

4. CONCLUSIONS

Abandoning a normative expectation of ‘culture’ and giving material culture its rightful active place in the interpretation of the past leads to a multi-scalar view, which not only aims to illustrate culture-historical narratives by means of single examples of selected finds (because in the culture-historical view a single example a type comprises the essence of all other specimens of that type and can therefore be used as representative) but gets closer to the lived reality of the ancient people, be it by means of their finger prints on pottery or seals or through remnants of their social behaviour, namely assemblages preserved to us. While their message is never as clear as we would like it to be, the multitude, variation and combination of the things found need to be recorded meticulously to provide a means of interpretation that is crucial to the progress of the field and the increase of knowledge through study.

In the current case this means an abandonment of a too simplistic generalisation and paying more attention to the ‘untidy’ that does not fit into preconceived categories as the ancient people had their own motivations and creativity induced by social conditions rather than biological ones.

Research in borderland situations, where there is a border/frontier between two territories with two or more different social groups coming into contact and interaction with one another, whether under colonial conditions or not and whether with textual sources or not, provides good parallels for creative mutual appropriation. The latter concept can be found in the current case study, if mainstream Egyptology is prepared to open up to approaches from other fields. Such approaches can be used to understand better the past sources, especially archaeology. To make better use of the data collected and to obtain a more differentiated view on these, exposure to post-colonial thinking is a worthwhile exercise. Thinking about how and why ‘the way of doing things’ implements changes, is untidy and actively involves things in daily routine is instructive in the attempt to look at things found in excavations and brings us closer to the ancient makers and users of these things.

Instead of considering ‘culture’ as bounded and impermeable with rigid borders, the view of open situational ‘systems’ with the ability of mutual negotiation provides a more realistic means to accommodate the material culture created in ‘in-between’ situations neither exactly one nor the other, defeating ‘cultural taxonomy’, as it embodies creation not natural growth. The virtual ‘space’ between has been aptly characterised as ‘relational’ or ‘material entanglement’ or appropriation, concepts that may be developed further over time. In this way no creator of ‘culture’ has to surrender their creative potential to a ‘better’ ‘culture’ in whatever way defined (acculturation, ‘Egyptianisation’), and interpretation can be improved. These considerations in combination with practice theory may provide a differentiated view on the variety of social identities, discussed above.

It is also worth looking at the archaeological record for its own merit without immediately using the backdrop of historical narrative, giving other social identities some more room although the ethnic identity still dominates and I argue that this should be re-considered.

The conceived similarity of the view of the ancient Egyptians towards non-local people, as far as is known, combined with the existence of ethnic stereotypes and phenotypes led scholarship in the 19th and early 20th centuries to apply nationalist, modernistic ideas to the ancient people. In many ways parts of this thought construct are inherent in the culture-historical thought model, which is also very much a construct of that time, and should therefore continue to be questioned.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁵ Loprieno 1988; Baines 1996; Schneider 2003b; Smith 2003; Smith 2007; Moers 2015.

These constructs have been extrapolated from textual and pictorial sources to archaeology, which is still often used as mere illustration of historical events narrated by textual sources rather than as a source type to be interpreted according to its nature with the critique it demands. After all, the things that people use are an expression of their engagement with their environment as well as correlates of social behaviour. Material culture plays a much more active role than hitherto appreciated in Egyptology.

The almost total absence of textual and pictorial evidence in the current case study of Phases H, G/4 and G/3–1 in Area A/II allows only very general assumptions derived from these sources to apply to those archaeological remains in the late Middle Kingdom. The previously advocated identification of the *Aamu* from tomb paintings at Beni Hasan with tomb inventories at Tell el-Dab^a⁵⁹⁶ is of limited use for Area A/II because the tombs found there, dating to the late Middle Kingdom, did *not* contain such items and it thus follows that those individuals must be Egyptians.⁵⁹⁷ The gender divide in grave goods also has to be mentioned because this conclusion is based mainly on weaponry carried by men in the tomb painting. A generalisation, namely, to say all of the inhabitants buried at Tell el-Dab^a are ‘Asiatics’ seems therefore extremely doubtful,⁵⁹⁸ albeit the sample of the eight graves in Area A/II is statistically insignificant. I would like to continue to keep the excavation areas A/II and F/I separate for interpretational purposes because the differences between them in Phase G/3–1 and local phase c (for F/I), respectively, are so striking. However, archaeological research in combination with theoretical approaches showed that a one-to-one correlation of objects and identities of the makers, owners and users of the objects must be rejected because such cannot be sufficiently proven. This means that the settlement of Area A/II can be seen as a *stage* for two different cultural traditions (minimum hypothesis, but who belonged to which tradition – all Syro-Palestinian or all Egyptian? – remains impossible to say). The recent finding that two women buried in Area A/II most likely grew up in another place outside the delta corroborates the assumption that people from several areas lived together there, even if those areas cannot yet be identified.

