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Initial results: The Sheikh Muftah occupation at Balat North/1 (Dakhla Oasis)

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Balat, located at the eastern edge of the Dakhla Oasis/Western Desert and investigated by Institut français d'archéologie orientale (IFAO) since 1978, is known mainly for its pharaonic remains dating from the late Old Kingdom to the Second Intermediate Period. However, approximately 90 m north of the 6th dynasty enclosures, an occupation area of the so-called Sheikh Muftah group was recently discovered. After a brief survey in 2011, the first short-term investigation took place during winter 2013. The excavations provided an insight into the vertical and horizontal stratigraphical development of the site, showing four main phases. At a minimum, the youngest phase, in which the main concentration of the Sheikh Muftah material is found, is contemporary with the Old Kingdom. Provisionally the site can be understood as a frequently occupied base camp with various zones of occupation. With no tent structures proven as yet, the combinations of fireplaces of different size and span of use and often accompanied by concentrations of fragmented bones turned out to be a specific feature of the Sheikh Muftah group at Balat North.

The material culture does not only demonstrate frequent contact between the Sheikh Muftah group and the pharaonic culture but also shows the differences between them. Cross-cultural influence is as yet only visible at the latter stage of occupation and might be an effect of the increasing pharaonic presence in the oasis.

Balat, situé à l'extrémité est de l'oasis de Dakhla/désert occidental, et fouillé par l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale (IFAO) depuis 1978, est bien connu pour ses monuments pharaoniques datés de la fin de l'Ancien Empire jusqu'à la Deuxième Période intermédiaire. Cependant, une zone d'occupation présentant du matériel appartenant au groupe dit de « Sheikh Moftah », distant d'environ

90 m au nord des enclos de la VI^e dynastie, a récemment été découverte. Après une brève prospection menée en 2011, la première étude du site a commencé durant l'hiver 2013. La fouille a permis de livrer un aperçu du développement stratigraphique vertical et horizontal du site, divisé en quatre phases principales. Au moins la dernière phase, dans laquelle se trouve la plus grande concentration d'objets du groupe Sheikh Moftah, date de l'Ancien Empire. Provisoirement, l'établissement peut être interprété comme un camp de base fréquemment occupé et composé par différentes zones d'occupation. En 2013, aucune traces d'habitation telles que des structures de tentes n'avaient été mises au jour, mais des combinaisons de deux types différents de foyers, de taille et de durée d'utilisation distinctes, souvent accompagnés par des concentrations de fragments d'os et de vaisselles *in situ*, se révélaient être un élément caractéristique du groupe Sheikh Moftah à Balat Nord.

La culture matérielle démontre non seulement qu'il y avait de fréquents contacts entre le groupe Sheikh Moftah et la culture égyptienne pharaonique mais révèle en plus leurs différences. L'influence entre les deux cultures peut seulement s'apercevoir durant la dernière phase d'occupation et elle pourrait être une conséquence de l'importance croissante de la culture pharaonique dans l'oasis.

Dakhla Oasis during the Old Kingdom

The Sheikh Muftah group is by now widely accepted as the representation of the indigenous population in Dakhla Oasis and its surroundings dating roughly to the 4th/3rd millennium BC (Hope 2002: 45-51, 56f.; McDonald 1999: 124f.; 2002: 113; Riemer 2011: 20f.; 188-194, fig. 159). Up to the present, only the site of El Kharafish on the northern limestone plateau has been published by Riemer in detail. In addition, various surveys by the Heinrich-Barth-Institut give an insight into the mobility of the Sheikh Muftah community outside the oasis (Riemer 2010: 547-713; 2011: 195-259 & 274-288, fig. 283 & 287, tab. 50). Approximately 70 known sites inside the oasis depressions have been almost exclusively investigated by the Dakhleh Oasis Project¹ (McDonald 1999; 2002). According to their results, the Sheikh Muftah group appears to be concentrated in the Dakhla Oasis but also has seasonal base camps and occasional short-term stops up to 80-100 km from the oasis proper. The distribution of the Clayton rings and disks even extends outwards to close to the south-western Gilf Kebir region. Based on the given environmental conditions and the archaeobotanical evidence, Riemer suggests a seasonal rhythm with movements outside the oasis during the period from autumn to spring. The oasis itself might have been used throughout the year but predominately during summer (Riemer 2010: fig. 17; 2011: 270 & 274-288, fig. 283 & 287, tab. 50; Pöllath 2011: 343f.). McDonald also states that the Sheikh Muftah group seems to be present throughout the year in the oasis, but no evidence points to long term and/or permanent occupation sites (McDonald 1999: 124f., 129; 2002: 116-118).

