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Lobo: a contribution to the prehistory of the eastern Sand Sea and the Egyptian oases

In 1934 Lt. Ordre Wingate published some archaeological objects from the Great Sand Sea. He recorded several sites in the vicinity of Abu Minquar, a small oasis halfway between Dakhla and Farafra (Wingate 1934: 302 - 304). One of these sites was re-discovered by chance in 1978 during a geological exploration. A collection of artefacts from that visit included pressure-flaked bifacial knives and arrowheads, adzes and fragments of decorated ostrich eggshell (Fig. 1 and 2) and is probably related to sites from Fayum and the Oases of Kharga and Dakhla (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934; Caton-Thompson 1952; McDonald 1982).

The site, called "Lobo" by the rediscoverer, was investigated by a group of the BOS project in 1981 and 1983. Five test excavations and a large scale sampling yielded a rich flint assemblage of about 100,000 artefacts, abundant remains of ostrich eggshell, several hundred of grinding stones, and some fragments of ceramics. Studies of these artefacts are still in process and will be published later in detail. Remains of hearths, pits and two well-like structures could have been partially excavated in three of the test areas. Radiocarbon dates suggest a rather long span of time of settlement activities with at least two main phases at about 7,800 b.p. and about 6,100 b.p.

The site (BOS site 81/55) is situated at the eastern margins of the Great Sand Sea of Egypt (see Kuper, this volume Fig. 1). A dense surface scatter of artefacts stretches along the western foot of a big longitudinal dune for about 1,200 m in N-S and about 300 m in E-W direction. Zones of lower and higher density of artefacts were recorded within this area but did not form any distinct distribution on the surface. Deflation is responsible for the nearly total lack of identifiable bones. The areas chosen for excavation indicated some better preservation (either bone splinters or ceramics or unweathered fragments of ostrich eggshell).

The first impression of the site and the artefacts suggested that they represent multiple occupations. This was confirmed by radiocarbon dates obtained from the