The greatest problem for comparative research is the lack of settlement excavations in Egypt in the Middle Kingdom and in Syria-Palestine in the early Middle Bronze Age (MBIIA) to know what may be ‘normal’ for an Egyptian settlement in the Middle Kingdom, if such a thing, indeed, exists. Having established this drawback it may be more likely that each settlement mirrors the practice/*habitus* of its inhabitants, depending on the individuals living there and their tasks and purposes as well as environmental circumstances in the widest sense. That means that any differences *per se* need/should not be connected to ethnic identity but to varieties in practice carried out by various groups of people fulfilling their social and economic fates. Thus, variation must be expected beforehand, even without ethnic variability.⁵⁹⁹

The following will assess various influential factors concerning the current case study:⁶⁰⁰

- The time frame over which the sketched out changes (Stages I to VII) take place is very wide and it takes approximately 450 years from the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (Stage I) to the latter part of the Second Intermediate Period (Stages VI–VII): except the comprehensive change dubbed ‘regional turn’ involving material culture having undergone a process of ‘material

⁵⁹⁶ Bietak 1996a, 14, specifies them “as part of the population”.

⁵⁹⁷ The positivistic approach is the problem here.

⁵⁹⁸ Burke 2019 puts forward an Amorite identity for part of the inhabitants of Tell el-Dab^a identified as Avaris in the Middle Kingdom. This is a hypothesis, valid in the greater scheme of the early Second Millennium BC, but it cannot be proven by any archaeological evidence from Tell el-Dab^a. He argues that the Amorite merchants in Karum Kanesh are not visible in the archaeological record there, although they are attested by a text type found at that site. While such texts do not exist for or at Tell el-Dab^a, the non-local influence noticed in material culture does not prove a presence of Assyrian merchants either as at Karum Kanesh such influence was not observed. Thus, in any case, it would not be possible to prove this hypothesis by anything found at the site, cf. Lumsden 2008, 37, “obviously shared material culture does not necessarily reflect a shared identity”, but this sentence could be used in two ways: for the presence as well as for the absence of two differential social groups and, thus, reflects a dilemma rooted in positivism. Moreover, if “Amorite identity” as Burke seems to see it, is something that is of differential meaning in different places, it becomes a catch all and ultimately meaningless.

⁵⁹⁹ Bourdieu 1977.

⁶⁰⁰ Many of the factors used are inspired by Berry 1997; Yasur-Landau 2010.

entanglement',⁶⁰¹ none of the other developments happens particularly suddenly and rapidly in archaeological terms. Moreover, the archaeological sample is very well explored in comparison to other sites but, sadly, not complete.

- It takes a relatively long time (assuming the chronology is correct) to see the creative use of various traits from both ceramic repertoires forming a new body of material with neither completely subscribing to one or the other cultural tradition in the Stage model (see Tab. 1). A similar but not as obvious development can be seen in scarab production. In contrast, other artefact types remain totally unchanged: the “Egyptian” stone vessels are always recognisable as such (a lack of local stone or access to the usual procurement channels might explain this) and these stone vessels might have been reused to a considerable extent from earlier phases. Probably also reused were the small amount of jewellery and toggle pins. There is some evidence for using pottery items instead of stone for cosmetic vessels, for example,⁶⁰² but also the weapons of Syro-Palestinian cultural tradition do not enter a creative relationship with a similar artefact group derived from Egyptian cultural traditions, although there is a change from tin-bronze imported to the site to a local copper production in the later stages of the site (D/3–2).⁶⁰³ Whether the unchanged objects were used in any way differently than according to their respective traditions or in different contexts cannot be ascertained to date, but the use of things derived from both cultural traditions in the same contexts, such as the tombs, makes relational entanglement seem likely in some instances.
- Cultural practices known from Syria-Palestine and Egypt are also attested unchanged throughout Phases H to E/1, namely the burial of complete equids and sometimes other animals in front of tombs. While never common, the custom was costly and attests to some status differences between those who have such burials and those who do not. Also, temples existed with the respective ground plans giving away their cultural backgrounds. Again, nothing can be said about religious practices executed within them to date.⁶⁰⁴
- The visibility of immigrants and other social groups in general in the archaeological record importantly depends on their numbers: in the earlier history of the site (Stages II, III and IV) there cannot be much doubt that at least single non-Egyptian individuals were present at the site of Tell el-Dab^a from the late 12th Dynasty or Phase H onwards because they are attested by one name⁶⁰⁵ and one statue with a mushroom hairstyle (destroyed), while previously (Areas F/I, stratum “e”; R/I) no evidence exists to suspect the physical presence of non-Egyptian people. Perhaps a temporary residence for the exchange/procurement of commodities (expedition/harbour) should be suspected. In so far as this included at least a seasonal presence of non-local people must remain unknown. About the exact number of immigrants and their descendants in later phases nothing can be said – unless one suspects that no “Egyptian” individuals lived there at all. The high level of cultural traits known from other sites in southern Egypt makes a total absence of “Egyptians” after Phase H unlikely, unless one follows Bietak’s unproven hypothesis that the ‘Asiatics’ were previously exposed to Egyptian cultural traditions and ‘acculturated’ in a very short time at an unidentified other place in Egypt.⁶⁰⁶ But thereafter the dilemma of ethnic identification of

⁶⁰¹ A similar feature can be observed in other regions of Egypt roughly in the same time frame as at Tell el-Dab^a, and there is no evidence that any non-Egyptian behaviour was involved.

⁶⁰² Bietak 1991b, 176–178, fig. 137.9, Phase E/1 black burnished, see a photo in Bietak and Hein 1994, 189, cat. no 160. Pottery kohl pots are also known from southern Egypt, probably from the late Middle Kingdom or the early Second Intermediate Period, cf. Bader and Seco Álvarez 2016, 205, fig. 223e–f.

