

## BALAT, A FRONTIER TOWN AND ITS ARCHIVE\*

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When compared to the extensive and detailed papyrus records preserved in the roughly contemporary royal memorial temples, the archives brought to light since the late 70s in the IFAO excavations in the Dakhla oasis (near the modern village of Balat, more precisely close to the old spring of 'Ayn Asil) are quite different. Instead of voluminous archives of papyri, we have either (1) tablets of very fine clay, with texts incised with a bone stylus or (2) impressions from cylinder or button seals, intended to secure doors, bags, boxes and the like; on these small lumps of clay, records were also written sometimes, necessarily reduced to the minimum. From the papyri which must have existed on the site—at least those bearing official communications from the royal Residence<sup>1</sup>—nothing remains, except for the faint impression of vegetal fibers on the back of a few clay sealings. On the other hand, a number of clay objects were satisfactorily preserved in or around the main administrative building in Dakhla—the governors' palace or residence. Reflecting the administrative activity at the very heart of local power, the Balat archives offer a unique insight into the everyday life of 'provincial' administration. In the current state of our knowledge, due to the lack of archaeological remains and/or extensive excavations on provincial city sites such insights are impossible for the other Nile provinces at the turn of the 3rd millennium. Admittedly, this remote desert area had been regularly visited by Nile Valley settlers since at least the 4th dynasty.<sup>2</sup> It also displayed peculiar geographical

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<sup>1</sup> Two royal 'decrees', i.e. letters from the king, recorded on stone stelae, were found in the *ka*-chapels area (inv. Ifao 3153, 3241): G. Soukiassian, M. Wuttmann, L. Pantalacci, *Sanctuaires de ka des gouverneurs et dépendances. Une annexe du palais de 'Ayn 'Asil, Balat VI*, (Cairo: *FIFAO* 46, 2002), 310–316.

<sup>2</sup> Expeditions from the 4th dynasty are now well attested in the Western desert, about 60 km south-west of Balat: K.P. Kuhlmann, "Der 'Wasserberg des Djedefre' (Chufu 01/1). Ein Lagerplatz mit Expeditionsinschriften der 4. Dynastie im Raum der Oase Dachla", *MDAIK* 61 (2005), 243–289 and pl. 42. The presence of locally made ceramics and small watch-posts is hardly understandable if small permanent settlements did not already exist in Dakhla (O.E. Kaper, H. Willems, with an appendix

and human factors which certainly had to be confronted in a specific manner. Nevertheless, during the 6th dynasty and the following transitional period at least, the general application of the “Egyptian” administrative system and the extensive range of records found on the site add valuable information, contributing to our understanding of pharaonic administration as a whole.

The archive currently available from the excavations falls into two main groups: “living archive”, found *in situ* throughout the palace, and a “dead archive”, where outdated records which were culled out and discarded, always in the same specific dumping area, outside the north wall of the palace enclosure.<sup>3</sup> At some point between 2200 and 2000 B.C., the residence of the governors was attacked, ransacked and reduced to ashes. Thus the living archives maintained at that time were fired *in situ*, and provide an accurate picture of their distribution throughout the residence. Careful observation and recording of the stratigraphical units allow a complete view of archive collections—generally a mix of clay sealings and tablets—and a full diachronic understanding of the archival process.

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by Mary M.A. Mac Donald, “Policing the Desert: Old Kingdom Activity around the Dakhleh Oasis”, in: *Egypt in Nubia. Gifts of the Desert*, R. Friedman, ed. (London, 2002), 79–94; H. Riemer et al., “Zwei pharaonische Wüstenstationen südwestlich von Dachla”, *MDAIK* 61 (2005), 291–350; O.E. Kaper, “Soldier’s Identity Marks of the Old Kingdom in the Western Desert”, in: *Pictograms or Pseudo Script? Non-textual Identity Marks in Practical Use in Ancient Egypt and Elsewhere. Proceedings of a Conference in Leiden, 19–20 December 2006*, B.J.J. Haring & O.E. Kaper, eds. (Leiden: Egyptologische Uitgaven 25, 2009), 169–178; F. Förster, *Der Abu Ballas-Weg. Eine pharaonische Karawanenroute durch die Libysche Wüste*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Univ. of Cologne, Feb. 2011, 493–494). In Balat the archaeological data currently available do not support a date prior to the mid-5th dynasty: L. Pantalacci, “Noms royaux nouvellement attestés à Balat”, in: *Mélanges Vernus*, J. Winand et al., eds., (Louvain: OLA)(in press).

<sup>3</sup> The practice of always using the same specific spot to discard the administrative documents collected, in particular clay sealings of the same origin, is well attested on ancient Egyptian sites: to mention only recently excavated sites, see in Giza the “Pottery mound” (J. Nolan, *Mud Sealings and Fourth Dynasty Administration at Giza. A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of The Division of The Humanities in Candidacy for The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations*, Univ. of Chicago, Illinois, ([http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/nolan\\_dissertation\\_2010.pdf](http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/nolan_dissertation_2010.pdf)), 2010, pp. 19–23); or for the Middle Kingdom, Elephantine (C. von Pilgrim, “The Practice of Sealing in the Administration of the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom”, in: *Le sceau et l’administration dans la Vallée du Nil, Villeneuve d’Ascq, 7–8 juillet 2000*, *CRIPPEL* 22 (2002), 164–168) or Abydos (J. Wegner, V. Smith & S. Rossel, “The Organization of the Temple *Nfr-k3* of Senwosret III at Abydos”, *A&L* 10 (2000), 89–90).