FIG. 1. Lobo, area 81/55

1 - 3, 7, 8: Flint artefacts; 4 - 6: Ostrich egg shell

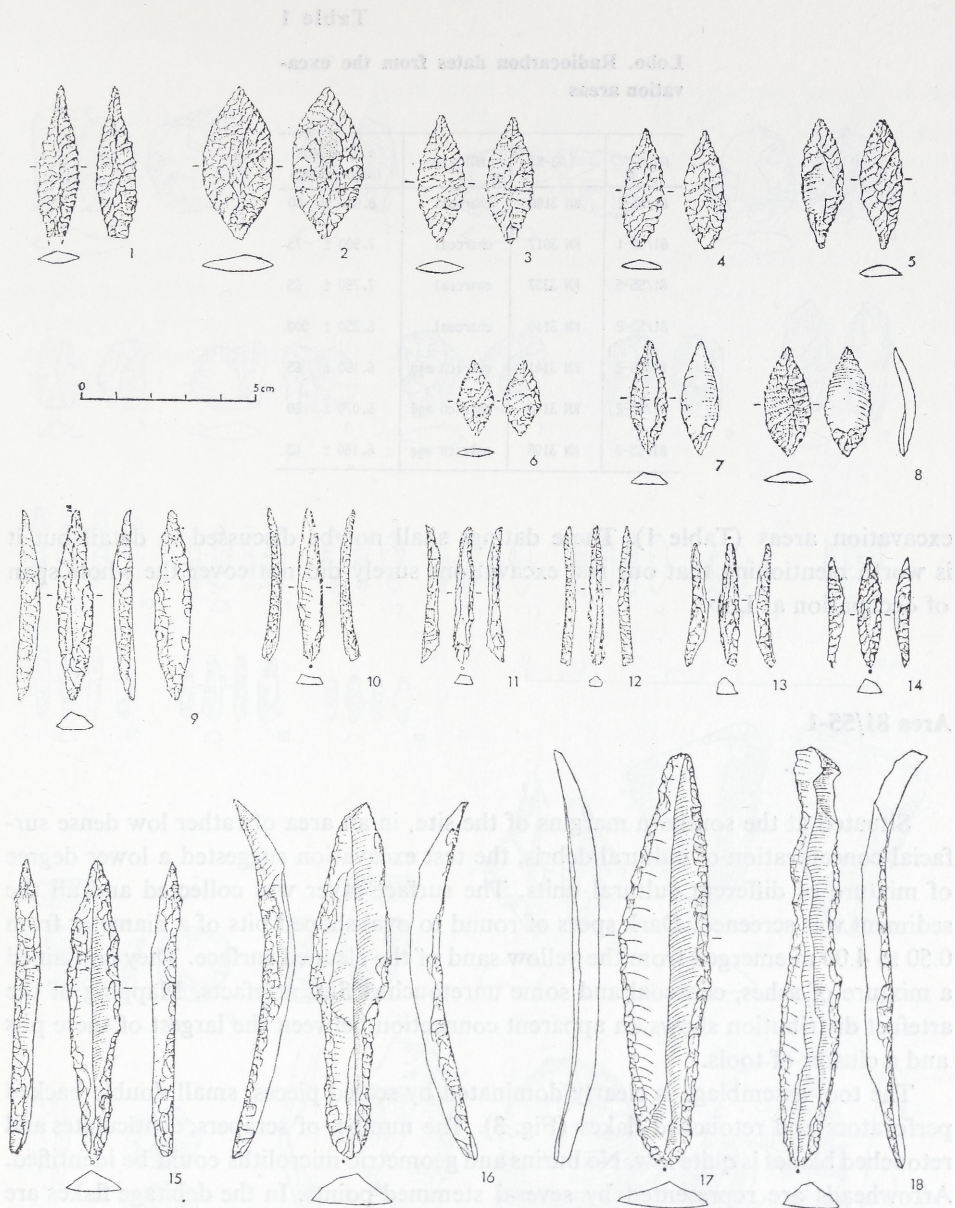


FIG. 2. Lobo, area 81/55. Flint artefacts

Table 1

Lobo. Radiocarbon dates from the excavation areas

AREA	LAB-NR	MATERIAL	b. p. - DATE (uncorrected)
81/55-1	KN 3186	charcoal	8.650 ± 80
81/55-1	KN 3017	charcoal	7.900 ± 75
81/55-5	KN 3357	charcoal	7.790 ± 65
81/55-2	KN 3140	charcoal	6.350 ± 500
81/55-2	KN 3141	ostrich egg	6.160 ± 65
81/55-2	KN 3142	ostrich egg	6.070 ± 60
81/55-3	KN 3198	ostrich egg	6.180 ± 65

excavation areas (Table 1). These datings shall not be discussed in detail but it is worth mentioning that our test excavations surely did not cover the whole span of occupation at Lobo.

Area 81/55-1

Situated at the southern margins of the site, in an area of rather low dense surfacial concentration of cultural debris, the test excavation suggested a lower degree of mixture of different cultural units. The surface layer was collected and all the sediment was screened. Dark spots of round to oval shaped pits of a diameter from 0.50 to 4.00 m emerged from the yellow sand of the cleaned surface. They contained a mixture of ashes, charcoal and some unretouched flint artefacts. Mapping of the artefact distribution shows an apparent connection between the largest of these pits and a cluster of tools.

The tool assemblage is clearly dominated by scaled pieces, small double backed perforators and retouched flakes (Fig. 3). The number of scrapers, denticulates and retouched blades is quite low. No burins and geometric microliths could be identified. Arrowheads are represented by several stemmed points. In the debitage flakes are predominant. Though there is a considerable amount of chips, the number of cores is very low and they have been strongly reduced. Some of them have been used as scaled pieces at last. As far as we can say from some surveys, the raw material, mainly nodular chert is not to be found in the close proximity of the site but had to be transported possibly from the escarpment about 40 km away. Far-reaching transport can be assumed for rare materials like desert glass, fossil wood and quartzite.