⁶⁰³ Cf. Philip 2006, 242.

⁶⁰⁴ Bietak and Vera Müller are conducting a detailed study on preserved temple inventories in Area A/II.

⁶⁰⁵ Schneider 2003a, 7–9, the hieroglyphic signs of the boomerang and the owl should be read as ‘Aam’ according to Schneider.

⁶⁰⁶ Bietak 2010, 139, this includes every subsequent wave of immigrating settlers from Syria-Palestine.

individuals by means of the objects present appears again. If one does not want to use arbitrary and potentially changeable ‘ethnic markers’,⁶⁰⁷ it has to suffice to know that members of both social groups were present and formed an intertwined/interwoven community with members of both parties (or more? harbour?) mutually negotiating their social relationship in the local conditions in something like a borderland or ‘Third Space’. This would include people who lived there for some time as well as possible newcomers from other parts of the delta, the Nile Valley and Syria-Palestine and descendants of mixed ‘marriages’.

- The evidence from the human osteological material from the tombs in Area A/II dating to the late Middle Kingdom remains inconclusive and debateable: there were only ten individuals, three of them small children.⁶⁰⁸ For the craniometric study, only three crania were used which were described in the individual entries of the anthropological study as broken and severely deformed by post-depositional processes.⁶⁰⁹ Moreover, it was assumed that all preserved crania from all tombs of all phases in Area A/II were ‘Asiatics’⁶¹⁰ without exploring a local variability of the data from phase to phase and then comparing it to other anthropological populations derived in the same way. This is a serious methodological difficulty since it anticipates the result, leaving no room for the possibility that the social group living there was heterogeneous in the first place, in other words ‘Egyptians’ may have been among the inhabitants of the site or that the population might have changed in composition in the course of the phases G to D/2 (approx. 200 years). However, it is currently unknown how this data is distributed, but current scholarship uses such measurements descriptively rather than analytically. Unfortunately, to date no other larger collections of human remains are published from Tell el-Dab’a in order to see if there might be a high degree of variation or not. Apart from this shortcoming, the notion that culture and human behaviour should be induced by biology is not tenable and must be rejected in accord with all modern genetic scientists (see Chapter 2.3.2).
- The cultural distance between Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian cultural traditions would have been immense due to the fact that the Egyptian cultural tradition used writing, even if only a fraction of the population could read and write.⁶¹¹ How many people we can expect to have been capable of doing so in the settlement of the late MK in Area A/II remains unclear. Other differences may be seen in mastering metalwork; some evidence allows the inference that at least minor metalwork was carried out at the site, but no moulds for Syro-Palestinian style metalwork have been found in Area A/II in the late MK, while this is known to have happened in other areas (see above). In terms of local pottery production, the Syro-Palestinian corpus shows more complicated forms (Tell el-Yahudieh juglets, dipper juglets) and a greater diversity of surface treatments and complex decoration schemes. The most complicated pottery type of the Egyptian tradition with profuse decoration is fish dishes, which seem to have been imported from the Memphis-Fayoum

⁶⁰⁷ The propagated abandonment of trait-list approaches (i.e. ethnic markers) called for long ago is still not achieved in Egyptian archaeology, cf. Kamp and Yoffee 1980. The very recent inclusion of Tell el-Yahudieh juglets as presumed markers of the physical presence of ‘Asiatics’ has to be rejected outright, even more so as no theoretical discussion even tries to justify such a hypothesis cf. Ksiezak 2019. Ksiezak’s study with an extremely restricted focus proposes ‘Asiatic’ presence at each site with such pottery, disregarding occurrences outside the delta and Wadi Tumilat and as if this could not be due to commodity exchange!

⁶⁰⁸ One child’s grave from Phase G/4 remains unpublished.

⁶⁰⁹ Winkler and Wilfing 1991, 43, no remark, 57, ‘ohne Hinterhaupt’ [without back of skull], 63, ‘Reste des Schädels’ [remains of skull], 67, ‘Cranium verdrückt und deformiert’ [cranium squashed and deformed], 74, ‘vollständiges Skelett, stark zerbrochen und deformiert’ [complete skeleton, badly broken and deformed].

⁶¹⁰ Not only the male ones found with weapons, for example, which may be a way to test this hypothesis. The overall number is too small for statistically relevant inferences. Cf. Zakrzewski et al. 2016 for a more modern research design.

⁶¹¹ According to estimates not more than 1% of the population was literate, cf. Baines 1983, 584. Quirke 2004, 37–38, in contrast estimates up to 15% of the inhabitants of Lahun were literate given the special circumstances of the papyrus finds in that settlement.

region. Thus, two differential traditions meet at Tell el-Dab^a, but the inspired material entanglement occurs a long time later.