Contacts between the Sheikh Muftah group and the pharaonic culture suggest their coexistence until the latter Old Kingdom (McDonald 2002: 113). But nei-

1. See for the various activities of the Dakhleh Oasis Project (in short DOP) in Dakhla Oasis with annual reports and further bibliography: <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/archaeology/excavations-in-dakhleh-oasis-egypt>. For the Western Desert, see the work of the Heinrich-Barth-Institut; cf. for further information and bibliography <http://www.uni-koeln.de/hbi>.

ther the nature of the relationship, nor a possible integration into the local pharaonic culture is as yet known. The influence of the pharaonic presence in the oasis on the indigenous group is not clear since no change of subsistence was observed at Sheikh Muftah sites with pottery of pharaonic tradition (Hope 2002: 56ff.; Riemer 2011: 283). However, pharaonic remains dating before the latter Old Kingdom are rare (Mills 1999: 174ff.), such as a few sherds of the 3rd dynasty found in Mut (Hope 2005: 3ff.) or the hilltop sites of the 4th/5th dynasty (Kaper & Wilhem 2002: 81ff.). Further activities in the Western Desert (latest: Förster 2011 with further bibliographical references; see also Schönfeld 2007) may also have required a logistic and administrative centre in the oasis. But only the settlements in Ayn al-Gazareen, dating roughly to the 5th/6th dynasty (Mills 2002: 74-78; Mills & Kaper 2003: 123; 127f.) and Ayn Asil/Balat, the seat of governors of the oasis from the 6th dynasty until the early Middle Kingdom (Soukiassian *et al.* 2002; 2013; Jeuthe 2012), are better known. In both cases, remains of the Sheikh Muftah group have been discovered nearby (Mills 2002: 76).

The site Balat North/1

Balat North/1, app. 90 m north of the 6th dynasty enclosures of Ayn Asil, covers a surface area of at least 95 m N-S and 75 m E-W with ancient wells and channels to the west in about 35 m distance (**Fig. 1**; Laisney 2011: 35, pl. 1 & 2, fig. 36). The Sheikh Muftah occupation is well defined on today's surface by clusters of fireplaces, bone concentrations and a high density of ceramics and flint items. Eight of these clusters are provisionally defined as occupation zones (**Fig. 2**). They effectively represent the pattern of occupation with sizes ranging approx. between 175 m² and 471 m², with an accumulation roughly between 212 m² and 330 m². As large as Balat North/1 is in total, the size of an individual zone fits well into the range of other Sheikh Muftah sites known from Dakhla Oasis (McDonald 1999: 124).

Altogether 84 m² were excavated within three trenches². However, the following description of the site's development is strictly a stratigraphical one because the analyses of neither the ceramics nor the ¹⁴C samples are currently finished. Even so, the preliminary results of the analyses of the ceramics and also other finds allow a date for the main Sheikh Muftah occupation to be contemporary with the late 3rd/early 4th dynasty.

Within the trench in Zone 1 four main phases were established (**Fig. 3**). Directly on the virgin soil cultural layers of uncertain date were found (Phase 1), followed by a massive sand accumulation of up to 1.6 m in thickness with two phases. While the sand layers of Phase 2 contain little ceramics and only seldom concentrations of charcoal, the quantity of finds including some Sheikh Muftah ceramics was slightly higher in Phase 3. A small fireplace with three stages of use and blown sand layers in between proved that there were occasional but repeated short-term stops at the site. Finally, Phase 4 describes the main Sheikh Muftah occupation, which had only 0.4 m of a reasonable accumulation of cultural layers.

