

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, questions concerning identity, and especially ethnic identity, have permeated Egyptological research and teaching themes more often than previously,¹ thus pulling Egyptology a bit closer into the archaeological mainstream, where a wider range of identities has been examined for quite some time.² But while sociologists and archaeological theorists were already asking whether ‘identity’ was a valid and useful category to research some time ago,³ Egyptology did not embrace such ideas so quickly. Right from the beginning, the theoretical preconditions for Egypt differed because leading Egyptologists following a long tradition, which considered the Egyptian culture as a distinctly homogeneous and bounded society.⁴ It was not deemed necessary even to contemplate a theoretical discussion of how permeable society, and culture, can and may be as well as how much external influence shaped the society located along the Nile. Instead, following a normative culture concept, the detailed level of information and source material necessary to research this topic – archaeological, pictorial and textual – was seen as a boon, ready to be used for discussion of the identity of ancient Egyptian people,⁵ as ancient Egyptian sources categorise their neighbours by means of pictures and denominations of other countries and their inhabitants.⁶

This can perhaps be explained by the ancient Egyptian practice of stressing phenotypical differences between certain peoples (skin colour, hair styles, dress preferences) in pictorial sources, which appealed as it was very similar to modern western practices to categorise people, although they have to be scrutinised in connection with ancient ideology as they represent ethnic stereotypes.⁷ Ancient Egyptian ideology also uses distinctively bounded cultural groups which appeals to the imagination of Egyptologists and this view is shared by many.⁸

Problems, such as the tentative connection between ‘culture’ and texts and ‘culture’ and archaeological remains, arose quickly in the earlier periods of Egyptian history as the nature of the evidence is more ambiguous and less frequent,⁹ just as in the prehistory in other areas of the world, whilst methodological

¹ A search in the Online Egyptological Bibliography resulted in 246 hits for ‘ethnic identity’. The distribution is as follows: between 1900 and 1960 there are 3; between 1961 and 1990 there are 55; between 1991 and 2000, 110 and between 2001 and 2017, 78 hits. In contrast the search for ‘national identity’ yielded 41 hits from 1991 onwards but none before. This result shows quite clearly that engagement with this topic in Egyptology rose steeply in the course of political developments in Europe during the 1990s when armed conflicts around ethnic identity broke out. Also, other historical disciplines began to engage with it because of political conflicts. Cf. also Halsall 2007, 45, for Late Antiquity; see Jones 1997, x–xi in general.

² Díaz-Andreu et al. 2005; Jones 1997. For a historical overview of anthropological and archaeological research into identity see Fowler 2010, 354–364, especially the development from the culture-historical, to processual and post-colonial theories. Not all of these steps were followed in Egyptology so that theoretical thinking is still not as developed as in global archaeology.

³ See Hicks 2010 for personhood instead of identity and Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1–9, who argue that use and meaning of ‘identity’ as an analytical tool is either too ambiguous or too strong to be useful. I would like to thank Claus Jurman for drawing my attention to the latter work (pers.comm. winter 2018/19).

⁴ Relatively recently the approach has changed but slowly: e.g. Baines 1996; Schneider 2003b.

⁵ See Bader 2017b, for a thorough discussion of the relationship between these source groups in the ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom.

⁶ Moreno Garcia 2018.

⁷ Loprieno 1988; Smith 2003, 4–5, 22; Liszka 2012, 72–76, 208–220; Bader 2017a.

⁸ Smith 2003, 203; ironically it may be viable to say that the ancient Egyptians followed a culture-historical paradigm.