- Status of the population segment: those people we know more about (Aam from scarab, owner of statue with mushroom hairstyle, both not Phase G/3–1) most probably took an elevated place in social stratification, but from the evidence in Phase G/3–1 in Area A/II no inference can be made. Whether the owner of Compound 11, the largest compound in all excavated areas (including F/I and A/IV, see Fig. 4), should be considered of the highest social stratum seems likely but remains unproven. Another question with relevance to status could also be asked, i.e., whether the owner of Compound 11 (tomb not found) was of a higher status than the one man buried with weapons in the settlement in the courtyard of Compound 1 (see tomb A/II-m/15-no^o9, Fig. 5). Moreover, how the highest local status would compare to other places in the Nile Valley and Syria Palestine is equally unclear.
- A variation in status/power balance may be deduced from the differential sizes of the houses in Area A/II although the differences are not huge.
- With reference to the post-colonial concepts mentioned above, the role of violence and warfare in the late Middle Kingdom settlement of Area A/II will be assessed because it has direct implications for the theoretical approach to the contact situation we are trying to reconstruct.⁶¹² The existing evidence does not directly hint at violence and warfare taking place in this particular area in the late Middle Kingdom due to the following:
 - there is no evidence for violent destruction in the three settlement phases discussed here in Area A/II. The deep ash deposits in some places⁶¹³ are likely to come from domestic activities such as craft production or food production;
 - there is no evidence for social structures used for the suppression of people in an asymmetrical power balance, such as small walled cubicles/cells or barracks in which people could be imprisoned;
 - the only male individual buried in this area was equipped with weapons. Whether this means he was actually a warrior or they signify his status⁶¹⁴ or whether these weapons may have been his booty remains unclear. Whilst those weapons could hint at domination, there are no other males buried in this particular area. This provides several possibilities:
 - the other males did not receive proper burials;
 - they were buried elsewhere;
 - there were no more males;
 - the other males died elsewhere and were buried elsewhere.
- there is no evidence for fortification or even just a city wall;
- the settlement is in a borderland between Egypt and the Near East, but was there some sort of border control undertaken at this particular site?

⁶¹² Dietler 2010, chap. 6, inspired these considerations.

⁶¹³ Cf. Bader 2020.

⁶¹⁴ See Kletter and Levi 2016 for a discussion of ‘warrior’ burials.

In summary of this section, it can be said that none of these possibilities can be securely supported by any archaeological evidence.⁶¹⁵

- The level of pluralism and tolerance in interacting societies is difficult to fathom for the seemingly illiterate society of Area A/II in the late Middle Kingdom (perhaps only due to waterlogging, which precludes the preservation of organic materials). The fact that variety exists in Phase G/3–1 between Areas A/II, A/IV and F/I might hint at tolerance towards burial customs that are not following Egyptian cultural traditions exactly although a certain extent of appropriation/incorporation or entanglement of items following Egyptian traditions also happened there. The historical, textual and non-site specific sources suggest an influx of foreign people of lower status. To what extent these individuals considered to be of lower status, many of whom would have been prisoners of war, would have been able to influence the ‘way of doing things’ of the superior power remains unexplained in the culture-historical narrative. This situation contrasts with that of the more ‘international’ New Kingdom, about which much more information concerning foreign elite individuals, contacts and relations exists.
- Schneider⁶¹⁶ used marriage patterns for the application of acculturation theories, but this cannot be utilised for Area A/II in the late Middle Kingdom as the connection of a known non-Egyptian individual in Egyptian society to the objects that he or she used, unfortunately, does not exist for scrutiny. Ideally, such a case could be studied in terms of which ‘things’ were used: Egyptian things, imported things, ‘entangled’ things or local things. Even if we had that information it would not need to form a rule or a ‘law’ as this constitutes an individual level with its own *habitus* that is influenced by dispositions and circumstances within various social groups from childhood onwards and there may well have been diverse experiences at work. It could also be interpreted to fit more or less the “middle ground” model, perhaps, although children of mixed ‘marriages’ of Aamu and Egyptian people are no longer recognisable in textual evidence due to the habit of giving such individuals Egyptian names, but that says nothing about their actual behaviour and is thus inaccessible to us.

The result of the case study is that neither of the two well-known cultural traditions completely disappears and we do not know exactly who the actors were because no names are preserved. In the published cemeteries of Stages III, IV and V (specifically in Phases G/3–1, but also in F and E/3) enough variation can be observed in the burial customs to remain uncertain as to who belonged to which cultural group, ‘Egyptian’ or ‘Asiatic’, from an etic viewpoint anyway. Such variation also serves to highlight the normative culture-historical understanding as unsuitable because generalisations do not do the variation of the actual facts any justice. Thus, acculturation models are not ideal for the situation at Tell el-Dab’a as described, although some stages might fit an acculturation model, namely where adaptation can be observed, e.g. the owner of the statue with the mushroom hairstyle from Phase H and that of the Aamu scarab in Phase F. At least two members of this local social group chose the ‘Egyptian’ way of expressing their alterity from the Egyptian viewpoint. The question of whether this choice of two individuals of conceived higher status can be extrapolated to all the other members of the social group, where we have no unequivocal evidence, must remain unanswered. However, it is dangerous to generalise such a vital question as it creates bias. Many traits of the earlier phases show that people did appropriate/adapt various elements from both cultural traditions probably in relational entanglements:⁶¹⁷ weapons, paired animals in front of the tomb. However, at the same time the deceased people buried have been given

⁶¹⁵ Of course, it is appealing to our modern minds to study peaceful communities, but how peaceful this particular one was in the late Middle Kingdom cannot be remotely estimated.

⁶¹⁶ Schneider 2003a, 291–315, with all its uncertainties due to imprecise descriptions of blood relationships.

⁶¹⁷ Although the objects were found together, mostly as burial gifts in tombs, it remains unclear whether usage differed from their traditional backgrounds.