From Phase 4 on, the layers of Zone 1 can be directly connected with the development in Zone 2 with seven stratigraphical subphases defined. In

2. The excavation work took place in January 2013 as a part of the IFAO fieldwork in Balat by C. Jeuthe; E. Gossens and J. Hempel; ceramics: V. Le Provost/S. Marchand; SCA: Amal Mohamed Abdallah.

Fig. 1
 Balat/ Dakhla Oasis
 with the sites of
 Balat North/1 and
 Ayn Asil (after
 D. Laisney 2011).



Fig. 2
Zones and distribution of features at Balat North/1.

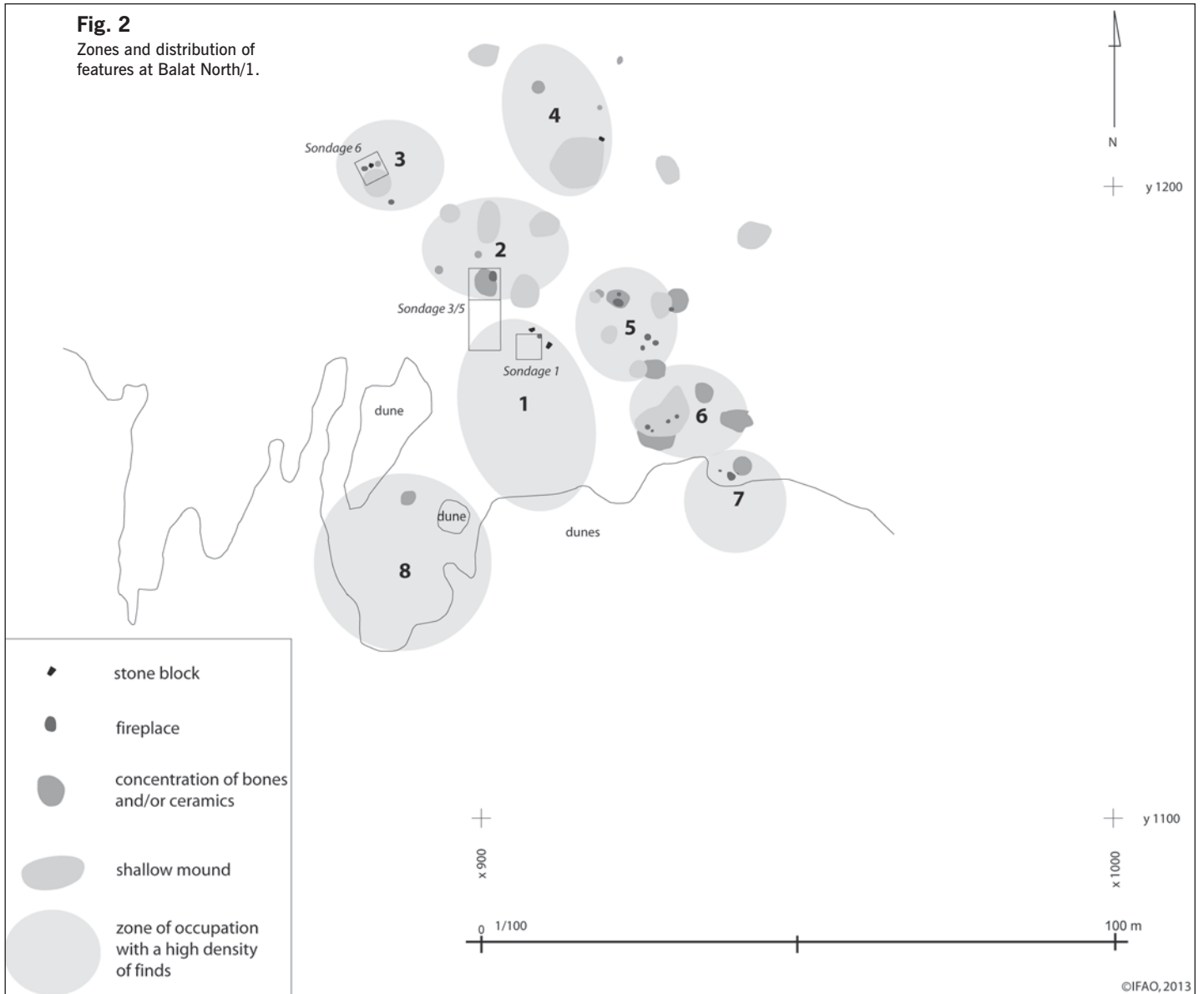
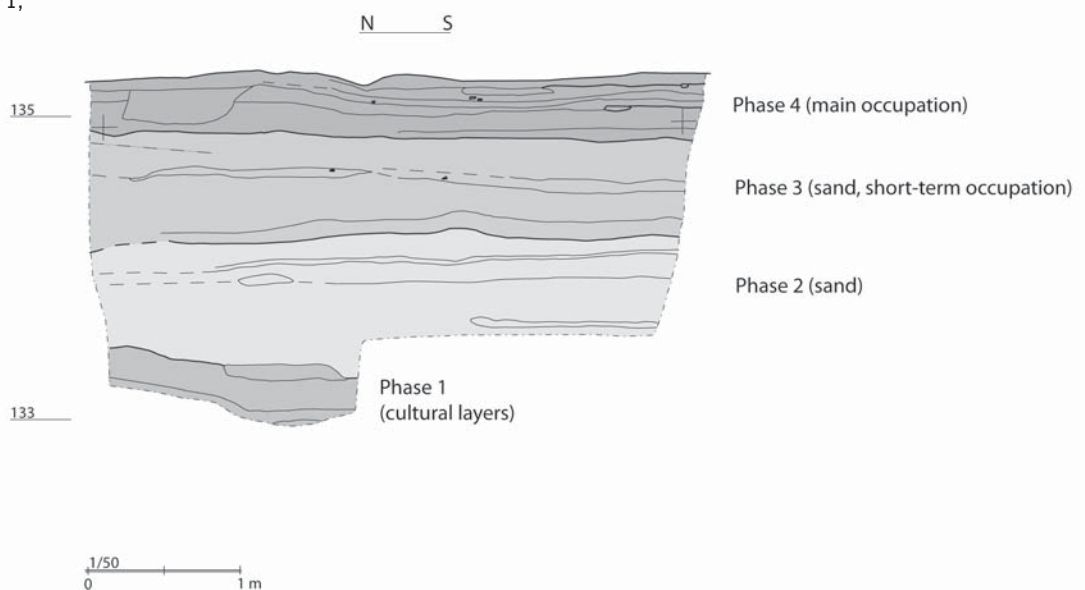


