

Preface

The main tenet of this book is the investigation of mechanisms of pastoral adaptation in hyper arid environments. Based on a field research carried out between 2003 and 2009 among the Kel Tadrart Tuareg in SW Libya in the frame of “The Archaeological Mission in the Sahara” of Sapienza University of Rome, this book explores various facets of a surprisingly successful adaptation to an extremely arid environment. My research vigorously shows that the resilience of the Kel Tadrart is the key to understand the reasons for their choice to stay and live in the almost rainless Acacus Mts., in spite of strong pressure to sedentarize in the neighboring oases.

By means of an ethnoarchaeological approach, I explore the Kel Tadrart interactions with natural resources, the settlement patterns, the campsite structures, and the formation of the pastoral archaeological landscape, focusing on variability and its causes. Through the collection of the interviews, participant observation, mapping of inhabited and abandoned campsites, remote sensing, and archival sources, I examine the various and different Kel Tadrart strategies, perceptions, and material culture to illustrate how desert pastoralism is a rather complex phenomenon, where the 12 households inhabiting a mountain region of c. 5,000 km² make different choices to optimize their survival. Rather than considering them as a marginalized, peripheral, and agonizing society, I show that the Kel Tadrart are instead an outstanding example of successful adaptation to extreme environments. This in turn leads me to reconsider the historical age frequentations in the view of the Kel Tadrart resilience, shedding light onto a quite misunderstood archaeological landscape, where the so far reported absence of evidence does not correspond to the evidence of absence.

This book is conceived as a gradual flow of concepts, elaborating a research narrative aimed at building a gradual understanding of pastoralism in the deserts in an ethnoarchaeological perspective. It is organized into eight chapters, plus a set of Slides available online. In Chap. 1, I introduce some basic theoretical issues, and focus on methodology, fieldwork procedure, and techniques of data treatment. In the following section (Chap. 2), I present an overview of the environment, in the scope of describing the environmental settings relevant to human occupations.

In Chap. 3, I reconstruct the recent history of the Kel Tadrart mainly using ethnohistorical sources and information from the neighboring mountains of the Tassili and Hoggar (both in Algeria). In the next section (Chap. 4), I discuss the Kel Tadrart settlement pattern, studying the position of settlements in relation to natural resources, status, and kinship. Chapter 5 includes a detailed study of the Kel Tadrart settlements, with emphasis on the investigation of the peculiar coexistence of different types of dwelling huts. Abandoned settlements are the subject of Chap. 6, which conveys the data discussed in the previous chapters and aims at discussing the various vestigial remains of no longer used sites, interpreted as the material evidence of different types of frequentations. The suitability of the Tadrart Acacus for pastoral occupation observed in the 'present' is the basis for a short ethnoarchaeologically inspired revision (Chap. 7) of overlooked archaeological evidence related to historic and recent (c. 1000 AC–present) frequentations erratically found in past years in the study area. The end of the book (Chap. 8) features some conclusive remarks, putting together main issues discusses in the previous sections and pinpointing some critical argument related to future development of archaeological and ethnoarchaeological research in the Sahara.



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