Marsa Matruh Revisited: Modelling Interaction at a Late Bronze Age Harbour on the Egyptian Coast

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The archaeological remains at Marsa Matruh provide a unique window on cultural interaction in the Late Bronze Age. An island, it is known locally as Gezirat al-Yehudiyah, but it was renamed Bates’ Island by the University of Pennsylvania Expedition in the 1980s in honour of Oric Bates, a Harvard scholar who visited the area for a few months in 1913–1914. The island is located in a shallow lagoon, the northern rim of which offered the prospect of shelter during Mediterranean storms. The Late Bronze Age remains have been extensively described, and a brief account will suffice here. Four different activity areas are discernible, running north–south along the spine of the island. The main storage area lay on the northern part of the island, identified by a number of Cypriot pithoi and Canaanite jars. A series of walls run through the area, but they do not connect in a coherent fashion; there are also a few hearths, as well as a midden of animal and fish bones and seashells. A cooking area lay to the south of this, but the archaeology was heavily disturbed, first by the construction of a fishermen’s hut over them and later by the destruction of the same in the Second World War. Further along the ridge was a series of very small rooms, apparently plastered. At least one of them was paved with flat stones. This cluster of rooms may have been protected from winds from the west by a sheltering wall, but this may also have been an access ramp, although to what is not clear. A final group of rooms or semi-open areas lie at the southern tip of the island. Identified by the excavator as a workshop, it was in this area that


small bronze items were fashioned, as indicated by the presence of crucibles and metal waste.\textsuperscript{4}

Given its isolated location, the material remains found on Bates’ Island is one of the rare occasions where pots can be held to more or less equal people, albeit with the caveats that form a large part of the argument here. The island was a place of encounter for at least three different groups: mariners, Libyans and Egyptians. Discussion in the initial publication emphasised the mariners, for the island provides a unique window into sailors’ lives.\textsuperscript{5} Other discussions sought to bring the Libyans closer to centre stage.\textsuperscript{6} This paper considers the practicalities of the activities on the island and seeks to balance the roles and spheres of activities of all three groups (Figure 4.1).

1 Mariners

The island is well-placed on the eastern Mediterranean gyre. Sailing from southern Crete, ships would make landfall in Cyrenaica and progress eastwards to the Delta, and then along the Levantine coast. A northern wind blows in winter towards Crete, allowing some connection between the two at this time.\textsuperscript{7} In any event, this section of the North African coast would have seen ships passing with some regularity during the sailing season, even if most did not put in to the lagoon at Marsa Matruh.

It seems reasonable to assume that the facilities on the island were constructed by and for the use of passing mariners. The walls were constructed out of stone with a rubble fill, held together by a mud mortar, with possibly a lightweight wattle superstructure. Even though it is not possible to identify the origin of the people who used the island based upon the construction of its architecture, for this method of building was not regionally specific within the eastern Mediterranean, we can say that the style does not conform to known

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., pp. 72–75.
\textsuperscript{5} Hulin and White 2002.
\textsuperscript{7} L.V. Watrous, Kommos III: The Late Bronze Age Pottery (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), figs. 10–11.