Fig. 3
Main phases in Zone 1, eastern section.



early Phase 4 a well defined occupation horizon with a repeatedly used fireplace was found in Zone 1 while in the area of Zone 2 only a few small ash concentrations and short-term fireplaces were visible (Fig. 4a). Thereafter, sand accumulation again took place in Zone 1 but an intensive occupation during two subphases started in Zone 2, including a long-term fireplace (Fig. 4b, c). With the following fourth subphase, according to blown ash concentrations, another long-term fireplace can be assumed for Zone 2 situated north of the excavated area (Fig. 4d). The occupation horizons did not show much change in the following development until today's surface but saw an increase of ash concentrations. However, an intensive and rapid accumulation of occupation layers with four subphases now took place in the eastern part of Zone 1 (Fig. 4d-g). Traces of occupation were still preserved on today's surface with a few fireplaces and concentrations of fragmented bones.

No direct stratigraphical link is possible for Zone 3. There, only one stage of occupation was present grounded directly on the blown sand, with a grinding stone still *in situ* next to a fireplace.

Clearly, during Phase 4, Balat North/1 was not abandoned for long periods but seems to have served for several camp sites. Long-term fireplaces do not only reflect the strong tradition of the chosen dwelling places but also the frequency of occupation. Yet, the question of whether there was a possible permanent occupation cannot be answered. In the earliest part of Phase 4, a reasonable period of sand accumulation can still be noted but it reaches only a few centimetres thickness in the end. The continued blown out surfaces may not have changed significantly during a longer time frame but which would allow, for example, for two fireplaces to be grounded on the same level but with some years separating them in time. Seasonal use or even a gap of several years would be not therefore being recognizable.