## THE STAFF OF THE GOVERNORATE

The variety of administrative systems designed for the different regions of the Nile Valley during the Old Kingdom and its aftermath has long been discussed, described and analysed.<sup>4</sup> Certainly that of Dakhla was quite specific; as an administrative unit, the Western desert ‘province’ doubtlessly included several of the Libyan oases, perhaps even all of them. We know Bahariya, in Egyptian *Dsds*, was part of the territory controlled by Balat, since its inhabitants were enlisted in the work forces operating in Dakhla.<sup>5</sup> Some documents include toponyms showing that such was also the case for other desert areas, but we still ignore which they are.<sup>6</sup>

At the head of this ‘province’ was the Governor of Dakhla (*hq3 wh3t*). Like the nomarchs, he was raised at the Memphite court and appointed by the king himself.<sup>7</sup> *Hq3* denotes both a power over a region with definite territorial boundaries, and a direct, if occasionally exotic, type of political authority.<sup>8</sup> The full titulary of the governors includes an ancient nautical title (*‘pr wj3 jmy-jrty*), referring to the management of expeditions dispatched from the royal court in desert areas.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See most recently H. Willems, *Les Textes des sarcophages et la démocratie. Éléments d’une histoire culturelle du Moyen Empire égyptien* (Paris: Cybèle, 2008), pp. 31–52.

<sup>5</sup> L. Pantalacci, “Contrôle et organisation du travail à la fin de l’Ancien Empire dans la province oasisite”, in: *L’organisation du travail dans l’antiquité égyptienne et mésopotamienne*, B. Menu ed. (Cairo: BdE 151, 2010), 141.

<sup>6</sup> For the connection of Dakhla with other inhabited areas, see my forthcoming article, “Broadening Horizons: Distant Places and Travels in Dakhla and the Western Desert at the End of the 3rd Millennium”, in *Desert Road Archaeology*, F. Förster, H. Riemer, eds. (Cologne: Heinrich-Barth Institut, to appear in 2013).

<sup>7</sup> So the biography of Khentikauepy: J. Osing et al., *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla aus dem Nachlass von Ahmed Fakhry* (Mainz: AVDAIK 28, 1982), pp. 29–32 and pl. 5, 59; see also our remarks “De Memphis à Balat: les liens entre la Résidence et les gouverneurs de l’oasis à la VI<sup>e</sup> dynastie”, in: *Études sur l’Ancien Empire et la nécropole de Saqqâra dédiées à Jean-Philippe Lauer*, C. Berger and B. Mathieu, eds. (Montpellier: Or. Monsp. IX, 1997), 341–342.

<sup>8</sup> H. Goedicke, “The Pepi II Decree from Dakhleh”, *BIFAO* 89 (1989), 205; H.G. Fischer, *Varia Nova. Egyptian Studies III* (New York: MMA, 1996), p. 86 (f); for the use of *hq3* in Nubia, see A. Sacko, “Le pouvoir politique des pays nubiens. Analyse du terme *hq3* et ses applications archéologiques” in: *Actes de la VIII<sup>e</sup> conférence Internationale des Études Nubiennes, Lille 11–17 septembre 1994. III. Études*, CRIPEL 17/3 (1998), 205–208.

<sup>9</sup> M. Valloggia, “Les amiraux de l’oasis de Dakhleh”, in *Mélanges offerts à Jean Vercoutter*, F. Geus, F. Thill eds. (Paris: 1985), 355–364; D. Eichler, *Untersuchungen zum Expeditionswesen des ägyptischen Alten Reiches* (Göttingen: GÖF IV/26, 1993), 163–177.

Male members of the governor's family formed the local court and were linked to the Memphite court milieu by the 'rank' titles of *šps-nswt* and *rḥ nswt*. Both titles are sometimes followed by a name of function. The title *šps-nswt*, which occasionally occurs alone in our documents, was not merely honorific. The *šps-nswt* are mentioned on royal hieroglyphic seals from the reign of Pepy I coming from the palace storerooms, suggesting their involvement in distributing commodities and/or luxury goods.<sup>10</sup> Some letters found in the residence also emphasize their control over material wealth.<sup>11</sup>

Close to the governor, a *šps-nswt*, presumably a member of the ruling family, acted as *wḥmw*—another title borrowed from the nautical hierarchy and, later on, desert expeditions.<sup>12</sup> In some letters, this officer appears to transmit orders from the governor himself to his subordinates. The 'controllers' (*šḥd*, abbreviated from the full title "controller of the oasis", *šḥd wḥt?*), occasionally figure in our name-lists, but no indication of their hierarchical position or specific duties has been preserved. A funerary stela from Qila' el-Dabba depicts a *šḥd wḥt* performing the cult for the benefit of the governor's spouse<sup>13</sup>—a cultural link suggesting that he, like many of the higher officers in Dakhla, was related to the ruling family. Around these high officers, seal-bearers (*ḥtmtyw*) and majordomos (*jmyw-r pr*) were active servants, working for institutions or for the governor's household. They feature regularly in distribution lists or property inventories. Through the epistolary records we are informed that they delivered and received goods, and insured the proper transmission and execution of information, orders

<sup>10</sup> H.G. Fischer, "Three Old Kingdom Palimpsests in the Louvre", *ZÄS* 86 (1961), 21–28.

<sup>11</sup> L. Pantalacci, "La documentation épistolaire du palais des gouverneurs à Balat 'Ayn Asil", *BIFAO* 98 (1998), 311–313; Ead. "L'administration royale et l'administration locale au gouvernorat de Balat d'après les empreintes de sceaux", in *Le sceau et l'administration dans la Vallée du Nil, Villeneuve d'Ascq, 7–8 juillet 2000*, B. Gratien ed., *CRIPEL* 22 (2002), 156–157.