⁹ E.g. Campagno 2008 with a simplistic approach to Egyptian material culture found in the Levant, where according to this interpretation many finds in Egyptian style signify a presence while a lower number of artefacts represent only general contacts, e.g. commodity exchange.

difficulties were not perceived to exist due to the widely available sources in the later phases of Egyptian history.¹⁰ Such sources are often not contemporary with the archaeological finds, for which they are cited as parallels, but are nevertheless used retrospectively extrapolating over thousands of years. Moreover, they were used in order to interpret archaeological finds, without much theoretical discussion. Some of these sources indeed report, about other peoples but, of course, only via ancient Egyptian perception, which is often hard to understand and is again filtered through modern interpretation. However one looks at it, an emic viewpoint can hardly ever be reached and thus the data being used are somewhat compromised. But that does not mean that simplistic reconstructions are to be preferred before a full discussion of the actual data, which are quite often ‘messy’ and so numerous as to be untamable.

Although recent scholarship aired reservations about ‘individual identity’ being a very recent western idea that did not exist in antiquity and warned about inventing identities, which have no basis due to difficulties with the nature of primary data, the theoretical debate with these questions is necessary because it needs to be made very clear that the past is equally as complex as the present but probably in a different way.¹¹

The approaches to identity research in antiquity differ widely according to the type of source material, and this is not restricted to Egypt but includes Greek, Philistine, Roman as well as early medieval identity and many more. In the ancient Egyptian context, scholars concentrated on the one hand on stelae and papyri¹² and the personal names they contained as well as assignations to social or geographically defined groups. Egyptian loan words as well as languages spoken were scrutinised.¹³ On the other hand the interpretations of material culture as a passive reflection of ‘culture’ were derived from mortuary archaeology and its *possible* meaning for the identity of ancient people were taken at face value all too often. The archaeological approach can be distinguished between the realm of the living (settlements) and that of the dead (single burials or more complete cemeteries) with early classification of ‘races’¹⁴ through analyses of human skeletal remains.¹⁵ Those two are further distinguished by the intentionality of the contexts versus post-depositional history. The division and tension between textual and archaeological sources influenced the approaches and research avenues as well as the results the respective areas provided. Often it is hard or even impossible to reconcile them.¹⁶ Textual sources and material culture underlie mutual misconceptions concerning their ability to solve problems beyond dispute: first that a text is the solution to all problems¹⁷ and second that only texts allow several interpretations, while material objects and landscape are delivering unambiguous messages.¹⁸ Moreover, Egyptian archaeology is still heavily biased towards mortuary data.¹⁹

It is important to not only stress single features (such as isolated ‘ethnic markers’ that might change their meanings over time anyway) but also to consider all areas of evidence in context: architecture, material culture and social and ritual practices.²⁰

¹⁰ Goudriaan 1988; Johnson 1999. Säve-Söderbergh 1951, 57, had already warned against using the distribution of Tell el-Yahudieh ware as a delimitation for the territory of the Hyksos. However, Ksiezak 2019 does exactly that, ignoring previous research.

¹¹ Insoll 2007, 13–15.

¹² E.g. for Egypt see Mathieson et al. 1995; Schneider 2003a; Vittmann 2003.

¹³ Johnson 1999; Schneider 2003a.

¹⁴ That race is a purely social construct has been established for some time; see Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 5–6. Cf. Bhabha 1994, esp. 236–256; Malik 2008; Rutherford 2016, 214–267; Raulwing 2012, for the ancient Near East, 262–264, with bibliography; Zakrzewski et al. 2016, 219; Smith 2018, 118, for the non-existent biological basis for any ‘race’ constructs.

¹⁵ Cf. Schiestl 2009, 200, for a critical opinion on assessment of race; Priglinger 2018, 28–29; Maaranen et al. 2019a, 340, for a critical assessment of ‘race’ based on biological criteria. See also Evison 2000, 280: “It is not possible to devise a racial taxonomy of humans.” Also Raue 2018, 10–11.

¹⁶ Cf. discussion Hall 1997, 142; Jones 1997, 40–45; Jones 1999a; Hall 2002; Antonaccio 2010; Hodder 1978 for historical archaeology.

¹⁷ Brather 2004, 570, 579–580, sees no realistic chance of researching emic symbols of significance for identity constructions without textual sources. Critique by Curta 2006 on this point. See Dietler 2010, 20, exposing “the tyranny of the text”.

¹⁸ Sommer 2017, 181–182.

