



Marina Gallinaro: *Mobility and Pastoralism in the Egyptian Western Desert. Steinplätze in the Holocene Regional Settlement Patterns*

Firenze, *Arid Zone Archaeology, Monographs 7*, 2018, XX+180 pp., ISBN 978-88-781-4861-1

Stefano Biagetti 

Published online: 10 April 2019

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Mobility and Pastoralism in the Egyptian Western Desert represents the outcome of more than ten years of research carried out by Marina Gallinaro in the Eastern Sahara. The author, who has considerable experience with fieldwork and research in North Africa, focuses on one of the most problematic archaeological features from the Holocene Sahara, the so-called Steinplätze, or hearth-mounds, consisting of roughly circular concentrations of pebbles or stone fragments, often characterized by a raised profile. These features, which dot many regions of the Sahara, were first studied systematically by Baldur Gabriel (1987), who recognized them as traces of fireplaces left on the ground by mobile pastoralists as a result of cooking food without pottery. Yet, the scarcity of materials and the lack of associated archaeological deposits have so far discouraged comprehensive and well-articulated approaches to the Steinplätze. Far from simply filling that gap, Gallinaro's book tackles the Steinplätze of the Farafra oasis (Egypt) by contextualizing them in the broad cultural trajectories that characterize the Western Desert during the Holocene. Using both first-hand data and published material, Gallinaro explores how ancient communities reacted to

the climatic oscillations that ultimately led to the aridification of the Sahara, demonstrating how the Steinplätze, an allegedly elusive archaeological feature, can contribute to the reconstruction of the human-environment interactions in the past.

The book consists of five chapters and three appendices. Chapter 1 focuses on defining the scope of the book, its research objectives, materials, and methods. It includes a most welcomed and updated synthesis on the origin and spread of pastoralism in North Africa, notoriously one of the most debated topics in African archaeology. Chapter 2 follows by presenting a detailed background on paleoclimatic data and human occupations throughout the Holocene in the Western Desert. An in-depth screening of the available paleoenvironmental data and related radiometric dates allows Gallinaro to identify six main phases of occupation, ranging from 9500 cal BC to 2600 cal BC, characterized by local developments and common cultural traits. Chapter 3 represents an impressive summary of the current knowledge about the distribution of the Steinplätze in the Egyptian Western Desert. After having addressed the Steinplätze formation processes, Gallinaro considers all the areas of the Western Desert where archaeological research has been carried out to date, including the Nabta-Kiseiba area, the oases of Dakhla and Kharga, Abu Ballas, the Great Sand Sea, and Abu Muhariq, as she reviews the archaeology of the Steinplätze in a comparative perspective. Steinplätze from the Farafra oasis are the subjects of Chapter 4, where we learn about the methods and the results of her

S. Biagetti (✉)
Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain
e-mail: stefano.biagetti@upf.edu

S. Biagetti
School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies (GAES), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

long-lasting research program. Different sub-areas in the Farafra oasis have been investigated, and three of them were subjected to in-depth archaeological study. Thanks to the analysis of their location, dating, and associated material, the Steinplätze emerge as key features for reconstructing past human behaviors in the Farafra oasis. Gallinaro recognizes different patterns of occupation, beginning with occasional early visits in the ninth millennium cal BC associated with isolated Steinplätze. A logistical strategy of exploitation of diverse ecological niches, likely on a seasonal basis, took place from 6500 cal BC, when base camps and short-term sites testify to a mixed economy based on herding and gathering. In the sixth millennium cal BC, the author records the highest frequency of Steinplätze, even though a trend toward more temporary occupations is ultimately recorded in the frame of on-going aridification from 5500 cal BC onwards. In the last section (Chapter 5), Gallinaro interprets the overall evidence from the Western Desert and hypothesizes well-grounded reconstructions of the cultural dynamics from the ninth to the fifth millennium cal BC by adopting an ethnoarchaeological perspective. Finally, Appendix 1 includes all the C14 dates used by the author, whilst Appendix 2 and 3 show the composition of clusters resulting from the cluster analyses presented by the author in Chapter 4.

Mobility and Pastoralism in the Egyptian Western Desert is an exemplary study, one that coherently combines new ideas with the state of the art of the study of pastoralism in the Sahara. Through the analysis of the Steinplätze, Gallinaro brings together a variety of themes related to the archaeology of pastoralism, demonstrating that, along with caves and rock-shelters, open-air sites can also provide relevant information if

approached through a combination of different techniques. Gallinaro masters GIS and statistics, and this allows her to outline the role of the Steinplätze in reconstructing past cultural trajectories. Her reconstruction of the occupation pulses and of the evolution of the settlement patterns conditioned by the introduction of domestic cattle and, later, by the exploitation of sorghum is well reflected in the spatial distribution of the Steinplätze and their associated archaeological features.

Doubtlessly, Marina Gallinaro's book will become a point of reference for all those interested in the study of North African Holocene prehistory. She must be commended for smoothly shifting from the local scale of investigation to the most general and wider issues related to the human dynamics in the Sahara, providing the reader with a wealth of high-quality data. The book also represents a noticeable contribution to the study of archaeological landscapes generated by mobile societies and will hopefully focus new attention on the horizontal dimension of ancient pastoralism. The book is richly illustrated, although some figures are not easily readable due to their reduced size. This is just a minor issue that does not affect the overall value of such an advance in the archaeology of the ancient Sahara.

Reference

- Gabriel, B. (1987). Palaeoecological evidence from neolithic fireplaces in the Sahara. *African Archaeological Review*, 5(1), 93–103.

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