<sup>12</sup> R. Anthes, *Die Felseninschriften von Hatnub* (Leipzig: UGAÄ 9, 1928), pp. 32–33, pl. 17, n° 14; J.C. Moreno García, *Études sur l'administration, le pouvoir et l'idéologie en Égypte, de l'Ancien au Moyen Empire* (Louvain: Aegyptiaca Leodiensia 4, 1997), p. 96 and n. 305; for the Middle Kingdom see also D. Farout, "La carrière du *wḥmw* Ameny et l'organisation des expéditions au ouadi Hammamat au Moyen Empire", *BIFAO* 94 (1994), 155, 166–167; S. Quirke, "The Regular Titles of the Late Middle Kingdom", *RdÉ* 37 (1986), 122.

<sup>13</sup> M. Valloggia, *Balat IV. Le monument funéraire d'Ima-Pepy/Ima-Meryrê* (Cairo: BIFAO 38, 1998), 76–77.

or commodities. The overall impression is that the administrative hierarchy was quite simple, and operated with a limited staff. The letters clearly show that all these officials were literate.

Closely connected with political management, cultic institutions were certainly essential for shaping socio-economic life in general. Thus far, no remains of Old Kingdom divine temples have been discovered in Dakhla. Yet we do know that the royal cult was performed in the *mrt*-temples or chapels—both Pepy I and Pepy II installed such foundations in Balat. A seal issued by Pepy I (5044), engraved with the name of the *mrt* and the title ‘scribe of the *phylè*’, was widely used throughout the Residence.<sup>14</sup> For Pepy II, a limestone stela showing the king granted life by Hathor was discovered early on by Ahmed Fakhry to the north of the site.<sup>15</sup> Royal cult may well have been established in Balat before then, as unpublished sealings from the oldest strata of the Northern enclosure (“Sondage nord”) name royal priests (*w<sup>c</sup>b-nswt, hm-ntr* [...]), presumably referring to a king prior to the 6th dynasty.<sup>16</sup> The memorial cult of the governors was established by royal decree within the framework of a *hwt-k3*. The decree issued by Pepy II for one of these officials explicitly defines its components: a chapel for the statue, a specific income (*jm3hw*) and a number of ‘*ka*-servants’.<sup>17</sup> The archaeological evidence suggests that these pious foundations formed part of the households of the governors, managed together with their domestic units.

High officers also controlled social order by dispensing justice. Two hieroglyphic seals alluding to judicial functions—presumably brought to Dakhla from the Memphite court for local elite, maybe for the governors themselves—are frequently used on door sealings throughout the palace. As already mentioned above, one (5044) belongs to king Pepy I and associates his *mrt* with a *zš n z3*, scribe of a *phylè*, bearing the epithet *sm3<sup>c</sup> wd3-mdw*, “who enforces judgments”.<sup>18</sup> The second

<sup>14</sup> L. Pantalacci, *CRIPEL* 22, 156–157. The objects numbers refer to the IFAO excavation inventory.

<sup>15</sup> Inv. Ifao 1180. J. Osing, *Denkmäler*, n° 28, p. 33 and pl. 7, 61; L. Giddy, *Egyptian Oases* (Warminster: 1987), p. 234 and n. 224.

<sup>16</sup> As mentioned above, n. 2, the earliest king attested in Balat at present is Neferirkare-Kakai.

<sup>17</sup> G. Soukiasian et al., *Sanctuaires de ka*, pp. 310–313; H. Goedicke, *BIFAO* 89 (1989), 203–212.

<sup>18</sup> On this Old Kingdom epithet, see A. Philip-Stéfan, “Juger sous l’Ancien Empire égyptien”, in: *La fonction de juger. Égypte ancienne et Mésopotamie*, B. Menu ed. (Paris: *Droit et cultures* 47, 2004/1), 147.

seal (6423), also dated to Pepy I, is engraved with the titles *hry-tp nswt, mdw rhyt*.<sup>19</sup> The local council, or *d3d3t*, appears mainly in the letters, since it sent, received and answered the administrative letters to and from all the oasite settlements. According to the letters, the council seems to have been in charge of checking the circulation of goods and persons. A text refers to the accounting activity of the (or a?) *d3d3t* outside the ‘capital’; given the limited number of supervisory officers, it is probable that the group of officials moved from Balat-‘Ayn Asil to other spots in Dakhla. Occasionally it could also register legal deeds, e.g. wills.<sup>20</sup>

In some cases, external competence might have been required. The control of royal administration on local management certainly did exist, as elsewhere in the Nile valley.<sup>21</sup> A clear reference to the physical presence of Memphite officers in Balat is given by the two royal decrees found in the *hwt-k3* area of the governors’ Residence, mentioning the messengers who brought the royal command.<sup>22</sup> The word *sr* appears only in a few name-lists (on tablets inv. 4415; 4416; 4430) as a title or rank indicator, directly preceding personal names. All these documents were kept together in the main courtyard of the palace at the time of the fire. Did these men reside in Dakhla, or did they come from the Valley for a short period? The very limited number and con-

<sup>19</sup> On *hry-tp nswt*, see P. Posener-Kriéger, *Les archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakaï (Les papyrus d’Abousir), Traduction et commentaire*, vol. 2 (Cairo: BdE LXXV, 1976/2), p. 598; N. Kanawati, *Akhmim in the Old Kingdom. Part I: Chronology and Administration*, (Sydney: ACE Studies 2, 1992), index p. 324 (frequent for nomarchs under Pepy I); J.C. Moreno García, “Deux familles de potentats provinciaux et les assises de leur pouvoir: el-Kab et el-Hawawish sous la VIe dynastie”, *RdÉ* 56, 2005, p. 117. For *mdw rhyt*, n° 12, 17 of P. Kaplony, *Die Rollsiegel des Alten Reichs. II. Katalog der Rollsiegel. B. Tafeln* (Bruxelles: Monumenta Aegyptiaca 3B, 1981), pl. 101–103. This string of titles, often followed by *jwn knmt*, is typical of major provincial officers, especially during Pepy I’s reign: N. Kanawati, *Akhmim*, p. 135 (Akhmim), 278 (Meir); M. Zitzman, *The Necropolis of Assiut. A Case Study of Local Egyptian Funerary Culture from the Old Kingdom to the End of the Middle Kingdom*, OLA 180 (2010), vol. 1, p. 73 and n. 454.