¹⁹ As is Late Antiquity in Europe, cf. Halsall 2007, 27–28.

²⁰ Smith 2003, 8, 36, 136–187.

The identification of identities (especially ethnicity) continues to be revisited in various disciplines because researchers are often convinced their particular research fields would provide more stringent and unequivocal data for the discussion to solve it and prove one point of view once and for all. However, from the start it seems unlikely that one set of data can be used to prove a single underlying structure for a phenomenon with so many different outcomes in an unequivocal way and to formulate a single ‘law’ for all of them.²¹

Whilst it is impossible to present a complete overview of identity research from all interdisciplinary viewpoints,²² the historical development and some aspects which are important in order to be able to grasp the current debate in Archaeology and Egyptology are presented and discussed below.

This book aims to summarise the critical application of modern concepts derived from culture studies and other research fields which serves to deconstruct long-lived, static culture-historical paradigms in mainstream Egyptology that are still implicitly at work today and need if not deconstruction at least realisation and visualisation. The same holds true for the colonial origin of Archaeology as a discipline,²³ which lasted much longer in Egypt. While the current work clearly shows how interpretations of archaeological and textual research influence each other, the differential consideration of both leads to a more informed understanding of the reconstruction of the past instead of using archaeology and material culture specifically to illustrate a history or a narrative, to use a modern buzz word, that probably never existed. It is clear that some eras in the long Egyptian history provide more information than others which allow highlighting identities of the past to a differential degree. However, the dangers and pitfalls of using simplified concepts to explain the relationship between material culture and the people using it need to be highlighted.

The case study I have chosen, namely the late Middle Kingdom settlement excavation in Area A/II at Tell el-Dab^a, provides an example of archaeological data conventionally used to illustrate the immigration of ‘Asiatics’²⁴, who subsequently dominated and took over the settlement. The data set is exclusively derived from archaeology, but the interpretation of the material culture outside the culture-historical paradigm leads to a far more diverse and interesting reconstruction of ancient lives in a liminal zone between Egypt and the Near East. Because the settlement excavation did not yield any textual information itself, the same restrictions and limitations apply as for prehistoric archaeology, which lacks any written evidence.²⁵ Moreover, the long history of the site (from the early Middle Kingdom, c. 2000 BC, to the late New Kingdom, c. 1100 BC and on to the Late Period, 664 BC) adds information and data that allow a deep insight into the workings and long-term impact of contacts between social groups with different cultural traditions meeting, impressing each other and, finally, mixing (or not). It must not be forgotten that the basis of the historical interpretation, for which the archaeological finds at Tell el Dab^a are used as illustrative materials, is not particularly substantial.²⁶

The cautious approach to and use of the purely archaeological data from a late Middle Kingdom settlement (Area A/II) in the liminal zone of the north-eastern delta site Tell el-Dab^a/Avaris reveal the complex and fascinating processes taking place at the very start of a cultural contact situation between (at least) two social groups of people with differential traditions, material culture and identities.

²¹ Cf. Hicks 2010.

²² Cf. Halsall 2007, 35–38, n. 1 as well as Fowler 2010.

²³ Dietler 2010, 3.

²⁴ The generic term ‘Asiatic’ for ancient inhabitants of the modern area of Syria-Palestine and the deserts between modern Egypt and Syria-Palestine is not intended as a racial term, but is derived historically from the translation tradition of hieroglyphic writing in Egyptology for the ancient Egyptian word *ꜥꜣm/ꜥꜣmw*. Although it would be a milestone to change this tradition, for example, to inhabitants of northern/eastern lands, there is currently not much hope to achieve such a change for this shortcut, which is widely conceived as convenient.

²⁵ Written sources are not per se ‘better’ but require different approaches and questions (e.g. for whom was the text written? What was its purpose? Who wrote the text? When was it written, etc.). Such questions are often as equally ambiguous as archaeological sources. Cf. the comprehensive discussion in Moers 2013a, with bibliography.