Egyptian-style cosmetic vessels and other cosmetic implements such as mirrors and tweezers, Egyptian amulets specifically as burial gifts which shows that Egyptian popular beliefs were at least used by the local population. Does that make them Egyptians appropriating Syro-Palestinian objects or Syro-Palestinian immigrants acculturating ('Egyptianising')? In addition, status may play a major role in this consideration, namely, why were certain individuals equipped with certain objects by their surviving kin. Another point to consider is looting: although the data set is not bad, it is not perfect either because massive looting diminishes the dataset of the tombs of all phases but not to the same degree.

Even the recent ($^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$) strontium isotope ratio study does not solve this dilemma, on the contrary. The result of the strontium isotope analysis suggests that the individual buried in tomb A/II-n/16-no 2, buried in a contracted position with shoulders on the ground (Fig. 7d) grew up in the delta, the same as the woman from tomb A/II-l/12-no 4 who was buried extended supine (Fig. 7a). On the other hand, the two women, A/II-m/15-no 11 and A/II-r/18-no 2, who did not grow up in the delta were equipped with a majority of Egyptian-style burial gifts and one of them was put to rest supine extended (A/II-m/15-no 11 with one leg up, not paralleled anywhere else⁶¹⁸), while the other was slightly contracted and slightly turned on the left side (Fig. 7c). Again the influence of the living on the dead may be underestimated, if we assume it was the dead person's wish to be laid down in a certain position.

Turning away from the culture-historical paradigm, the use of post-colonial models is problematic to a certain extent because necessarily colonialism, in the proper sense of the word, needs to be proven and the case study does not really provide this proof as there are too many blank spaces in the picture.⁶¹⁹ The concept of borderlands on the other hand may be applied whether a colonial situation can be proved or not, whether a frontier existed as a fortified line or not or whether it may be thought of as permeable or not. Thus, 'mutual appropriation' in a virtual or real 'space/place' is probably the best model in this situation because it saves us from having to decide beforehand if the individuals buried there were 'Asiatics' or 'Egyptians'. General acculturation theory seems to impose a circular argument in the sense that it was assessed beforehand, which cultural traits are 'Egyptian' and which are 'Syro-Palestinian' and furthermore, which cultural traits are dominant in certain situations. Following this the decision of the direction of acculturation is based on this previous assessment. This argumentative circle can be broken if we rely on the archaeological sources exclusively and remove the dictatorship of interpretation of the historiographic non-site specific textual tradition generally used to reconstruct the history of the late Middle Kingdom in Egypt as a whole and use it as an inevitable backdrop of the late Middle Kingdom settlement analysed here.

Following Yasur-Landau's⁶²⁰ assumption that the domestic sphere reflects the acculturation strategy of migrants, namely assimilation, segregation, separation or marginalisation, and applying that model to the settlement of Phases H and G in Area A/II (Stage III) when the Egyptian cultural traits dominate, would mean a) that immigrants assimilated totally (excepting a few burial customs and a very small amount of pottery) and b) Egyptian people would have had to reside there in major numbers to introduce the immigrants into the Egyptian "way of doing things". The overwhelming lack of non-Egyptian traits (or completed assimilation? to Egyptian ways) in the private/internal sphere of the settlement⁶²¹ complicates the search for 'proof for migration' in this case. Thus, in terms of material culture the private/internal sphere did not yield any substantial evidence for immigration – against expectations as this sphere was thought to be extremely conservative and less susceptible to change than public areas of life.⁶²² The

⁶¹⁸ See Forstner-Müller 2008, 71a.

⁶¹⁹ Cf. Dietler 2010, 18, which defines colonialism as follows "the projects and practices of control marshaled in interactions between societies linked in asymmetrical relations of power and the processes of social and cultural transformation resulting from those practices."

⁶²⁰ Yasur-Landau 2010, 15–17.

⁶²¹ The result of the Elise Richter project 'Foreigners in Ancient Egypt – The Archaeology of Culture Contact in an Egyptian Settlement', V147-G21, awarded by the Austrian Science Fund. The project used, among other things, Stefan Burmeister's approach of change and difference of material culture in the internal/external sphere of the life of the immigrants. Cf. Burmeister 2000.

⁶²² Burmeister 2000; Yasur-Landau 2010, 16.

argument that the immigrants had no choice but were forced to assimilate entirely can be countered by the archaeological record of the late Middle Kingdom settlement that does not provide evidence for a huge power asymmetry in plan or otherwise. A further counter-argument would be the small number of burials with some Syro-Palestinian cultural traits hinting at a slightly elevated social status. It would appear unlikely that they would be buried in such rich burials, had they been of low status or even less appreciated prisoners of war. It would be necessary for both of these preconditions to be present to put forward a “creole” community as commonly defined.⁶²³ Thus, this post-colonial concept seems largely inapplicable to the known circumstances of the settlement in Area A/II in the late Middle Kingdom.