The most prominent features of the occupation are the fireplaces. They can be clearly divided into main fireplaces, with a diameter up to 1.3 m and several layers of ash, at one side and on the other side into smaller short-term fireplaces of around 0.6 m diameter. A combination of both appears all over the site and can be defined as a typical pattern especially as an often high concentration of fragmented animal bones and a complete vessel lay just next to them. It should be noted that nowhere on the surface at Balat North and its surroundings are a comparable combination of features present without Sheikh Muftah ceramic being visible.

The absence of post holes may not only be due to the given sand substrata, as long-stretching roots channels of larger plants, possibly *Acacia nilotica* and/or *Tamarix spp.*³, are well preserved. Accordingly, the effects on structures and the development of soils and substrata prove their existence for some cases during Phase 4. Another indication of environmental conditions such as the massive sand accumulation during Phase 2/3 could be explained with a stronger vegetation cover such as green grass or small bushes by which more sand could accumulate at the site. The increase of occupation during Phase 4 may have affected the grass cover, thus holding back less sand. As observed today, without any vegetation the sand is constantly blown away before any accumulation can take place.

3. Personal communication F. Darius, judging only by photos.

Fig. 4
Development of
Zone 1 and Zone 2,
schematic overview.

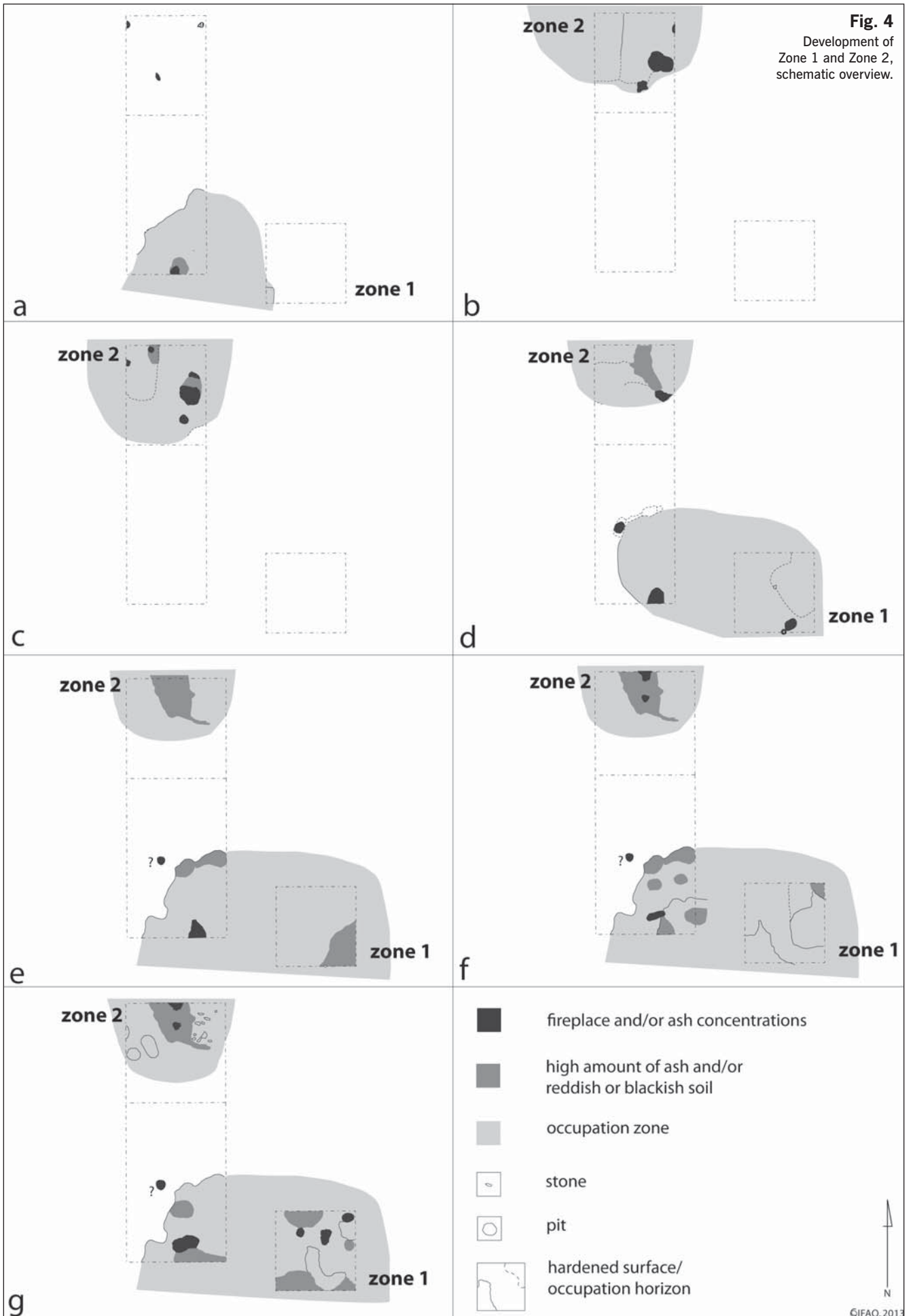




Fig. 5
Sheikh Muftah vessel,
surface Zone 2 (Photo: A.
Leclère, IFAO).

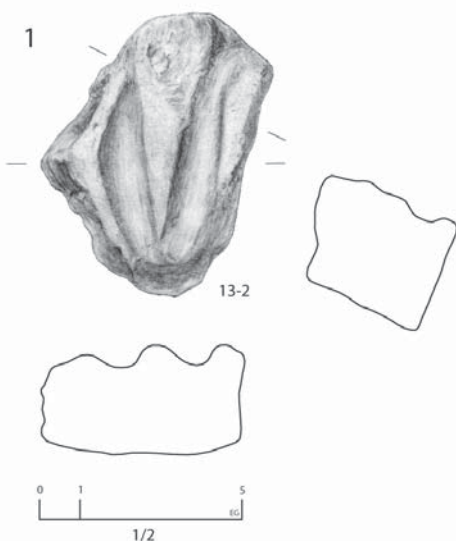


Fig. 6
Clayton disk, surface
Zone 5. (Photo: A.
Leclère, IFAO).



Fig. 7
Stone implements.
1: whetstones stone;
2: polishing tool.

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The material culture