²⁶ Bourriau 2000 is the best overview using textual and archaeological evidence to advantage. Traditional narratives are Wilkinson 2010, 182–198 and Van de Mieroop 2011, 126–143. See Schneider 2018 for an overview of common narratives on the ‘Hyksos’ and deconstructing them.

Simplistic reconstructions and the use of traditional and partly colonial culture contact models are based on the current reconstruction of a historical background derived from texts that are not directly related to the site and the settlement of the late Middle Kingdom at Tell el-Dab^a. They provide a kind of background picture, which currently almost obscures the actually preserved archaeological data and does not leave enough space for interpretations deviating from the currently accepted narrative. Much the same can be said for an uncritical and non-quantitative interpretation of the material culture, mainly derived from mortuary data. This approach is based on the assumption that the items of material culture²⁷ found passively reflect the identity of the makers/owners/users *directly*, which is very likely not the case (see below).

Thus, the current historical narrative of events in the late Middle Kingdom and the early Second Intermediate Period (c. 1800 to 1750 BC) in the Egyptian Nile Delta²⁸ proposes a steady (and probably repeated) immigration of ‘Asiatics’, who are identifiable by means of their mortuary customs and material culture as coming from the wider area of Syria-Palestine, although their exact place of origin remains unknown. It also remains not known whether they all came from the same place, which is not necessarily the case.²⁹ These immigrants settled in Egypt, probably due to their special skills (according to administrative texts unrelated to the site), underwent a degree of acculturation in a different and unknown place than Tell el-Dab^a, to which they came later and then – strengthened – overthrew a weakened Egyptian centralised administration during the later Second Intermediate Period.³⁰ This common place reconstruction falls short of understanding the complexities of this alleged process especially of its beginning, which should be represented in the three earliest phases of the settlement Area A/II at Tell el-Dab^a (H, G/4 and G/3–1). The present case study intends to open the reader’s mind to scrutiny of the material culture in its own right and let it speak. While it does not seem likely that the outcome of this particular case study will prove any *side* right or wrong, it will provide an example of insights gained by careful analysis of material culture available in the unparalleled richness and diversity from a hitherto unique site. Current research in the Wadi Tumilat and at other delta sites suggests a number of obvious differences, e.g. the choice of tomb architecture or cooking pottery.³¹

This case study will provide building blocks for a theory of the process of material culture change and also cultural mixing manifesting in material culture. Moreover, it will demonstrate the complexity of interpretations and prove that the questions asked could be more interesting than “was this pot made by an ‘Asiatic’?” and question what this information would tell us anyway. As an example, it may be mentioned that not all the graves found unequivocally follow Syro-Palestinian mortuary practices in the settlement Area A/II in Phase G/3–1. Instead, various cultural traits known from Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian cultural traditions are used in an intricate mix or even interplay.³² At the same time, we must bear in mind that the burial practices of people are nowhere homogeneous and exactly the same in every

²⁷ See Hicks 2010 for a thorough discussion of the field of material culture studies and its current developments.

²⁸ Usually such a sequence of events is not only reconstructed for the site of Tell el-Dab^a but the finds are generalised for at least the whole of the eastern delta and the Wadi Tumilat, although, only recently, detailed comparative studies of material culture are under way, e.g. by the Polish-Slovak mission to Tell el-Retaba and especially by Lucia Hulková.

²⁹ Current theories favour the northern Levant due to previous proven contacts and by imported pottery: cf. Mourad 2015. Name patterns of the personal names of non-Egyptians known from all over Egypt in the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period point to a diversity in origin of immigrants in Egypt quite apart from those people coming from Punt, the desert or from Nubia: cf. Schneider 2003a, esp. 112–115, 339–340.

³⁰ This paradigm can be found in Van Seters 1964 and is with adjustments still in use: see Bietak 2010. Cf. for a different way of looking at the historiographic tradition, see Bader 2017b. The later Second Intermediate Period is currently equated to Phases E/2–D/2 in the Tell el-Dab^a stratigraphy.