<sup>20</sup> Tablet 5955: A. Philip-Stéfan, “Deux actes de dispositions inédits découverts dans l’oasis égyptienne de Dakhla”, *RHD* 83/2, avr.-juin 2005, pp. 273–281, in particular 275–277; *ead.* *Dire le droit en Égypte pharaonique. Contribution à l’étude des structures et mécanismes juridictionnels jusqu’au Nouvel Empire* (Bruxelles: 2008), doc. 55, pp. 260–261.

<sup>21</sup> Following the scheme reconstructed by J.C. Moreno García, *Études sur l’administration*, pp. 104–109.

<sup>22</sup> See above, n. 1. The fact that the royal letters, from the late reign of Pepy II onwards, usually mention the name of the messenger (H. Goedicke, *BIFAO* 89 (1989), 209–210) might reflect a new type of link between Memphis and the provinces.

text of these occurrences might reflect the occasional presence of royal *srw* from Memphis in Dakhla. Be that as it may, a *sr* was expected to play a regulating role. This appears from the use of this term in a short letter from the Northern enclosure (1508), in the syntagma *sšm sr*, ‘repartition of (by?) the *sr*’, concerning a claim to income by the governor’s spouse (*hmt-hqʒ*).

#### THE TERRITORY OF ADMINISTRATION

More or less loosely connected with the Memphite authority, the governors’ palace in Balat was viewed by the inhabitants of a large area as their capital and major administrative centre. Around it, in Dakhla proper, existed other settlements, small cities, villages, hamlets or farms.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, most of the letters found at Balat-‘Ayn Asil were sent to the oasite capital from the secondary towns, in which a single scribe (or a few scribes ?) acted as representatives of the governor. They wrote to the council of the capital, addressing the official in charge of correspondence by his title *jry-mdʒt nty m dʒdʒt*.<sup>24</sup> For the villages or smaller rural communities, the *jmy-r šht*, “overseer of the fields”, was probably acting as an intermediary between the governorate and the peasant communities.<sup>25</sup> Two *jmy-r šht* are mentioned twice in connection with delivery of grain for *jmʒhw*-income. It seems that the fields they tended were cultivated mainly for the benefit of high officials living in Balat. Locally, they were probably responsible for managing labour and apportioning what was allotted back to their community.

Moreover, Balat had regular contacts with other oases, some of them, as already mentioned, being under direct Egyptian control. This means

<sup>23</sup> Such a secondary settlement from the late OK/early FIP is currently under excavation by the DOP project: see most recently A.J. Mills, O. Kaper, “‘Ain el-Gazzareen: Developments of the Old Kingdom Settlement”, in: *The Oasis Papers 3. Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project*, G.E. Bowen & C.A. Hope, eds. (Oxford: DOP Monograph 14, 2003), 123–129. For the ‘ezba-type settlement we can now refer to the late Middle Kingdom complex excavated in Balat: S. Marchand, G. Soukiassian, *Un habitat de la XIII<sup>e</sup> dynastie—2<sup>e</sup> Période Intermédiaire à Ayn Asil. Balat VIII* (Cairo: FIFAO 59, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> L. Pantalacci, *BIFAO* 98, 306–308.

<sup>25</sup> The use of this precise title *jmy-r šht* seems unattested outside Balat before the Middle Kingdom: L. Pantalacci, “Agriculture, élevage et société rurale dans les oasis d’après les archives de Balat (fin de l’Ancien Empire)”, in: *L’agriculture institutionnelle en Egypte ancienne*, Lille, 10–11 juillet 2003, J.C. Moreno García, ed., *CRIPEL* 25 (2005), p. 86 et n. 38.

that they had to provide work forces for the governors' building projects, and deliver goods (fabrics, basketry, perhaps animals) to Balat. This is amply attested for Bahariya (*Dsds*)<sup>26</sup> and the regions (other oases?) called *Msqt* and *Qdst*, the locations of which are still unknown. The Egyptian control of these regions may have been rather loose. On the other hand, clay tablets impressed with hieroglyphic seals naming other desert areas or rural units were found in the archive dump.<sup>27</sup> It seems that the governorate had nominated some kind of (permanent?) representative in these—more or less distant—places to keep and use this official seal. Thus the origin of a messenger could be both identified and guaranteed.

The extensive use of seals reminds us that, be it inside or outside Balat-ʿAyn Asil, people involved in the administrative process must have exercised many different vocations and have been unable to read or write by means of the official writing-code.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless these people had a part to play in the administrative routine: they were expected to perform distant missions, to keep accounts and record the result of their reckoning under difficult conditions, etc.<sup>29</sup> For such purposes, the seals were a convenient tool of visual communication: the many occurrences of tokens on the site underline this point, as tokens could be “read” even if both the carrier and the person who finally received him were illiterate. The low number of hieroglyphic, i.e. governmental, seals, as compared to the very popular use of cylinder- or button-seals, reflects the important part of humble local staff in the governorate at the turn of the Old Kingdom.<sup>30</sup> This pattern was probably identical

<sup>26</sup> G. Castel et al., *Balat V. Le mastaba de Khentika (mastaba III de Balat)* (Cairo: FIFAO 40, 2001), pp. 141–149; L. Pantalacci, *BdE* 151, 142.

