

PREFACE

This book was developed from the ‘Rahmenschrift’ for the ‘cumulative habilitation’ thesis ‘Material Culture and Identities – Complexities of Identity Research in Archaeology as seen in a late Middle Kingdom settlement in Ancient Egypt. A Case Study’, approved in 2019, at the Institute for Egyptology, University of Vienna.

It is the result of an elongated period of research, first recording all the finds of a late Middle Kingdom settlement at Tell el-Dab^a, then understanding the archaeology and finally researching on the meaning of material culture and its relation to the identities of people and what to make of things left behind in antiquity and found millennia later by archaeologists. While thinking about the complicated nature of this relationship filled many books in the past, the intention of this book was to bring the many thoughts on ‘things’ of daily use, how they were made and who used what and how into a fruitful relation with a large number of actual objects recovered from a settlement of the late Middle Kingdom. The choice of the settlement in Area A/II at Tell el-Dab^a in this period as a case study within the framework of several archaeological theories is strongly influenced by the fact that excavations here have brought to light many artefacts clearly related to the Syro-Palestinian milieu, which has resulted in somewhat dismissive references in the Egyptological literature to that settlement being classified as a settlement of strongly ‘Egyptianised’ (acculturated) immigrants from Syria-Palestine. Such a view does not take into account the multifaceted image that the site, the inhabitants and their material culture actually deserve.

In effect, the importance of this rather humble accumulation of houses, people and items found in Area A/II, lies in the stage it provides for the inhabitants living here in the late Middle Kingdom, with contacts to both Egypt and the Near East. The features and development of its material culture provide several opportunities to utilise various theoretical approaches to its studies, by far exceeding the simple historical narrative usually offered.

Several of the approaches to the archaeological processes visible at the site suffer from a lack of data, either through missing comparanda or due to the fact that certain scientific data could not be collected because the excavation took place a long time ago and scientific sampling of various materials was, at the time, impossible. While some scientific data might still become available in the future, in the meantime this book offers a guide to thinking about material culture in a liminal space, without claiming to provide the only correct approach. In many ways it was a thought experiment to see what happens if some assumptions are not taken as certainties but instead are questioned and allow the material culture to speak without cramming it into a preconceived and rigid taxonomy.

As for the structure of this book, Chapters 1 to 3.3 formed the introduction to the collection of thirteen articles and one book previously published/in press constituting the original “habilitation” thesis. These chapters were expanded and some discussions were adapted to be coherent without the published articles directly attached in the form of references. For better understanding a number of figures have been added. The chapter on results summarises many of the archaeological details, which were originally included in the habilitation thesis but have since appeared in print as ‘Tell el-Dab^a XXIV. The Late Middle Kingdom Settlement of Area A/II. A Holistic Study of Non-élite Inhabitants at Tell el-Dab^a. Volume 1. The Archaeological Report. The Excavations from 1966 to 1969’. The second part of this report dealing with the excavations from 1975 to 1985 is in an advanced stage of preparation. Several articles also deal with aspects of material culture, archaeological theory, and certain object classes occurring in the late Middle Kingdom settlement at Tell el-Dab^a. This is the basis onto which the current volume builds.

I would like to thank a number of people and institutions making the completion of this work possible. First I would like to thank E. Christiana Köhler who hosted the Elise Richter Habilitation Project V147-G21 awarded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) ‘Foreigners in Egypt – The Archaeology of Culture Contact in an Egyptian Settlement’ at the Institute for Egyptology, University of Vienna. It all began with this project and much of the work to be found in the following chapters was undertaken in the years 2010–2014. Further, E.C. Köhler unconditionally supported the habilitation process at the University of Vienna and helped to obtain the necessary requirements in various other ways.

For encouraging me to actually contemplate my work already done and to structure it as a ‘cumulative habilitation’ thesis I cannot thank enough Brigitte Mazohl, who, with one glance at my bibliography, said with great conviction: “Your habilitation thesis is basically already there.” Invaluable help in the process was also provided by Katharina Rebay-Salisbury, Irmgard Hein and the Mentoring Programme of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

During my time at the Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences with the START Project Y754-G19 ‘Beyond Politics – Material Culture in Second Intermediate Period Egypt and Nubia’, awarded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), and as leader of the research group ‘Material Culture in Egypt and Nubia’ I was always supported by the Director Barbara Horejs. My fellow members of ‘*A dialogue with things*’ (the ‘material culture reading group’), namely Natasha Ayers, Aaron de Souza, Lucia Hulková, Christian Knoblauch, Uroš Matić and Vera Müller, discussed a number of topics occurring in the following pages and always provided food for thought especially about our entangled identities. The same holds true for the attendees of the interdisciplinary study day ‘*Documenting Material Culture*’ which highlighted dramatically how conditioned the recording method of material culture is by one’s own discipline. Here I would like particularly to thank Hubert Feiglstorfer for attending this workshop. ‘The *Zentral-Café*’, a discussion group organised by Reinhard Jung, deals with topics connected to economic matters in the widest sense and I would like to thank him and the whole group for covering a lot of ground over the years and taking me on these travels.

Further I would like to express my thanks to the series editors and the publication committee of the Austrian Academy of Sciences for accepting the manuscript for publication. I would like to thank the Board of Trustees of the Holzhausen-Legat and OREA to award funds towards the editing and printing costs for this book.

I would like to thank the excavator of Tell el-Dabʿa Manfred Bietak for allowing me to study and publish the late Middle Kingdom material from Area A/II, which provides the basis of this book. To Irene Forstner-Müller, Director of the Austrian Institute for Archaeology, Cairo Branch, I extend my thanks for institutional support.

To James Goff and Gerald Moers I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks for many formal and informal discussions on various topics including migration, identities and nationalism.

For providing literature I would further like to thank Reinhard Jung, Claus Jurman, Vera Müller and Katharina Rebay-Salisbury. Ulrike Schuh and María Antonia Negrete Martínez helped to realise the book in a very short period of time – thank you to both.

Vera Müller took on the task of assiduously reading part of this manuscript in an earlier version, and for that I am deeply grateful. Hazel Harrison undertook the task to copy edit the text and would I like to extend my warmest thanks for her efforts. David Aston read several revisions of this book and corrected the English, but, of course, I, alone, am responsible for any remaining errors. Most of all, I would like to thank him for his unstinting moral support over the years and for his putting up with prolonged absences on excavations and study trips to museums.