Interestingly, the main object group, in which changes and developments become visible over time, is the pottery at the site. The reason for this concentration on products of the raw material clay may lie in its ubiquitous availability and its potential to accommodate creative formation processes that were perhaps not as regulated as object types made of rarer and more precious materials, which were harder to obtain (metal and [semiprecious] stone). The other exception are glazed scarabs, often made from steatite, which may have been more easily available than the former materials, although there is no known source close to the delta.⁶²⁴ Other expressions of creativity such as textiles and mats or leather objects are not preserved in the wet soil. While in the settlement, in Stage III, perhaps acculturation proceeds towards Egyptian traditions, as very little hints at Syro-Palestinian cultural traditions, the obvious ceramic imports result from commodity exchange. Only when local production of previously imported ceramic material starts (marginally in Stage III and more comprehensively in Stage IV) a change in the behaviour of the potters at the site becomes clear and, thus, a change in the cultural disposition. The question of why this change happens at this particular point in time, without an obvious new wave of immigrants, remains unanswered. But perhaps this is one of the “group identities founded upon everyday practices”⁶²⁵ that we see in archaeology (see also below) or some unidentifiable market demand provoking a new habit. Using the borderland processes as template, the mutual engagement with material culture may lead to new practices or the engagement between the social groups required the development of new practices and therefore objects necessary to conduct it.

Much of the historical reconstruction in Syria-Palestine and at Tell el-Dabʿa is based specifically on the belief that potters never change their *habitus* and ‘way of doing things’ in making pottery⁶²⁶ due to the way they learnt this craft by endless repetition of psychomotor routines thus internalising certain working steps by craft-learning. That changes are possible has been shown⁶²⁷ and therefore care must be taken in generalising such approaches. In order to be able to be sure of meaningful differences observed in chaînes opératoires, minute details need to be observed and published to present data for the evidence necessary to prove such points.⁶²⁸

It takes quite a long time after this Stage, IV, until a “fusion of traditions” with inextricable trait lines developed (IV–VIIa) and something new is created out of various traditions mainly in the pottery corpus (see above). This stands in stark contrast to assimilation, which is the total integration of ‘adherents of a cultural tradition’ so they cannot be distinguished anymore. However, that does not happen in the test case detailed here.⁶²⁹ Another difficulty is to have to prove first that ‘newcomers’ came, who then assimilated. The recent strontium isotope study details a limited influx of people who did not grow up in the delta in each phase of this period, although the numbers seem to decrease in Phases D/3–2 equivalent to Stage VII.⁶³⁰ In contrast, using the metaphor of ‘material entanglement’ or mutual appropriation, Stage VII is the culmination and materialisation of a pottery-producing tradition incorporating a long

⁶²³ See Bader forthcoming-c.

⁶²⁴ Aston et al. 2000, 58–59, central and southern Eastern desert.

⁶²⁵ Jones 1998, 47.

⁶²⁶ Cf. Bader 2015a for a discussion of scenarios.

⁶²⁷ Gosselain 2000; Budden and Sofaer 2009.

⁶²⁸ In this sense the claims about cooking pots at Tell el-Dabʿa are still not supported by enough published evidence, cf. Bader forthcoming-a.

⁶²⁹ Contra Liszka 2012, 239–240, who puts forward a quick acculturation of the ‘Hyksos’.

⁶³⁰ Stantis et al. 2020a, tab. S1.

local development of ceramic traditions. This model is based on the creativity of local individuals rather than on the immigration of more Syro-Palestinians. This seems corroborated by the limited results of the isotope study, the focus of which were individuals of Area A/II.⁶³¹

In the current case study of the late Middle Kingdom settlement of Area A/II there is no obvious trace of any more newcomers noticeable in the material culture and the only non-Egyptian trait is represented by a very small number of flat-based Middle Bronze Age cooking pots and a small number of tombs with some Syro-Palestinian traits – but they are not laid out exclusively according to Syro-Palestinian traditions. To be bold/heretic, it could be argued that ‘Egyptians’ living in the north-eastern delta acculturated to/emulated cultural traits from the north, which they got to know during contacts with the north due to spatial closeness in a borderland situation. This could be a very localised proposition which is only valid for Phase G/3–1 in Area A/II, but it will never be possible to prove beyond doubt either way with the data currently available. This thought experiment was just proposed to prevent us from thinking in too tightly circumscribed boxes dictated by historiographic tradition.