³¹ Cf. preliminary reports of the Polish-Slovak mission at Tell el-Retaba and the research project of Hulková within the framework of the START project ‘Beyond Politics: Material Culture in Second Intermediate Period Egypt and Nubia’, led by the author. See also; Nour el-Din et al. 2013; Rzepka et al. 2014; Rzepka et al. 2015; Nour el-Din et al. 2016; Rzepka et al. 2016; Rzepka et al. 2017a; Rzepka et al. 2017b; Hudec et al. 2018.

³² See Bader 2011a; Bader 2015b; Bader 2020 for overviews of settlement areas and the primary data. In Phase H no burials were found in that area; in G/4 only one burial of an infant was discovered in a small mud brick structure.

little detail as the normative culture-historical paradigm leads us to expect.³³ Particularly noteworthy is the non-élite status of the settlement in Area A/II in contrast to the earlier phases in other areas of the site³⁴ and contemporary areas of different layout and with a higher number of tombs (in Areas F/I³⁵ and A/IV³⁶).

From an intra-site perspective it became clear that not even all contemporary settlement areas within Tell el-Dab^a develop in the same way³⁷ and, thus, too broad generalisations, which do not even do justice to one site alone, must be avoided, even if that complicates matters and the way the material culture at the site is summarised. The material culture of all categories has to be presented in all its diversity to avoid its simplified appropriation to fit hypothetical reconstructions of events, which remain largely unprovable.³⁸

To achieve this goal, this detailed discussion of the enormous complexity of the related themes covers critical reviews of culture concepts and how these influence the Egyptological interpretation of textual, pictorial and archaeological sources in order to write history. The text frequently refers to the detailed presentation of the archaeological sources and primary data covering the three earliest settlement phases of the late Middle Kingdom in Area A/II at Tell el-Dab^a,³⁹ while previous work⁴⁰ explored the role and potential of material culture in the interpretation of identity and also looked at the methodologies available to obtain it.⁴¹ This is particularly important because much of the interpretational value of material culture, if used for identity research depends on the quality and detail of the recording and analysis of the ‘things’ people were surrounded with and chose to use themselves.⁴² Only relatively recently did the inclusion of the ‘context’ of objects gain more importance in certain parts of Egyptian archaeology, which is a necessary pre-requisite to achieve a more informed consideration of the material remains at one’s disposal for ancient individuals. The division into object types (beads, metal tools, stone vessels, pottery, etc.), the specialisation of analysts to their respective artefact type, and the subsequent isolated interpretation of these finds are some of the less advantageous legacies of Flinders Petrie’s method of publishing his finds,⁴³ which has as yet to be completely overcome to remedy the lack of context in archaeological presentations. The extent and degree of variation in shape, material and manufacturing technologies within many object types still remain largely unknown due to the habit of publishing typological corpora with ‘typical examples’ rather than full contexts. But knowledge of context(s) is paramount to the informed interpretation of finds.⁴⁴ This should serve as a warning against forcing objects and material culture in general into too broad sub-typologies without acknowledging those that do not really fit. Such a procedure may eliminate categories which might represent the very essence of the material development we are researching.⁴⁵ The identification of raw materials and quantification of objects in a given context also fall into this category⁴⁶ even if scientific methodology is not always available.

³³ Cf. Gramsch 2015. Cf. the publication of the tombs at Tell el-Dab^a: see Bietak 1991b; Forstner-Müller 2008; Schiestl 2009 where there are many minor variations in the burial customs and they cannot be considered uniform. The same is the case for cemeteries in the Nile Valley; cf. Seidlmayer 1990 for tomb architecture, etc. Unfortunately, to date there is no single research publication highlighting the subtle differences in burial customs in Egypt.

³⁴ E.g. the mansion in Area F/I: cf. Eigner 1985; Eigner 1996. For the cemeteries in its vicinity, cf. Schiestl 2009.

³⁵ See Müller 2012.

³⁶ See Bietak/Hein 1994.

