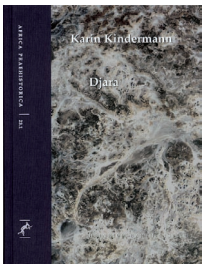
Book Review



Djara. Zur mittelholozänen Besiedlungsgeschichte zwischen Niltal und Oasen (Abu-Muharik-Plateau, Ägypten). *By K. Kindermann.* Africa Praehistorica 23. Heinrich-Barth-Institut, Köln, 2010, 2 volumes, 858 pp. ISBN 978-3-927688-35-3. € 98.00 (Hardback).

This title is number 23 of the series "Africa Praehistorica, Monographs on African Archaeology and Environment", edited by Rudolph Kuper. The different volumes of this series are the result of the important interdisciplinary studies devoted to a North-South transect of Africa in search of prehistoric humans and their environment. This title comprises two volumes. Volume 1 and two papers of volume 2 are written in German. Three papers of volume 2 are in English. Most parts have an extended summary in English, French and Arabic. All figures have an English legend.

The PhD thesis of Karin Kindermann at the University of Cologne in 2006 is the main contribution and subject of volume 1 (538 pages). It presents the final results of important field research with an outstanding documentation of the archaeological material, and an accurate and in-depth analysis of the lithic technology with 322 figures, being black and white pictures or drawings, and 122 tables. This volume is subdivided in two main parts: a cultural history part with an interpretation of the lithic assemblages in a large geographical context, and a landscape archaeological part with the discussion of the settlement structures and the environmental data.

Djara is situated on the Egyptian Limestone Plateau in the Western Desert some 150 km west-northwest of Asyut in the Nile Valley. Today it is an extremely dry region, but during the Middle Holocene the area was visited by humans.

There is a good description of the lithic terminology that has been used for the archaeological inventory of the sites. The Holocene sites are situated in a well-defined depression on the limestone plateau, an area of 10 km by 5 km. A high amount of mid-Holocene sites was evident, whereas artefacts from older as well as from younger periods were rare. The relative chronology of the sites is mainly based on lithic technology, the tool inventories and type of retouches from 20 large lithic artefact inventories, and 36 radiocarbon dates, stretching over a period of some 3200 years from 7700 cal BC until 4500 cal BC. The sites are attributed to five successive occupation phases, labeled Epipalaeolithic, Djara A, Early Djara B, Late Djara B and Final Djara B. During this time period important changes in the lithic technology are visible: from a typical bladelet technology with backed pieces towards facially retouched tools such as arrowheads, knives or foliate points whose percentage continuously rises until the end of the Djara occupation. Ceramics are very rare and exclusively associated with sites later than 5800 cal BC. After 4500 cal BC an abrupt break-off is visible in the sequence of the ^{14}C dates, and the humans disappeared from the area.

A discussion on the special hydrological system of the region and the agglomeration of archaeological sites comes to the conclusion that a permanent occupation of the plateau area was probably not possible because of the climatic conditions. The concentration of prehistoric sites in the Djara depression points to locally favourable conditions in contrast to the surrounding plateau surface. The introduction of small domestic animals (sheep) is dated to the end of Djara A, but livestock keeping had a subordinate role (somewhat in contradiction to the ideas expressed by Nadja Pölliath in volume 2). Hunting and gathering were much more important.

The volume concludes with a comparison and categorisation of the archaeological results from the area of Djara with neighboring regions in Egypt like other parts of the Western Desert, the oases and the Nile Valley.

In an epilog, the significance of the Djara region for the formation of the predynastic cultures in Egypt

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is discussed. There is, according to the author, good evidence that the Nile Valley predynastic cultures can be considered as "a gift of the desert".