A few sherds of pharaonic tradition appeared in almost all layers, demonstrating frequent contact between the groups, whilst the main part of the ceramic assemblage shows the typical fabrics of the Sheikh Muftah material as well known from other sites (Fig. 5; Hope 2002: 45-51; Riemer 2011: 56-73). Clayton rings and disks, apparently connected with the Sheikh Muftah group, were found in high numbers in El Kharafish (Riemer 2011: 62, 66, 73 & 266), but only a few Clayton disks come from Balat North/1 and mainly from the surface (Fig. 6). Besides ostrich eggshell disk beads small finds were extremely rare. Some refer to the pharaonic culture such as a tiny rim of a stone vessel or a few copper fragments. More surprisingly, six pieces of sealing clay material were found, unfortunately none of them with a preserved seal impression. Most of the 121 groundstone implements show little specific traces and/or shapes, such as a few hammer stones, whetstones and polishing tools (Fig. 7). Nine grinding stones were found which are also only known in low numbers from other sites in the oasis and El Kharafish (McDonald 1999: 123; Riemer 2011: 125f.). At Balat all were associated with the youngest layers or on the surface and all were made from hard sandstone or silicified sandstone. That is in clear contrast to the choice of raw material for the same items in Ayn Asil. There, a sandstone conglomerate or fossil limestone was used almost exclusively, which in turn hardly appeared on the Sheikh Muftah site.

Most of the flint tools and debris (altogether 13188 items, including 476 lithic tools, 298 cores and 12414 pieces of debitage/debris such as blanks, chunks and chips) were found on the surface, and less than four percent originate from the stratified layers. As elsewhere, tools were made on the well known opportunistic principle and altogether the tool kit, with mainly scrapers, simple perforators and a few knives, is closely comparable with the other inventories (Fig. 8; McDonald 1999: 122f.; Riemer 2011: 82-124). No single arrowhead was found.