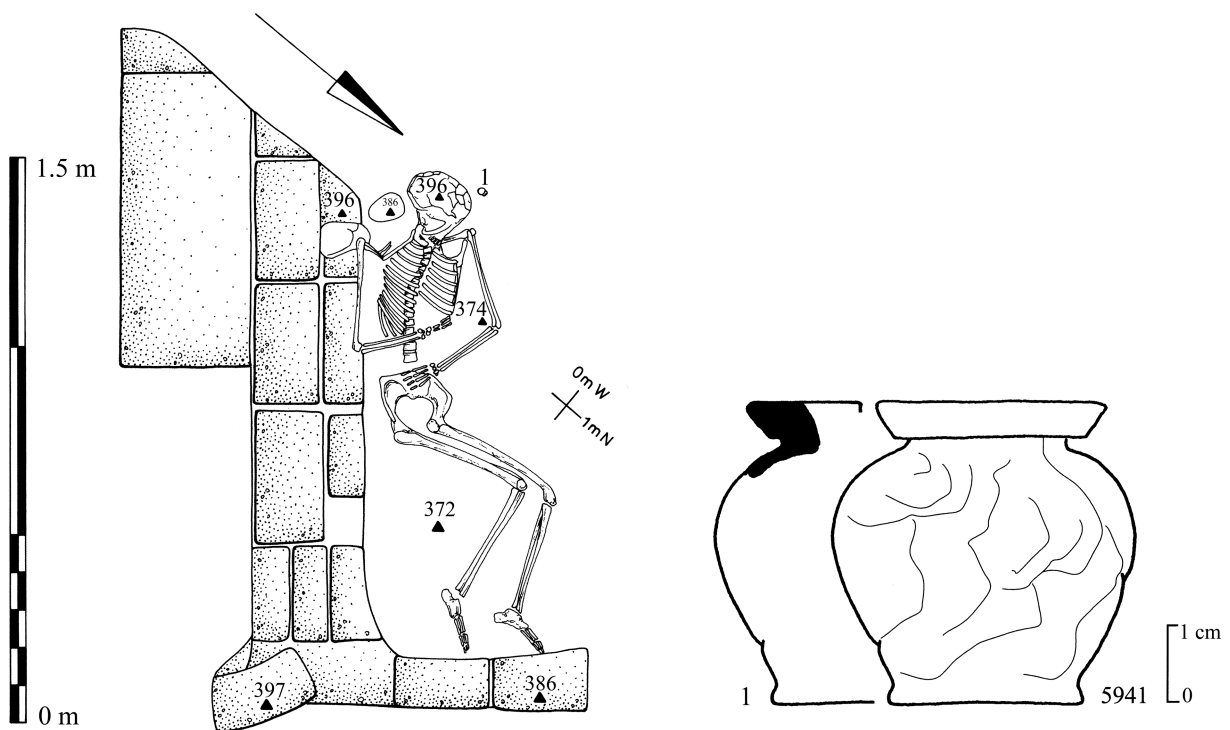


Fig. 16 Tomb A/II-r/18-2 (after Forstner-Müller 2008, fig. 77)

If we consider two tombs more thoroughly, the interpretational dilemma will become obvious because even a culture-historical approach does not yield a clear-cut result: in one tomb a woman was buried, with a corroded toggle pin and an Egyptian cosmetic pot, in a (slightly) contracted position with both shoulders on the ground (Fig. 16).⁶³² The decision as to which cultural sphere this individual belonged (or to which her bereaved relatives assigned her by placing these items into her tomb) is not easy to make. Isotopic analysis has been conducted on one of this woman's teeth and shows that this particular woman grew up elsewhere herself, whether in Syria-Palestine or the Nile Valley is currently

⁶³¹ Stantis et al. 2020a.

⁶³² Forstner-Müller 2008, figs. 77–78, A/II-r/18, grave 2.

unknown.⁶³³ However, the addition of a cosmetic vessel and the largely ‘Egyptian’-style tomb architecture exemplifies the use of cultural features from both cultural backgrounds. Apart from that, as stressed before, the biology does not influence cultural behaviour; the socio-cultural environment does. It need not be the culture “she was born into” because the genes do not dictate which kind of cosmetic pot one uses. The argument is circular: if we assume that she is an ‘Asiatic’, the Egyptian-style traits are those that she acculturated to, but if we assume she was ‘Egyptian’, she acculturated towards Syro-Palestinian habits. The same holds true for the woman in the stone sarcophagus with purely Egyptian-style burial gifts who was buried in a supine position (Fig. 17).⁶³⁴ The circumstances attest an affinity to Egyptian burial traditions. Does the fact that the burial was in a room behind a screen wall increase the possibility that she was of Syro-Palestinian ancestry? Not to forget the other local woman of A/II-n/16-no 2 (see Tab. 2) buried with some Middle Bronze Age cultural affinities who should be mentioned here again: while the pottery is entirely Egyptian containing sheep and goat offerings, she also had a toggle pin. In these three cases it becomes particularly clear that the acculturation model assumes too much from the beginning and that scientific analyses may shed light on biological ancestry but fail to explain the modalities of the use of material culture and this in turn is rooted in the socio-cultural traditions of any one environment/unit. It seems that acculturation theories work particularly well with the culture-historical paradigm, at least superficially.

Another factor in the thinking pattern leading to the assertion that people displaying burial customs or other Near Eastern traits can only be Near Easterners because of the stout belief that the Egyptian central authority would not have tolerated any other burial customs than traditional Egyptian ones to be used if it had been strong enough to prevent this from happening. But, after all, what we are seeing at Tell el-Dab^a is not a ram skin as Sinuhe states.⁶³⁵

The use of concepts of cultural mixing, in particular more recently hybridity,⁶³⁶ does not entirely abandon the culture-historical paradigm or the ‘trait-list’ approach, assigning the traditions, out of which objects develop, amongst others to ethnic identities. Defining ‘hybrid types’, also depends on a rigid culture-historical view, which does not do sufficient justice to the creative potential of ancient crafts people and the fact that culture is neither bounded nor ‘pure’. When people with a different cultural background meet, an exchange of ideas takes place and finds material expressions sometimes, if not always. Creativity and connectivity were likely at work in ancient times. It is rather a modern rigid imagination and the need to categorise things that invents neat boxes to file cultural features in order to label phenomena, which then do not need to be further investigated because everything seems clear about them. Thus, the presence of a (virtual) ‘space/place’ between cultures is currently the best option for a model to explain the findings of the case study which may be called a ‘Third Space’, a materialised borderland situation or one scenario of several depoliticised cultural entanglement scenarios (see Chapter 2.5).