The most important part of this work (309 pages) is the catalogue of the sites. Indeed, the general ideas that have been formulated in relation to the importance of the Djara area can already be found in contributions in journals that have a more international distribution then books in German. The catalogue describes 58 sites where systematic excavations were conducted, 66 sites that have been documented by a standardised survey method, and finally 139 short observations made during survey trips in the area. The sites are presented in a systematic way with information on the landscape, the archaeological activities performed, a site description, the archaeological inventories and a cultural-chronological evaluation based on the ^{14}C dates. The catalogue is extensively illustrated with plans, very good artefact drawings and tables. All these illustrations are of high standard quality. Good maps for most sites are available but a GPS reading of the sites, especially those of the third category, could have given a more precise location.

Most often, international journals have no place for publishing such final site-reports with numerous drawings of stone artefact assemblages, which are, however, the most important part of the research and provide a valuable basis for other researchers. They can inspire scientific discussion about regional epipalaeolithic and neolithic developments in the Eastern Sahara, of which only little is known at present. The present book is an extremely valuable example of research reporting.

Of course, some remarks can be formulated: Most sites are deflated remnants where no stratigraphic or sedimentologic observations were possible, which always presents the danger that sites are in fact palimpsests of several occupations. Correlation between ^{14}C dates and artefact assemblages is in such circumstances of course very difficult, if not impossible. The author is quite aware of this problem and tries to find suitable elements to differentiate a "good" site from less usable one. She tries to apply a whole series of techniques to ascertain the cultural homogeneity of the collections. Still, the discussion regarding the homogeneity of the sites should have been more explicit.

One should remember that the ^{14}C method does not provide an "absolute" chronology (*p. 206*) but rather a radiometric chronology that can be connected with a "calendar" chronology.

There has been a long discussion about the cultural term one should use for the Western Desert occupation. The author chooses to identify the first period as Epipalaeolithic rather than Neolithic as was introduced by Wendorf & Schild (1984). This is the better option because there is, indeed, in this part of the Western Desert, no indication of a neolithic way of life.

One of the questions that are quite important for the Egyptian prehistory is the understanding of the important change in lithic technology that occurred between the Epipalaeolithic phase and the Djara phases. Why is there a change from a mainly bladelet to a mainly flake debitage? Is this an introduction from abroad, from the Levant? A discussion on the origin of the mid-Holocene occupants of the Djara region is missing. No suggestions from the author are given.

The author stresses that the "flächenretuschierter Komplex" (facially retouched stone tool complex) on the Abu-Muharik-Plateau is typical for the northern part of the Egyptian Western Desert. There is, however, no discussion why, from 6500 cal BC on, there is a very important change from the Epipalaeolithic technology towards the "flächenretuschierter Komplex" technology.

The acceptance that the occupation of the area was restricted to the winter time is argued from some rather simple reasoning regarding the impact of evapotranspiration, but no field arguments are presented. According to the author the occupation of the Djara region was very episodic and characterised by a high mobility, suggesting that the population had to leave the area during the summer period. The population could move to the large oases or to the Nile Valley. Unfortunately nearly nothing is known of the human occupation of the Nile Valley during the time period of the mid-Holocene. At Elkab (Vermeersch 1978: 125), which is situated more than 250 km south of Djara, it was argued that during the Epipalaeolithic period there are field indications of winter rains.

The author tries to prove that the beginning of the predynastic cultures in the Nile Valley can be seen as a direct consequence of the migration at the end of the episodic utilisation of the Djara area. Similarities between Djara's artefact inventories and those of the early predynastic cultures are suggested. She stresses a remarkable agreement between the stone tool inventories of Djara and those of Fayum A. However, it is not evident that the Fayum material represents the origin of the predynastic cultures in the Nile Valley. Moreover, there is an important time gap between the Late Djara phase and the predynastic occupations in the Nile Valley. Why should, *e.g.*, a Badararian site such as Maghar Dendera 2 (Hendrickx *et al.* 2001) have such high numbers of burins, which are nearly absent at Djara? The idea of "a gift of the desert" is certainly a good hypothesis but it still needs much more evidence before it can be accepted as a reality. Djara is not providing that evidence.