<sup>27</sup> L. Pantalacci, in: *Desert Road Archaeology* (Cologne, Heinrich-Barth Institut, 2013), [4–6]. The same type of object appears in Middle Kingdom Nubia, though under a different shape: B. Gratien, *CRIPEL* 22 (2001), 68.

<sup>28</sup> L. Pantalacci, “Fonctionnaires et analphabètes: sur quelques pratiques administratives observées à Balat”, *BIFAO* 96 (1996), 364–365; see also n. 38.

<sup>29</sup> For instance keeping account of days, or numbering animals: O.E. Kaper, H. Willems, in: *Egypt in Nubia* (London: 2002), 88–89. It was vital for the desert expeditions that the staff in charge of supplying food and water had an exact knowledge and was able to maintain an overview of the rations and their distribution, for men and donkeys alike: F. Förster, “With donkeys, jars and water bags into the Libyan Desert: the Abu Ballas Trail in the late Old Kingdom/First Intermediate Period”, *British Museum Studies in Archaeology of Egypt and Sudan* 7 (2007), [www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/bmsaes/issue\\_7/foerster.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/bmsaes/issue_7/foerster.aspx), 1–36.

<sup>30</sup> In the residence, the ratio of sealings bearing royal seals forms less than 10% of the corpus: L. Pantalacci, *CRIPEL* 22 (2002), 157.

throughout Egyptian provinces for some time.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the marks on clay or stone are another, most elementary contribution of the humble servants to the smooth running of the administrative process.

## HANDLING INFORMATION

### *Transmission*

To carry messages between Balat and all these distant places, or to fetch people, animals or other goods, retainers from the palace staff were sent: *šmsw* and *ꜥꜥw* are mentioned in several documents in connection with work forces and labour (harvesting, for instance). Even the guards (*zꜥw*) formed an active, though less formal link between Balat and its *Hinterland*, bringing animals back and forth, along with various goods and news, and occasionally escorting people.<sup>32</sup> Inside the 'capital' as well, servants sent as go-between were circulating frequently between different institutions.

Our documents could suggest that most of the information and orders were written down and circulated by means of letters written on clay tablets. The format being very formal and brief, the information conveyed through a letter is generally limited: short requests, acknowledgements of the arrival or departure of members of the staff; disbursals of goods; etc. In reality, a good deal of other official and unofficial communications must have been carried around, either along with these letters or separately, by the messengers treading desert roads. Considering (1) the existence of tokens, (2) some hints to verbal transmission (*ꜥꜥ*) included in the letters themselves, and (3) the fact that a large part of the staff must have been unable to read and write, we must postulate a significant amount of oral information linking together the members of the staff, both inside the capital itself and throughout the surrounding territories.

Necessarily, the bulk of communication with natives (not notably conspicuous in the Pharaonic sources) or foreign neighbours must have been verbal. A couple of documents mention the fact that the governor in person travelled outside Dakhla—presumably to meet

<sup>31</sup> C. von Pilgrim, *Elephantine XVIII*, AVDAIK 91 (1996), p. 241 Tab. 9, gives nearly the same ratio of 8% of institutional seals in Elephantine under the 13th dynasty.

<sup>32</sup> L. Pantalacci, *BdE* 151, 143.

foreign chiefs and their communities. We imagine that he did so because he had to transmit special information or requests from the Memphite king to these people—a task which could hardly be entrusted to a minor official. Mobility was a major requisite for all administrators. Qualified personnel was required to supervise the various workshops controlled by the residence (e.g. bakeries, flint working, pottery workshops) as well as occasional labour (quarrying expedition, tree-felling, building projects, etc.) to assure that the work was carried out on schedule and as planned. The word *sšm*, “distribution” is a key-word in the officers’ idiom; the use of seals or simple marks on clay moulds supposed that, near the bakers, stood, at least for a while, a member of the residence staff indicating the anticipated ‘distribution’ before the bread-moulds were fired. The scribes’ mobility is also reflected by the construction marks of Khentika’s chapel (mastaba III of the necropolis). These marks imply that administrative staff was constantly present in the quarries, then moving on to the project site to supervise the work of the different teams.<sup>33</sup> So an important part of administrative personnel was constantly in motion, embedded in production processes.

### *Storage*

As indicated above, papyri were certainly present in the archives of the residence, and might have served to store information for the long term. Otherwise, the clay tablets found in or near the governors’ residence appear to record only short-term information. Whole collections of records were discarded, presumably after the data were checked and collated—as the staff in charge left the offices, perhaps monthly. Many tablets are palimpsests, meaning that they were kept for even shorter-lived data and reused. Although it would have been easy to pour water on the clay, erase the text and reuse the tablets, some documents were definitively discarded; just why is unclear. We have no means of determining whether each tablet is a unique document, or if there were several copies of the same document stored in different places—but this last hypothesis is highly probable.

In the course of the excavation of the main peristyle courtyard in the governors’ palace, a small wooden closet or podium was discovered.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 146–147.

Storing archives near a large courtyard and close to the entrance and reception area of the palace is a feature common to Egypt and the rest of the Mediterranean world.<sup>34</sup>

Built by inserting wooden planks between the wooden columns of the portico, this place was used to store clay archives, along with other objects;<sup>35</sup> were the tablets laid on wooden shelves? Although this area was heavily burnt, the discovery of small copper nails rather points to the use of wooden boxes in which the archives were secured. But most of the time, quite logically, clay tablets bearing accounts or inventories were stored together with the objects they mentioned, i.e. in magazines, where wooden or reed caskets, ceramic jars and leather bags were common. We cannot be certain that in storerooms tablets were kept in separate containers. In Balat it does not seem they were all stored together in separate rooms especially designed for this purpose, like in other Near Eastern palaces.<sup>36</sup> Since many tablets, once inscribed, were pierced by the stylus used for writing, it seems probable that *dossiers* of documents relating to the same topic were created by tying the relevant tablets together with a vegetal string or a leather thong.<sup>37</sup> Were these ‘bunches’ then stored inside larger containers, baskets or boxes,<sup>38</sup> among heaps of goods?

