Flint and Forts: The Role of Flint in Late Middle-New Kingdom Egyptian Weaponry

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Studies of ancient Egyptian pharaonic warfare tend to privilege metal over flint,¹ giving the impression that, with the exception of arrowheads, flint weapons were not normal military issue (Yadin 1963; McDermott 2004). Moreover, there is a tendency to assume that post Middle Kingdom bifacial artefacts found in Egypt must be foreign (Vila 1970: 192). There is good reason for these viewpoints. It does seem that within Egypt itself there are far more extant metal than flint weapons. Metal weaponry had been used since Early Dynastic times and has the advantage of robustness and possibilities of elaborate forms. Flint weapons from Nubian sites such as Buhen and Mirgissa are perhaps exceptional and could be explained as an inability to keep a distant outpost supplied with the latest technologically advanced weapons, an inability afforded by the ‘primitive’ nature of Nubian warfare. However, I will argue that at least until the Early New Kingdom there is strong evidence that flint weapons were standard military issue, and far from being a primitive technology, they were a natural choice for both utilitarian and ideological reasons. I concur that metal was a component of warfare, but make a plea for the role of lithics. I take as my starting point a summary of Vila’s (1970) study of flint weapons found at Mirgissa.

The Mirgissa Lithic Assemblage

Vila (1970) dated the Mirgissa lithics to the Early New Kingdom, and I here assume him to be correct. As will be shown below, the technology is consistent with near contemporary Egyptian flint-work.

As at Buhen (Emery et al. 1979: 8, 48), groups of flint tools at Mirgissa were discovered in what would appear to be an important administrative building (Vila 1970: 174, fig. 1), presumably an armoury. The lithics described by Vila exhibit the skill, regularity and standardisation consistent with specialist production. Debitage was found but did not relate to the manufacture of these

¹ In this paper ‘flint’ is taken to also include chert.
weapons, suggesting off-site manufacture (1970: 176). This concurs with lack of debitage for the working of fine pieces at Askut (Tyson Smith, personal communication). Specialist lithics workshops are known for Egypt, for example, as evidenced by the ‘hoards’ at Kom Rabia, Memphis (Giddy 1999: 228).

Vila categorised the material according to type, though admitted the dangers of etic, and thus possibly artificial, divisions (Vila 1970: 180). He identifies 310 ‘javelots’ and ‘javelines’, 88 spears, and 2700 arrowheads. It is noticeable that there are large numbers of arrowheads. Miller et al. (1986: 1889) estimate that at this date the Egyptians could shoot 30 arrows every three minutes.

Vila’s ‘javelots and javelines’ (I will henceforth refer to them as ‘lances’) average 153 mm long and only 6.4 mm maximum thickness. His belief that these may have been thrown, is supported by their light weight, no more than 40 gm. That similar metal tools were employed as projectiles is clear (McDermott 2004: 174). Vila’s ‘spears’ are significantly larger, averaging 222 mm long and 17.7 mm wide. Such weapons could have been used for thrusting or throwing. Similar items from Buhen were categorised as daggers (Emery et al. 1979: 116–18, pl. 102), but the hafting evidence from Mirgissa suggests otherwise. No flint daggers were found. Vila (1970: 91) stated that daggers are also rare in metal and are a personal weapon rather than military issue. Gilbert (2004: 43) observes that daggers were usually manufactured of metal, as flint would tend to break when twisted. Arrowheads were tranverse, of lunate and trapezoidal shape.

**Were the Lithics Standard Military Issue?**

Arguments against the Mirgissa material being standard military issue rest partly on the assumption that the artefacts appear anomalous and un-Egyptian. However, the Mirgissa lithics are clearly not Nubian. Nubian flint work is quite unlike the Mirgissa pieces. Bonnet states that the flint industry is not pre-eminent in Kerma culture, and fine, bifacial Nubian flint working of large pieces unknown (Bonnet 1990: 137). A bifacial tabular flint knife from the town of Kerma, which Bonnet dates to Middle Kerman (contemporary with Egyptian Middle Kingdom), is considered an Egyptian import as it is unique to Kerma (Bonnet 1990: 137, 153, fig. 119). It is almost identical in form to a number of Middle Kingdom Egyptian specimens. Nubian types consist of scrapers, sickle blades, microliths, borers, all with little core preparation (Gratien and

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E.g., Manchester Museum M239c from Lahun.