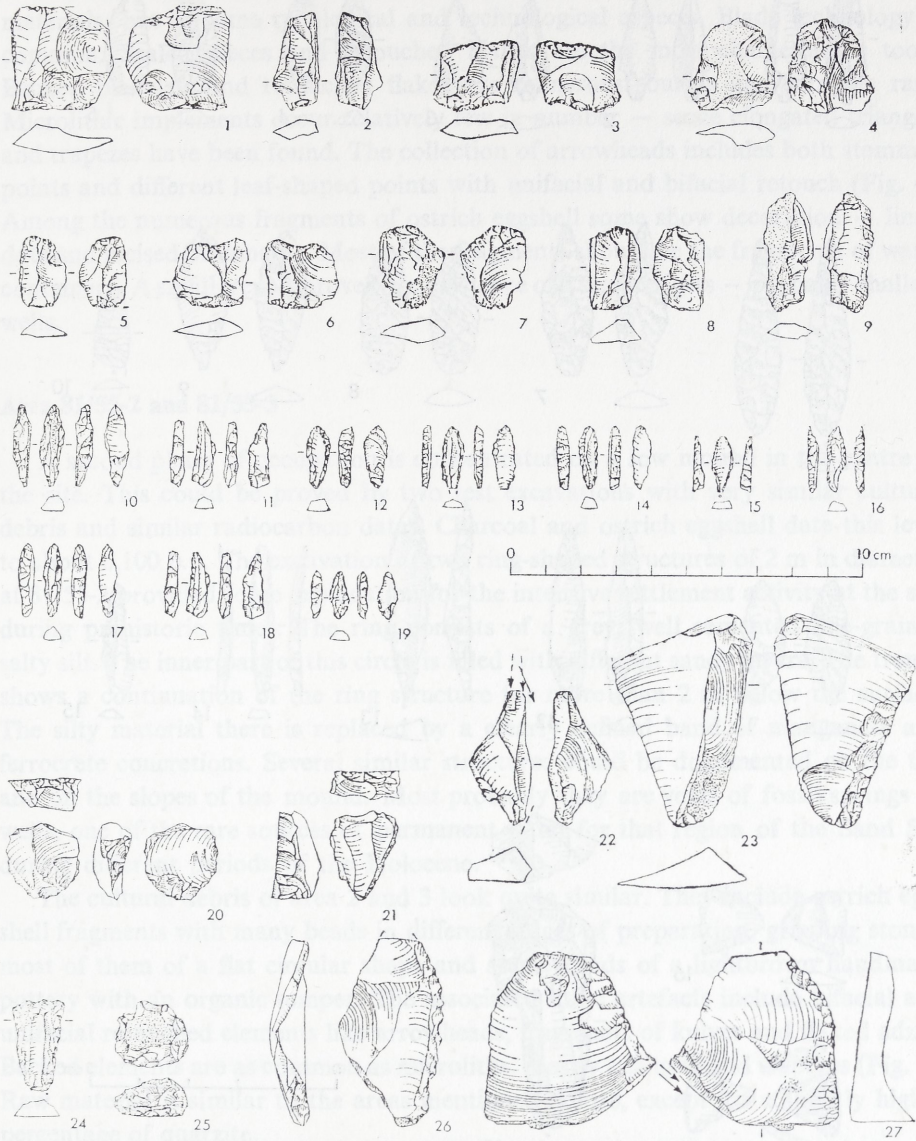


FIG. 3. Lobo, area 81/55-1. Flint artefacts

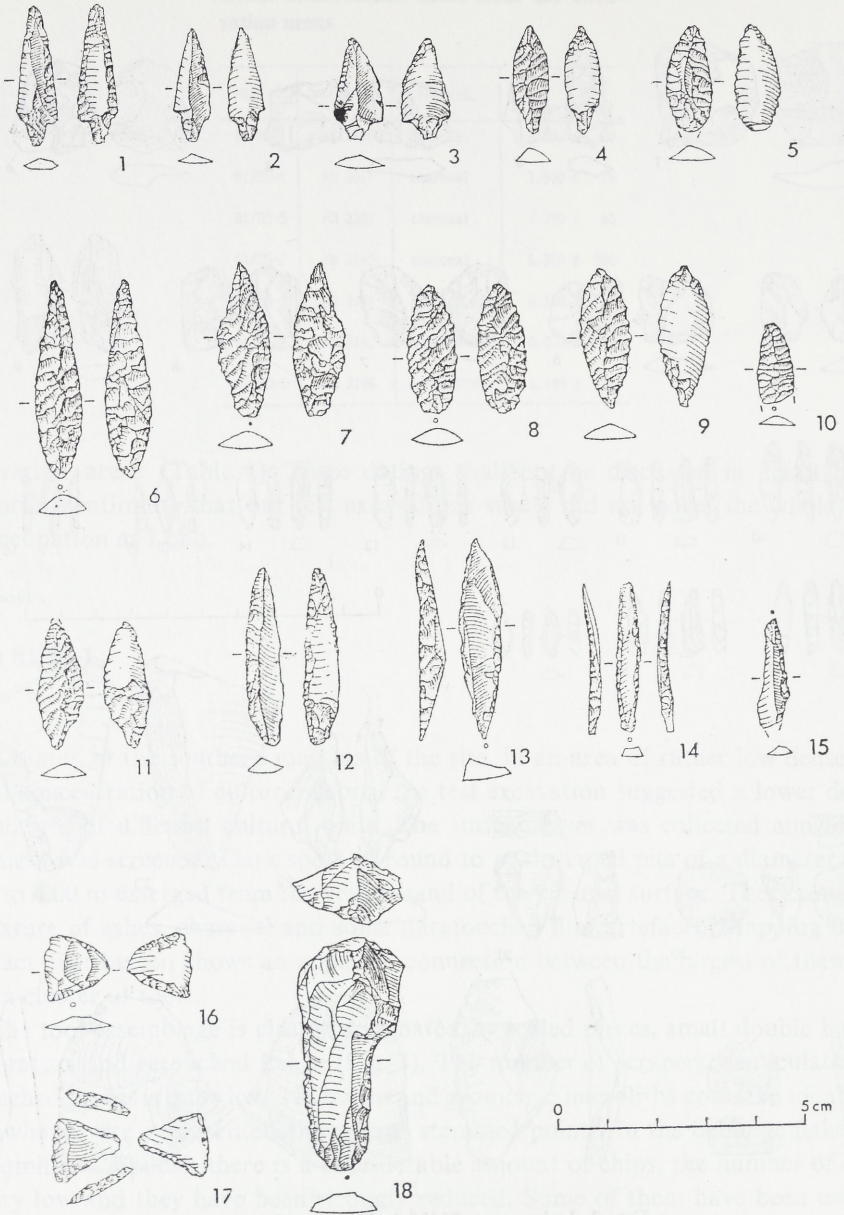


FIG. 4. Lobo, area 81/55-5. Flint artefacts

Area 81/55-5

The flint implements differ from those of 81/55-1 not in the proportion of raw materials, but in some typological and technological aspects. Blade technology is common. Scaled pieces and retouched blades are the most characteristic tools. Backed bladelets and retouched flakes are numerous, burins and scrapers rare. Microlithic implements occur relatively few in number — some elongated triangles and trapezes have been found. The collection of arrowheads includes both stemmed points and different leaf-shaped points with unifacial and bifacial retouch (Fig. 4). Among the numerous fragments of ostrich eggshell some show decoration — lines, dots and incised ornaments. Most of the fragments should be the fragments of water containers. A small trench proved the existence of a series of pits — probably shallow wells.

Area 81/55-2 and 81/55-3

A second phase of occupation is concentrated on a low mound in the centre of the site. This could be proved by two test excavations with very similar cultural debris and similar radiocarbon dates. Charcoal and ostrich eggshell date this level to about 6,100 b.p. The excavation of two ring-shaped structures of 2 m in diameter at 81/55-2 provided some explanation for the intensive settlement activity at the site during prehistoric times. The ring consists of a grey, well cemented fine-grained salty silt. The inner part of this circle is filled with different sandy layers. The trench shows a continuation of the ring structure for more than 2 m below the surface. The silty material there is replaced by a clearly defined band of manganese and ferrocete concretions. Several similar structures could be documented on the top and on the slopes of the mound. Most probably they are vents of fossil springs or wells, one of the rare sources of permanent water for that region of the Sand Sea during different periods of the Holocene.

The cultural debris of area 2 and 3 look quite similar. They include ostrich eggshell fragments with many beads in different stages of preparation, grinding stones, most of them of a flat circular shape and some sherds of a lightbrown handmade pottery with an organic temper. The associated lithic artefacts include bifacial and unifacial retouched elements like arrowheads, fragments of knives and flaked adzes. Backed elements are as common as microliths, mostly triangles and trapezes (Fig. 5). Raw material is similar to the areas mentioned before, except for a slightly higher percentage of quartzite.

Area 81/55-6 and 81/55-7

The artefacts of these areas are still awaiting analysis. No hearths and other features could be recorded.