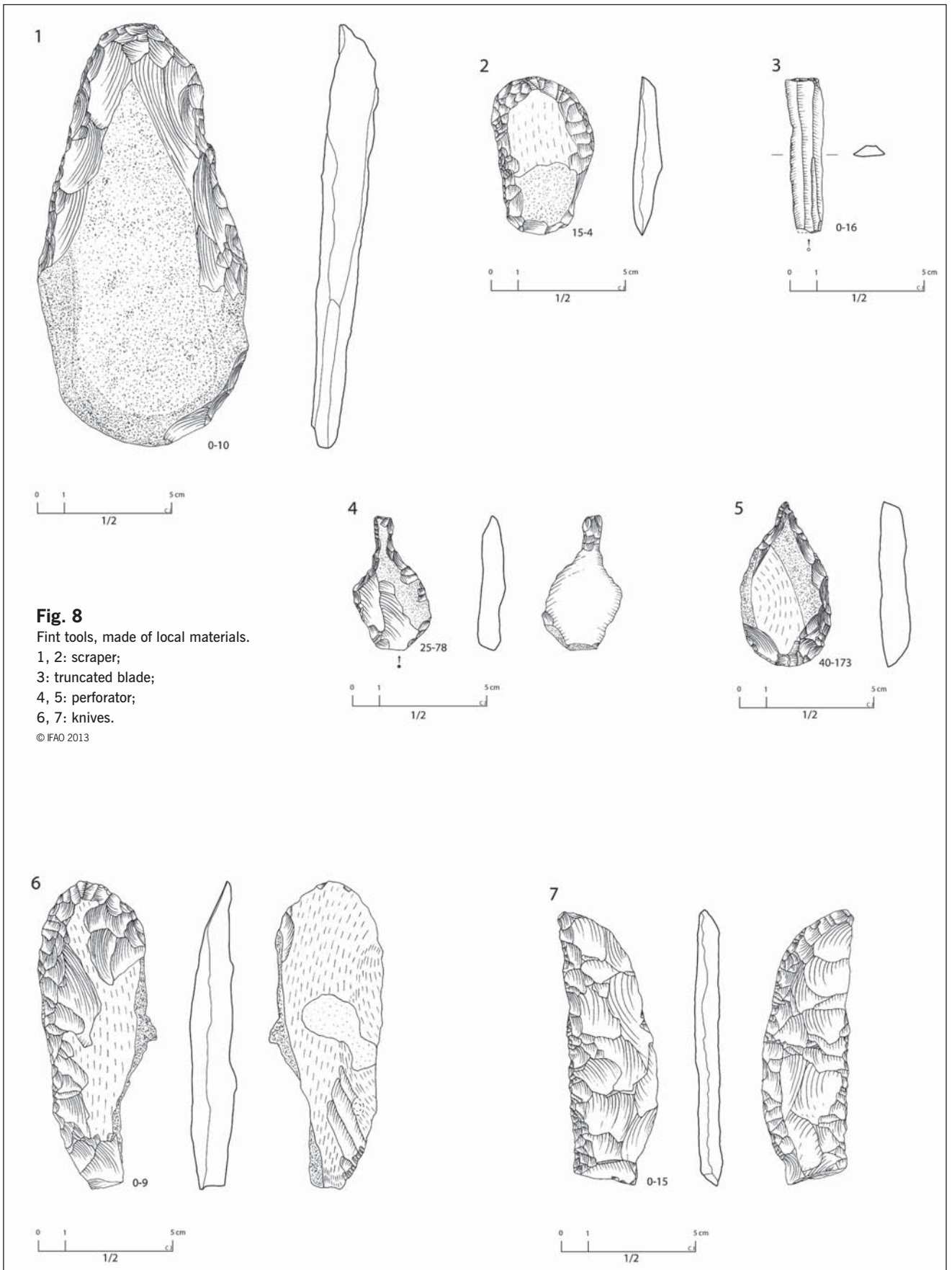


Fig. 8

Fint tools, made of local materials.

- 1, 2: scraper;
- 3: truncated blade;
- 4, 5: perforator;
- 6, 7: knives.