### *Cross-checking*

Generally, several officials and/or institutions were involved together in transfers of goods or persons. Thus each transaction prompted the

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<sup>34</sup> T. Palaima, “‘Archives’ and ‘Scribes’ and Information Hierarchy in Mycenaean Greek Linear B Records”, in: *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-keeping in the Ancient World*, M. Brosius, ed. (Oxford-New-York: Oxford studies in ancient documents, 2003), 177.

<sup>35</sup> P. Posener-Kriéger, “Travaux de l’IFAO au cours de l’année 1988–1989”, *BIFAO* 89, 1989, 293–296.

<sup>36</sup> Wooden shelves for archival storage are well known from many ancient sites in the Levant and Greece (e.g. Ebla: A. Archi, “Archival Record-keeping at Ebla 2400–2350 BC”, in: *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-keeping in the Ancient World*, M. Brosius, ed. (Oxford-New-York: Oxford studies in ancient documents, 2003), 32–34), Kultepe (K.R. Veenhof, “Archives of Old Assyrian Traders”, *ibid.*, 101), Pylos (T. Palaima, *ibid.*, 177) among others.

<sup>37</sup> It appears the tablet was pierced only after the text was written, since in some cases signs were erased in the process. The operation of piercing a solid clay tablet about 2 cm thick without breaking it must have required a specific knack.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. in Assyria the careful archival treatment of letters: C. Michel, “La correspondance des marchands assyriens du XIX<sup>e</sup> s. av. J.-C.”, in *La lettre d’archive*, L. Pantalacci, ed. (Cairo: Suppl.Topoi 9/BiGen 32, 2008), 123–125.

creation of multiple copies of the records, each so accurate that they became redundant: e.g. the disbursement of goods from a storeroom can appear in the records two or three times:

- in a letter ordering the disbursement,
- in the two clay sealings produced when the storeroom had been opened and closed again by the same official on duty,
- and presumably, by a separate inventory kept inside the magazine, stating the balance of products present.<sup>39</sup>

Among these multiple archival forms, the seal impressions are by far the most numerous, since it was the simplest means of keeping track of the officials responsible for any administrative deed. As simple and clear as a signature in the modern world, it did not require literacy.<sup>40</sup> In the palace storerooms, as well as in the everyday life of the households, the process of sealing and stamping the door-bolts, bags, boxes and so on was mere routine. Near the magazines, but also throughout the living quarters of the palace, the broken sealings testifying to the closing and opening of containers were carefully collected *in situ*, i.e. near the container they once sealed, perhaps stored in a special box, jar or bag.<sup>41</sup> This custom is still alive in modern Egypt.

The periodical cross-checking, simultaneously carried out through the various categories of clay objects kept together as a living archive, resulted in culling tablets and sealings and discarding them in the special dump area, to the north-east of the enclosure. Based on the collections recovered from the Nubian Middle Kingdom fortresses, tentative estimates of the duration of an ‘administrative cycle’ range from 1–3 months to a year.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Details and examples, *La lettre d'archive*, 145–146.

<sup>40</sup> S.T. Smith, “Sealing Practice, Literacy and Administration in the Middle Kingdom”, *CRIPEL* 22 (2001), 188–194.

<sup>41</sup> The same practice has been observed in Elephantine: C. von Pilgrim, *CRIPEL* 22 (2002), 161 with n. 2, 163–164. It is also common in Middle Kingdom Nubia: S.T. Smith, “The transmission of an Administrative Sealing System from Lower Nubia to Kerma”, *CRIPEL* 17/3 (1998), 219–222.

<sup>42</sup> S.T. Smith, *CRIPEL* 22 (2001), 180–182. Conversely, in the temple of Sesostris III in Abydos, J. Wegner posits a daily compilation; therefore no practice of collecting broken sealings has been observed there: “Institutions and Officials at South Abydos: An Overview of the Sigillographic Evidence”, *CRIPEL* 22 (2001), 98–99.

## MANAGING PEOPLE

*Identification of Persons*

Many lists of personal names were preserved in the archive. As is customary in Egyptian documents, the individuals are identified by their title, if any, and their name; in case they lack a title, the patronymic is written before the personal name.

The lavish use of patronymics confirms that the reference to a family group was very important for identifying persons. It is well known that the “house”, or household was an important socio-economic, and administrative, framework in ancient Egypt;<sup>43</sup> on some labels found in Balat the term *pr* is used to define the link between two or three individuals.<sup>44</sup> The material from small First Intermediate Period houses and from workshops to the South of the Residence reveals the use of 4 or 5 seals in each domestic unit, all remarkably homogeneous by their dimensions and decorative patterns. It must have been difficult to identify the different seals without a close examination, but a glance would allow low-level officials to recognize their style and attribute them to a specific social or professional group. In the same way it would be plausible that all the stamp-sealings bearing *njwt*-sign could refer to a special category of servants.<sup>45</sup> Long ago, it was suggested by Reisner that the seal patterns were checked and registered by the local authority.<sup>46</sup> For major officers the seal was an object of distinction, for servants it might have been the token of their integration in a group.

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<sup>43</sup> The notion is recorded as early as the Gebelein papyri from the 4th dynasty: P. Posener-Kriéger, *I Papiri di Gebelein—Scavi Farina 1935—ed. a cura di Sara Demichelis, Studi del Museo Egizio di Torino Gebelein Volume 1* (Turin, 2004), Tav. 16 (Pap. Geb. II vso, H).