Finally, I would like to advocate a more differentiated view on the inhabitants in Area A/II of Tell el-Dab^a in the late Middle Kingdom. While we will probably never know for sure, it seems rather unlikely that only ‘Egyptians’ lived there at this time as is the opposite proposition that only ‘Asiatics’ spent their lives at that site. Moreover, the possibility must be considered that even other individuals from other geographical areas found a home in this place, if indeed a harbour and economic hub developed there that early, which to date is not proven.

“Group identities are founded often upon everyday practices and the material domains associated with them”⁶³⁷ – and in the case of Area A/II in the late Middle Kingdom this seems to be the definitely interwoven socio-cultural flavour to be found in Development Stage III.

⁶³³ Stantis et al. 2020a, tab. S1. The researchers expect that the difference between delta and Nile Valley isotope levels will be marginal. Implicitly they seem to suspect an origin from outside of Egypt.

⁶³⁴ Bietak 1991b, A/II-n/12, grave 4, figs. 8–9.

⁶³⁵ B197–198, “you will not be put in the skin of a ram, when your grave is made”, cf. Gardiner 1909; Ritner et al. 2005, 62; Smith 2018, 132.

⁶³⁶ E.g. Budka 2018, 163–164. See Stockhammer 2012, 1–3, for a critique.

⁶³⁷ Jones 1998, 47.

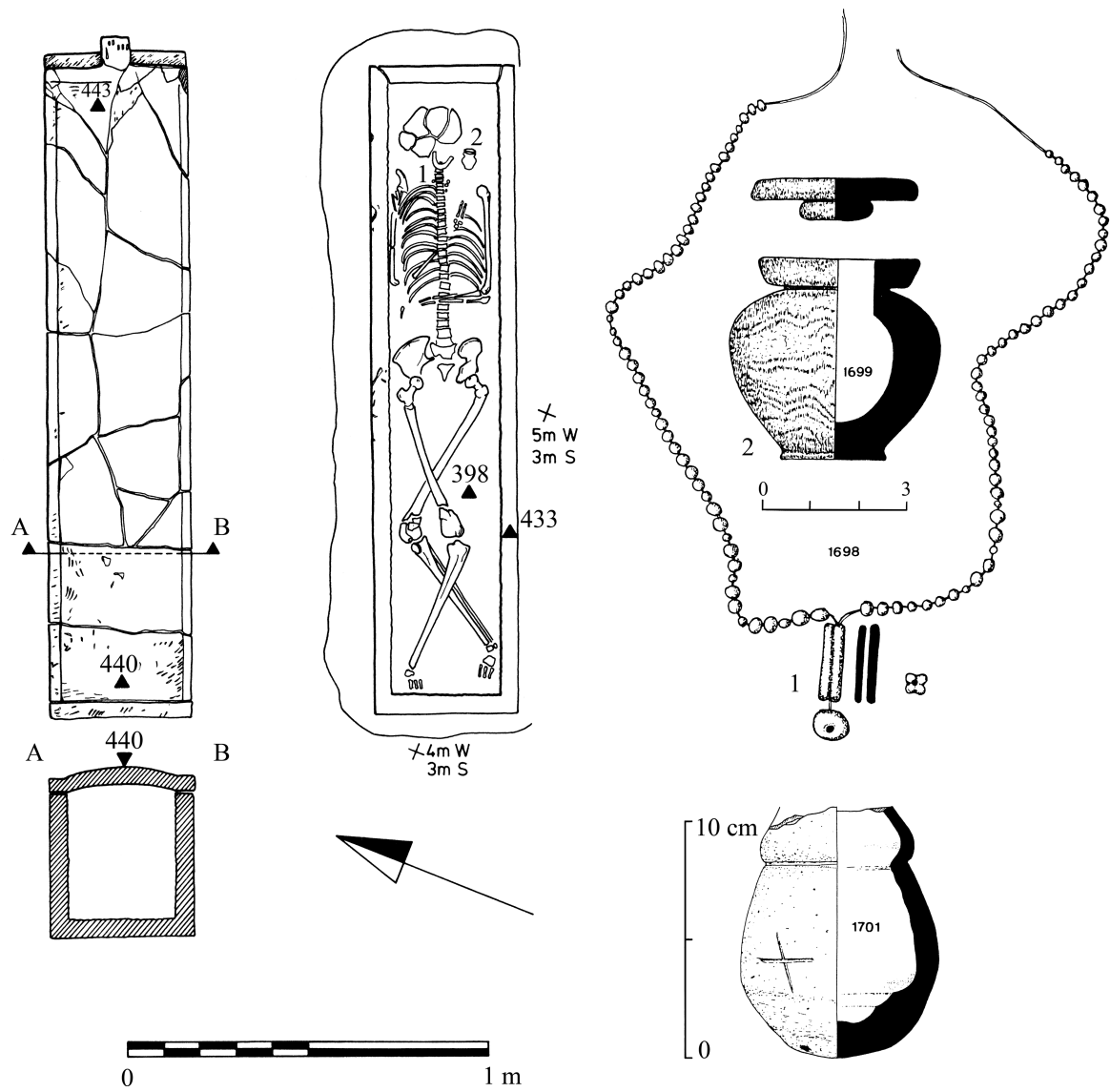


Fig. 17 Tomb A/II-n/12-4 (after Bietak 1991b, figs. 8–9)