

LIFE IN THE EASTERN DESERT OF EGYPT

Unit 10 – Living in the desert today:
Modern Bedouin communities

HPAH7006

Bedouin Tribes

- There major groups or tribes living in the Egyptian and Sudanese Eastern Desert.
 - Ma'aza ('Goat People'),
 - 'Ababda,
 - Bisharin.
- Ma'aza territory largely corresponds with the northern Egyptian Eastern desert: from Za'farina down to the road running between modern Quseir and Quft
- 'Ababda: area south of Quseir to Quft road down to Shalateen
- Bisharin territory extends south of Shalateen into Sudan.

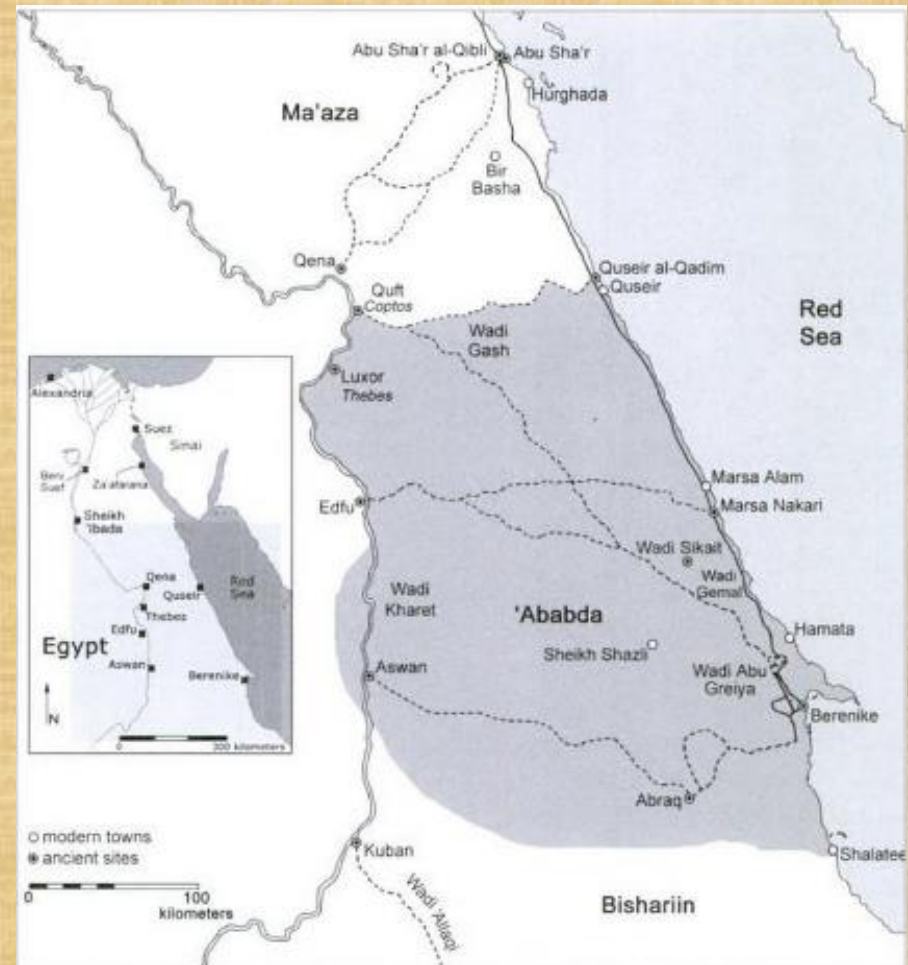


Fig. 11.1: Map showing the boundaries of the Ma'aza, the 'Ababda, and the Bisharin tribes.

Map from Sidebotham, Hense and Nouwens (2008)

Origins

- Ma'aza migrated into the Eastern Desert region from Arabia a few centuries ago – arrived around the 1700s after being driven out of Arabia by another tribe called the Howeitat.
- Ababda can trace their origins back about 22 to 23 generations ago (13th century), but also claims a connection to Arabia (via al-Zubayr bin al-Awwaam); an additional tradition also credits a link with Sudan to a figure known as Kahil.



Lifestyles

- ❑ Traditional Bedouin houses are often simple tents or structures of woven mats, skins and carpets.
 - Egyptian government has provide some houses made of concrete and cinder blocks.
- ❑ Ma'aza, 'Ababda and Bisharin all engage in herding goats, sheep and dromedaries – also keep chickens and dogs.
- ❑ Wool and animal hair to make products, milk and meat. Products made from animal skins, also traditional medicines from desert plants and vegetables.
- ❑ Kitchen gardens.



Fig. 11.5: Bisharin hut of tree branches.



Pl. 11.1: Building the 'Ababda abode: adding mats to the wooden frame.

Diet

- ▣ “Traditional” staple diet of the Bedouin includes unleavened bread, lentils, *mulukhiya* (a vegetable akin to spinach).
- ▣ Also consume tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco.
 - ▣ Commodities very much not available to our ancient indigenous nomads!
- ▣ Use of charcoal (made from dead wood) and dried camel dung for fuel.



The Future

- ❑ The Bedouin do not live in “timeless” or “static” cultures – nor can we automatically assume an unbroken link back to the past.
- ❑ Influence of modern technology – pickup trucks, guns, mobile phones, plastic containers, etc.
- ❑ Importance of recording oral accounts and preserving aspects of material culture in museums and educational centres – but should not seek to impose “preservation” onto these groups.