries AD by associated pottery, coins or radiocarbon dates. However, this ware may have been produced as early as the second century AD and have continued in production until as late as the eighth century AD. Most of the vessels belonging to this corpus were relatively small bowls and cups, with proportionally thin walls, made without the use of a potter's wheel. Their surfaces were carefully wiped, smoothed or burnished (polished) and decorated with impressed or incised patterns. These were often remarkably asymmetric and frequently augmented with a white inlay or a partial red slip. Occasionally, slight modifications appear to have been made to the shape of the vessels to enhance the decorative pattern, or elements of the design were applied after the vessels were fired. With such a distinctive appearance these vessels must have stood out, especially when used as serving vessels, as can be inferred from their shape. The significant differences in technology and appearance between vessels from the desert and the pottery produced in the Nile Valley make it probable that they acted as cultural or ethnic markers.

Because Eastern Desert Ware usually constituted only a very small fraction of the pottery found, the majority being sherds of Late Roman (Byzantine) Egyptian vessels or imports, it has only recently become possible to initiate a systematic study of the corpus.

A connection had already been established between the pottery found in the desert and certain vessels from Lower Nubia, where archaeological research is no longer possible as it disappeared under the waters of Lake Nasser in the 1960s. Fortunately, many archaeological artefacts were donated to museums abroad after the UNESCO Nubian Salvage Campaign and collections of Eastern Desert Ware are now kept in the Naprstek Museum in Prague, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Museum of the Oriental Institute in Chicago. Eastern Desert Ware has recently also been found in the Sudanese part of the Eastern Desert (in Tabot) and in the Nile Valley (for instance, catalogue number 255 of the exhibition *Sudan, Ancient Treasures* at the British Museum).

Results from the new study of Eastern Desert Ware seem to disprove the former scholarly association of these vessels with a people called Blemmyes, which was based on an assumed correspondence in geographical and chronological distribution (see for instance *EA* 8, pp.16–17). It is not even certain that in the fourth–sixth centuries AD the term Blemmyes referred to an ethnic or cultural entity. The *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, a collection of historical texts on the region, includes 68 texts that contain references to the Blemmyes. In these texts, the

evidence of a Blemmyan language is limited to the names of persons and gods as well as the use of 'pidgin' Greek in some of the texts. Only 29 of these texts mention the Blemmyes by name, while in the remaining 39 the reference is indirect. The ambiguity of the texts further obstructs our understanding. The most reliable sources do not agree on the area in which the Blemmyes lived, their numbers or their life-style. Furthermore, Olympiodorus, writing in the fifth century AD, mentions the emerald mines in the



*Eastern Desert Ware from Sayala (KHM 76918 and KHM 77217, courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna) and Wadi Qitna (P835 and P840, courtesy of the Naprstek Museum in Prague), two Late Roman (Byzantine) settlements in the Dodecaschoenus (Lower Nubia)*



report on his visit to Lower Nubia but the only known sources of this gemstone were in the Mons Smaragdus area, far from Lower Nubia and indeed the Nile Valley. It is also noteworthy that the son of a Blemmyer mentioned in one of the texts is identified as being a Megabari in another text. A conclusion that seems secure, however, is that small groups of pastoral nomads roamed the desert between the Nile and the Red Sea in antiquity, just as they do at present. As today, there seems to have been some confusion concerning the ethnic units comprising these groups.

With only a few exceptions, Eastern Desert Ware is made of a rusty red to orange fabric with white mineral and very few organic inclusions. Many of the decorations were probably made with the thorn of a date palm, which has a triangular section. The inspection of thin-sections of a number of sherds, with a polarizing microscope, showed most of the inclusions to be poorly sorted, angular quartz or feldspars. The elemental composition of both the paste and the inclusions is currently being studied by mass spectrometry, but the preliminary interpretation of the data indicates that the vessels were made in a number of geologically different places. A series of experiments, aimed at replicating Eastern Desert Ware, has proved that the production of such pottery by nomadic groups is quite feasible.

All of the ancient sherds studied so far appear to have



*Eastern Desert Ware from Berenike (EDW 17 and 48, courtesy of the Berenike Project) and Wadi Sikait (in the Mons Smaragdus area, EDW 232 and 234, courtesy of the Sikait Conservation Project), two settlements, occupied between the 3rd century BC and the 6th century AD, in the desert between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea.*

preserved fatty acids in their ceramic matrix. As these are common in animal and vegetable fats and oils, the determination of their origin is difficult. It is also unclear whether these residues represent the first food to come into contact with the vessels, during which the matrix became saturated, or are the result of the trapping of different molecules each time the vessel was used. Possible sources of the organic residues include not only food, but also trash surrounding discarded vessels, and human remains decaying close to their grave goods. However, the presence of fatty acids in Eastern Desert Ware is interpreted as indicating that these vessels were used for food and not solely as receptacles for water or as grave goods. Recently a search has been initiated for proteins attached to the ceramic matrix and this may shed light on many of these uncertainties. If they can be found and identified, proteins will be far more specific than fatty acids.

The evidence summarised above indicates that Eastern Desert Ware is the result of the household production of a utilitarian ware by groups of (pastoral) nomads whenever the need occurred or the opportunity presented itself. Its occurrence in the archaeological record coincides with the large influx of traders, miners and quarrymen during Graeco-Roman times. Their interaction with the indigenous inhabitants of the desert seems to have provided the infrastructure that facilitated the accumulation, and possibly also the production, of these remarkable ceramic artefacts.

□ Hans Barnard is Research Associate with the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is currently involved in research projects on the archaeology of mobile people, ceramic analysis and Eastern Desert Ware ([www.archbase.org](http://www.archbase.org)). As an archaeological surveyor and photographer he has worked on sites in Chile, Egypt, Iceland, Sudan and Yemen ([www.barnard.nl/hans1.html](http://www.barnard.nl/hans1.html)). Photographs by the writer, reproduced (p.29) courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and the Naprstek Museum, Prague, and (p.30) courtesy of the Berenike Project and the Sikait Conservation Project.



## Museum Books

PO Box 852,  
Enfield, EN2 7XU, UK

**New, secondhand and out of print books on *Egyptology* and the *Ancient Near East***

*Catalogues & email lists issued regularly. If you would like to receive lists please get in touch. Alternatively, visit the website to view the wide range of books available.*

'Wants' lists are welcomed. Books bought – single volumes or collections.

Tel: +44 (0)20 8367 8973

Email: [shirley@museumbooks.demon.co.uk](mailto:shirley@museumbooks.demon.co.uk)

Website: [www.museumbooks.demon.co.uk](http://www.museumbooks.demon.co.uk)