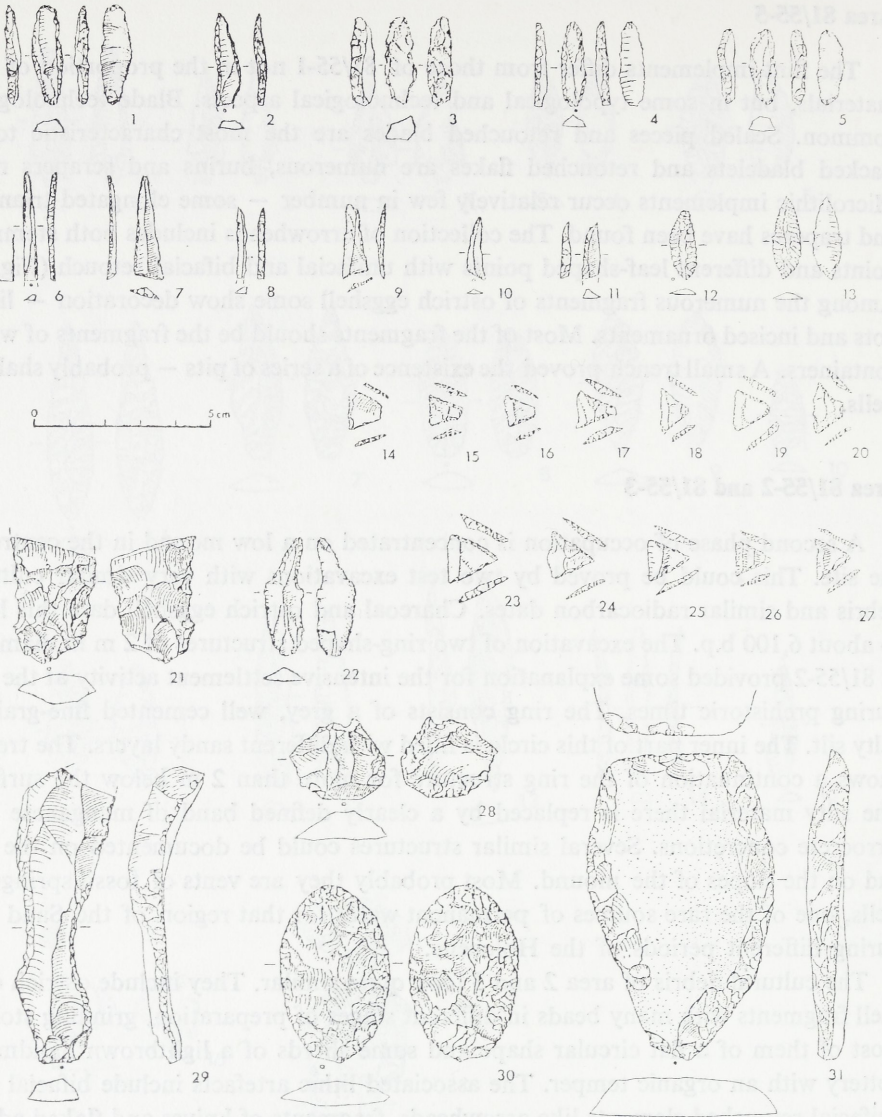


FIG. 5. Lobo, areas 81/55-2 and 81/55-3. Flint artefacts

The site of Lobo was of great importance for the region because there existed a permanent, not seasonal water source and as S. Kröpelin suggested (personal communication) also salt mining might have played an important role during the occupation. It seems to be rather complicated to define the different cultural units because of multiple occupation at that open air site, but the rather long span of settlement activities at the area shows that at least the outskirts of the Great Sand Sea offered

favourable living conditions during different periods of the Holocene (see also E. Cziesla, this volume). The existence of fossil springs at Lobo suggest a remarkable higher local water table during these times. Another 15 Epipaleolithic and Neolithic sites in the vicinity of Lobo and several other sites and hearths in the central parts of the Sand Sea could be recorded during a reconnaissance trip by R. Kuper and K. Bokelmann in 1981 showing that this vast dune area cannot be regarded as a frontier line preventing cultural contacts between the Maghreb and the central Sahara to the Egyptian Oases and further to the Nile and vice versa.

Cultural relations to the Oases and the Fayum can be found in elements of typological similarity especially of the younger phase represented by the bifacially worked pieces and also by the ceramics (F. Wendorf, personal communication). It is still an open question if these artefacts either represent western influences during the formation of Neolithic and Predynastic cultures of the Nile Valley or point to an extension of these cultures as far west as the Great Sand Sea. The radiocarbon dates from Lobo show a slightly earlier date than these from Fayum.

The results of this relatively limited work at Lobo seem to be promising for future work that may give some new information about the origins and external relations of the Neolithic cultures of the Nile Valley.

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