<sup>44</sup> For a presentation of these objects, but with a different understanding, see N. Grimal, “Notes sur les objets inscrits de Balat, campagne de 1981”, *BIFAO* 81 (1981), 202.

<sup>45</sup> L. Pantalacci, “Sceaux et empreintes de sceaux comme critères de datation: les enseignements des fouilles de Balat”, in *Des Néferkarê aux Montouhotep, Lyon, 5-7 juillet, 2001*, L. Pantalacci, C. Berger El-Naggar, eds. (Lyon: *Travaux de la Maison de l’Orient* 40, 2005), 231.

<sup>46</sup> G.A. Reisner, “Clay Sealings of Dynasty XIII from Uronarti Fort”, *Kush* 3 (1955), 50-51.

*Controlling People: Labour*

In Balat and Dakhla as a whole, the most important concern of the governorate staff was the organization of work. On several tablets names are listed under the head *tzt*, 'team'. As a rule, the texts do not betray the tasks for which the small teams of 5 to 10 workers were enlisted. Many of our tablets, written by and for specialists, lack any title. The layout of the text might in itself be significant, indicating hierarchy, for example; all the personal names of the workers were written in columns, except the name of the head of the gang, written on a line at the bottom of the tablet.

In rare cases, original information about planning construction projects, or supervising fieldwork has been preserved.<sup>47</sup> Such documents imply that the scribes in charge of following up such projects were quite often working outdoors, together with the teams they controlled. Managing workers from different geographical regions, or operating in unfamiliar areas, required extensive planning and robust logistics. The question of long-distance journeys of labour teams was not easy to handle when starting from the Nile Valley,<sup>48</sup> but in the desert it must have required a highly sophisticated organization. The recent investigations of the Cologne University ACACIA project along the Abu Ballas trail have brought to light the elaborate laying and equipping of this desert road.<sup>49</sup> Coordinating and provisioning the travels and work of the different groups must have been a real challenge for administrators. Discrepancies or even contradictions in the orders must have occurred, as betrayed by a few letters, but on the whole the system was efficient.

## MANAGING PRODUCTS

*Institutions*

The archive name individuals with local titles more frequently than governmental departments or institutions. There seems to be a discrepancy

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<sup>47</sup> L. Pantalacci, in: *L'organisation du travail dans l'antiquité égyptienne et mésopotamienne*, 148–153.

<sup>48</sup> For the logistics of expeditions in the Eastern desert at the beginning of the 12th dynasty, see D. Farout, *BIFAO* 94 (1994), 143–148.

<sup>49</sup> A synthesis about this trail has been produced by F. Förster in his unpublished dissertation (see above, n. 2); id., *British Museum Studies in Archaeology of Egypt and Sudan* 7 (2007), 1–36.

between the paucity of references to the Treasury (*pr-ḥd*) and the Granary (*šnwt*)—two major departments of pharaonic administration—and the huge number of collective storerooms built to the East and South of the governors' palace.<sup>50</sup> Both departments are mentioned in connection with goods removed from storage. The Granary was responsible for managing food resources in the oasite 'province' as a whole,<sup>51</sup> whereas the Treasury is mentioned several times as a local storage place, for instance for *mrḥt*-oil and textiles.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, our documents being very concise, most of the operations carried out in the palace bear no reference at all to any institution. It might be hypothesized that all the governorate records dealing with goods are implicitly related to these two institutions. The tablet 3487, a name-list, quotes two "Overseers of the Granary" (*jmy-r šnwt*);<sup>53</sup> their leading position at the beginning of the list suggests that they were major officials. In another text (tablet 4991), one of them receives 40 carrying-bags *tṃ3*, objects perhaps intended to be used for harvesting and filling the Granary. So far no title referring to the Treasury has been found. It is also remarkable that whereas the seal impressions from the Granary and Treasury are regularly occurring in the Nubian forts throughout the 12th dynasty,<sup>54</sup> no seal impression naming such institutions has been identified in Balat-<sup>c</sup>Ayn Asil.

### *Individuals*

The archive included yet another category of records, the clay labels. These consist in cordiform pendants, about 5 cm high and 4 cm wide, modelled in clay, folded around a string or a long vegetal stem so as to form one or several protruding loops.<sup>55</sup> It was thus possible to attach

<sup>50</sup> On these numerous storerooms, see the annual excavation reports in *BIFAO* 97 (1997), 327; 98 (1998), 505–506; 103 (2008), 440–441; 109 (2009), 594.

<sup>51</sup> The letter 3685 (L. Pantalacci, *Lettre d'archive*, 152–153) clearly indicates that the seal of the Granary, kept in Balat, had to be sent and used also in localities outside the oasite capital. This use of institutional seals far from the institutions themselves would explain the high proportion of counter-sealings in some Nubian forts during the Middle Kingdom, a situation summarized by B. Gratien, "Scellementes et contrescellémentes au Moyen Empire en Nubie. L'apport de Mirgissa", *CRIPEL* 22 (2001), 47–63.

<sup>52</sup> Tablets 4391 et 6719 (unpublished). The management of resources in Nubia during the Middle Kingdom is similar: B. Gratien, "Les institutions égyptiennes en Nubie au Moyen Empire d'après les empreintes de sceaux", *CRIPEL* 17 (1995), 155–159.

<sup>53</sup> G. Soukiassian et al., *Sanctuaires de ka*, pp. 340–342.

<sup>54</sup> B. Gratien, *CRIPEL* 17 (1995), 157; S.T. Smith, *CRIPEL* 22 (2001), 180–188.