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Two of the only three sickle implements are imported and originate from the surface, referring without doubt to the pharaonic culture. While blade cores were absent, some irregular blades and “blade-look-alike” pieces made from the local material were attested, again in only in the latest layers and mainly on the surface, together with a few imported blades and knives. Hence, the local blades may hint to a cross-cultural influence, trying to imitate the tools in the pharaonic tradition. Local pebbles of poor quality were the main choice for tools, followed by those made from natural blanks of tabular chert, a choice of raw material well known at other Sheikh Muftah sites (McDonald 1999: 122f.; Riemer 2011: 74f., 122). The same strategy is also evident in the pharaonic contexts in Ayn Asil but a break can be observed in the choice of pebbles. The main variation of nodular flint in Ayn Asil, though also local, is more homogenous in texture and of a higher quality (Jeuthe 2012: 117-121).

Subsistence

Part of the animal bone assemblage was studied by J. Lesur but because of its state of preservation, less than 300 fragments could be identified. As observed elsewhere (Churcher 1999: 136 & 143), animal bones were extremely fragmentary which may be the result of a technique of food preparation in which the bones are broken into small pieces to fit into the cooking pot. This might be understood as a sign of economic stress (McDonald 1999: 129).

Within the analysed material, non-specific remains of middle-sized *bovidae* (64 %) dominated over wild animals such as gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*, 22%), wild caprines (*Ammotragus lervia*, 2 %) and possibly antelope (*Addax nasomaculatus*, 0.4%). Domesticated species such as caprines (10 %) were clearly less popular. Domesticated cattle have not been identified at Balat North/1 which contrasts the results from other oasis sites (Churcher 1999) but is comparable with those from El Kharafish (Pöllath 2011). However this may only prove that cattle were not frequently slaughtered in the excavated areas but could very well have been herded close by. Moreover, as the cattle bones from other sites often seem to originate from older animals, they might have served less for meat production but more for milk as livestock (McDonald 2002: 117f.; Churcher 1999: 136-140; Riemer 2011: 158).

While harvesting is rather unlikely according to the missing sickle implements, the grinding stones may hint at the use of cereals. Taking their stratigraphical position into consideration, they could refer to a growing influence of the pharaonic culture. Still all evidence points clearly to a pastoral nomadic existence, with a strong hunting tradition.

Conclusions

Occasional human presence and short-term stops were demonstrated for the older stratigraphic phases while the Sheikh Muftah occupation in Phase 4 was comparably intensive in scale and most likely increasing in size. Combinations of different features effectively describe the Sheikh Muftah occupation at Balat North and distinguish it from the other sites dating to different periods nearby. Yet the general character of the site must be provisionally understood as a base camp without specification for a seasonal rhythm or a certain purpose such as herding and or hunting. The intensive accumulation of cultural layers and the

long-lasting main fireplaces imply only short gaps but still do not prove a long-lasting permanent occupation. Furthermore, most of the complete silex tools were left behind in the youngest stratified layer and on the surface, whilst in the earlier Phase 4 mainly broken items remained at the site. This distribution clearly argues against a permanent presence.

However, the shallow accumulation of sand during Phase 4 makes the determination of contemporary/non-contemporary occupation in the different zones impossible. Consequently, some of the zones could have been occupied by the same group, which returned frequently to the site but changed its dwelling places. Still the long-lasting fireplaces could also hint at a contemporary occupation, e.g. a community splitting to occupy various camp sites. Yet the difference between a seasonal camp and an occupation lasting a couple of years cannot be established. Balat North/1 may indeed serve a seasonal area of refuge, perhaps particularly during summer when other sites outside the oasis were not used. Hence it could have attracted several small Sheikh Muftah groups at the same moment. As the occupation area is close to water access and with the most likely green vegetation, with trees to provide not only shade but also fire wood, the area may have been therefore a rather favourable place for the Sheikh Muftah group.

The most drastic change for the Sheikh Muftah culture, as we understand it today, would be the establishment of permanent settlement in connection with agriculture but none of the features and finds points to that. The Sheikh Muftah occupation site does not become a “pharaonic” village, but frequent contact can be throughout the span of occupation, increasing at its end. The imported blades, sickle implements and grinding stones only found at the end of the Sheikh Muftah occupation may also reflect the growing pharaonic presence at the oasis. Yet a clear change in the habits of the Sheikh Muftah group and their subsistence pattern cannot be noted, rather only a few possible additions.

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