³⁷ See Bader 2011a for a summary of the comparison between two contemporary excavation areas.

³⁸ Cf. Burke 2019 and the selective choice of certain patterns of cultural behaviour used to support his arguments, while ignoring others.

³⁹ Bader 2020; Bader forthcoming-d.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bader 2010; Bader 2013a; Bader 2016; Bader 2018a.

⁴¹ Bader 2010; Bader 2015a; Bader 2015b; Bader 2015c; Bader 2016; Bader 2018a; Bader forthcoming-a.

⁴² E.g. Hicks 2010; Hahn 2005.

⁴³ In a culture-historical approach, one example of each ‘type’ is sufficient to gain all knowledge to be retrieved from material culture, due to the normative expectation concerning all other constituents of a type: cf. Van Oyen 2017.

⁴⁴ See Bader forthcoming-b on copying, imitating and transposition of objects and their differential interpretations as well as their pitfalls.

⁴⁵ See Langin-Hooper 2013.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bader 2010; Bader 2015b; Bader 2016.

Nevertheless the objects still need to be studied in depth. Besides, it is absolutely crucial to know the frequency of certain phenomena in these contexts (e.g. local copies, foreign imports, etc.), otherwise singular finds may appear more frequent than they are due to their objective or subjective importance and create a distorted picture.⁴⁷ Classic research methodology using parallels to features of material culture, e.g. certain ground plans of houses in a larger perspective is also instructive, but a ‘deeper’ look into the technological intricacies of production and manufacture (e.g. *chaîne opératoire*, metrological considerations) becomes more and more important as similarities in shape or type may be superficial,⁴⁸ and on closer inspection might turn out not to be as similar as previously thought. Such problems were encountered in researching domestic architecture, when it was realised that, not even in very recent publications, was there sufficient detail available on building materials, methods and measurements to answer pertinent questions. Despite technological advances in photography and 3D modelling, personal engagement and experience with the object is, in my opinion, vital to fully understand it and build a semblance of a personal relationship.

Various concepts of mixed culture and mixing culture seem promising in understanding the way in which groups of people sharing cultural traits interact.⁴⁹ Although most of the current theoretical approaches are derived from language-centred post-colonial research and, for one reason or another, have problematic often biologicistic baggage which impedes their unaltered one-to-one application to ancient situations in broadly speaking historical research, some concepts are currently developed from this body of thought, such as Philipp Stockhammer’s entanglement theory⁵⁰ or Richard White’s “middle ground”,⁵¹ which offer the opportunity to describe a variety of influences on objects as well as on contexts. The thought process of what ‘cultures’ actually are and how to describe them and their ‘properties’ continues and, thus, the debate about similar questions concerning historical cultures is unlikely to be finalised in the near future, all the more so since it is unlikely to find only one single ‘process’ or underlying ‘structure’ causing developments culminating in cultural mixing. This is, in a way, frustrating but also provides the possibility of developing entirely new research avenues.

A concise overview of the results of the work on the late Middle Kingdom settlement of Area A/II finishes this essay and points to further areas of research that can be usefully pursued in order to enhance knowledge about the way material culture should be viewed and analysed in order to inform about ancient identities.

⁴⁷ Cf. Bader 2016. As an example one type of cooking pot was frequently referred to in academic works and used as proof for ‘Asiatics’ settling at Tell el-Dab’a despite its relatively low frequency. Cf. Yasur-Landau 2010; Burke 2019. Bader forthcoming-a; Bader forthcoming-d will provide a quantitative as well as a qualitative presentation of this phenomenon as seen in Area A/II.

⁴⁸ Cf. Bader 2018a; Bader forthcoming-b.

⁴⁹ Cf. Insoll 2007.

⁵⁰ Stockhammer 2012; Stockhammer 2013. This approach differs strongly from Hodder’s much more universal human–thing relationship concept: cf. Hodder 2012.

⁵¹ White 1991; White 2011. See Lumsden 2008 for using parts of this approach in an Old Assyrian Context, and below for the more problematic aspects of this approach.