<sup>55</sup> See the description by N. Grimal, *BIFAO* 81, 1981, 201–203. The type is attested sporadically from the archaic period or early Old Kingdom through the New Kingdom,

the labels to various containers—clay jars, baskets, nets, caskets, etc. Labels are mainly used to identify the possessor of a container, and/or of its contents; thus most of them bear proper name(s) whereas a few others have cylinder-seal impressions. Some combine both kind of information. By this means, the officials could conveniently record and check the identity of the sender, or owner, of a container. Labels are found all over the archaeological site in Balat, whereas for the same period they appear relatively rarely outside Dakhla—perhaps only for lack of recording by earlier excavators.<sup>56</sup> They were particularly popular in the Northern enclosure, where ten of them have been found together in a single *locus*. Such labels could easily be modified and reused. Storage of short, temporary information could also be achieved by writing directly on various clay objects, like door-sealings or jar stoppers.<sup>57</sup>

Large storage jars containing grain—movable silos, in a way—were stored in courtyards or store-rooms, and sometimes inscribed in cursive writing with personal names, presumably identifying their owner.<sup>58</sup> A couple of fragments from such jars feature prominently among such objects: those inscribed with the titles and names of some of the governors. The best preserved one (4453) mentions the ‘divine offering (*hṭp-nṯr*) made for the governor of Dakhla Medu-nefer’.

#### *Account-keeping*

As elsewhere in Egypt, an important part of the scribal activity consisted in keeping accounts. One of the basic tasks was collecting taxes, and redistributing goods to communities and individuals. The vocabulary describing accounting operations is limited and uses mostly the

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but with seal-impressions, not with texts (Eva-Maria Engel and Vera Müller, “Verschlüsse der Frühzeit: Erstellung einer Typologie”, *GM* 178 (2000), 41; J.-P. Pätznick, *Die Siegelabrollungen und Rolliegel der Stadt Elephantine im 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.: Spurensicherung eines archäologischen Artefaktes. BAR International Series 1339* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), pp. 41–42, calls them “Krawattenknotenverschlüsse”).

<sup>56</sup> Note that in Old Kingdom Giza, at the recently excavated “Pottery Mound”, none such label appears (J. Nolan, *Mud Sealings*). They might be a typically provincial feature.

<sup>57</sup> The surface being rather unsuitable for writing, the short notes written on it are often difficult to decipher: G. Soukiassian et al., *Sanctuaires de ka*, pp. 365–374. This practice is also well attested in Giza, but there the notes are quite short and illegible: J. Nolan, *Mud Sealings*, pp. 20–21, 127 with the on-line catalogue: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/is/scholars/nolan/cat/Incised.html>.

<sup>58</sup> G. Soukiassian et al., *ibid.*

same words as other Old Kingdom *corpora* like the Abusir papyrus: *jp*, ‘account’ or as a verb ‘to pay’; *rht*, ‘list/amount’; *pr(t)*, ‘expense’; *shwy*, ‘compendium’. A few common words are apparently used in Balat in a slightly technical way, such as *zš*, ‘writing, i.e. written account’. *ḥ*<sup>c</sup> is noted on clay labels, probably meaning ‘global amount, credit’.<sup>59</sup> The frequency of the word *hrt*-<sup>c</sup>, ‘arrears’, in our documents, confirms that many accounting operations were carried out in several steps over a certain period of time,<sup>60</sup> so that permanent and accurate updating of the records was a necessity.

Several letters record transactions and had to be kept to serve as accounting documents—such as this very short letter (7196): “(From) the *šps-nswt Khentika*. (Since) I sent one palette which is (already) with you, and another one to the *rḥ-nswt* and majordomo *Ihykent*, I don’t have any more left with me.” It seems that such notes were written in anticipation, to be used as archival testimony!

Many of our texts deal with distributions of grain; the topic being quite familiar to the scribes, their notes are elliptic, most of the time not even mentioning the kind of grain involved.<sup>61</sup> Units of measure and their abbreviations are similar to what we know from the Nile Valley. The only peculiarity in writing is the use of circles as a unit of measure for grain<sup>62</sup>. The nearly physical reality of the reckoning process is vividly felt when the accounting tablets show unusual sequences of bars (for units) and *mdj*-signs (Gardiner Sign-list V 19) for tens. These awkward pieces of writing allow us to imagine both a high heap of objects stored there, whatever they may have been, and the strict attention of the illiterate writer during the reckoning process.

*Mrht*-oil in jars, (dried?) meat, fabrics, tools, weapons, boxes, bags and nets stored in the magazines (*wḏw*) were regularly registered and then distributed by the scribes. A few lists of objects apparently merited the explicit mention of a special attribution by the central administration to important personages of the community—family or predecessors of the ruling governor—as part of their *jmḥw*-income.

<sup>59</sup> M. Megally, *Notions de comptabilité à propos du papyrus E 3226 du musée du Louvre* (Cairo: BdE 72, 1977), pp. 56–61.

<sup>60</sup> P. Posener-Kriéger, *Les archives*, pp. 213–214.

<sup>61</sup> Cultivated species are identical to those grown in the Nile Valley: the most common are *jt-šm<sup>c</sup>w* and *bty*, *zwt* appearing only rarely: L. Pantalacci, *CRIPPEL* 25 (2005), 83.

<sup>62</sup> For instance tablet 7092, *ibid.* 84, fig. 2.

To sum up, the main administrative rules and methods applied in the Memphite area seem to have been known and applied in Balat, though on a much smaller and simpler scale. All our sources being roughly contemporary, we get the impression that administration underwent no major change throughout the four to five generations of governors who occupied the palace. Given the distance, Memphite control will always have been rather loose. Information is too scanty to allow us to evaluate whether this situation was original or common in all the peripheral provinces—Elephantine could be a case in point. Be that as it may, the preservation *in situ* of the archival evidence is valuable to understand more precisely the activity and *modus operandi* of the staff managing the residence. This overall picture can be usefully collated with the sparse data from other provincial centres from the period between the end of the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom, and can help place them into a broader context.