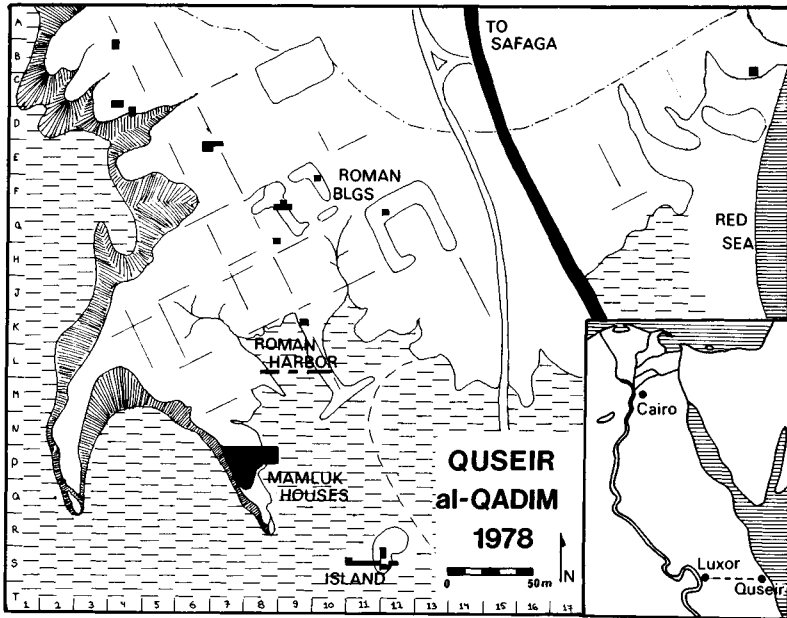


QUSEIR AL-QADIM

Janet H. Johnson & Donald Whitcomb

THE FIRST SEASON of investigations at the ancient port of Quseir al-Qadim on the Red Sea in Egypt took place in winter, 1978; the investigations were sponsored by the Oriental Institute with funding from the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society. The fieldwork was under the direction of Donald Whitcomb (excavations), Janet Johnson (recording), and Martha Prickett (regional survey), with a staff of students from the Oriental Institute: Ann Roth, Ray Johnson, and Richard Jaeschke (conservator). The following consultants were also present: Drs. Leila Wente and John Stubbs, Louisiana State University, Robert Giegengack, University of Pennsylvania, Hainy al-Zeiny, and Abdel Monem Sayed, University of Alexandria. The purpose of this expedition is the archeological investigation of the mercantile and social history of Egypt through the excavation of a small port on the Red Sea and the survey of its environs. The information so gathered will then be studied in relation to the port's urban hinterland—the major urban centers in the Nile Valley which served as the western focus of the caravan trade. The investigation was divided into three parts: 1) the mapping of the ancient city and harbor, 2) the excavation of selected areas of these ruins, and 3) the survey of the region around the ancient port.

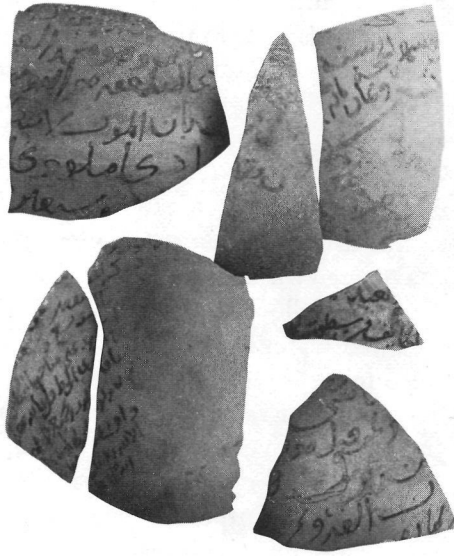
The site was mapped during the first two weeks by grid-ding the ruins in 20 × 20 meter squares. This grid was then used for more detailed planning of all surface features—wall fragments, small mounds, and sherd concentrations. Contour elevations were taken for grid points and surface features for the site map and an intensive surface collection of artifacts was made in a non-random sample amounting to 1% of the entire city (which is about 10 hectares in extent). The grid-



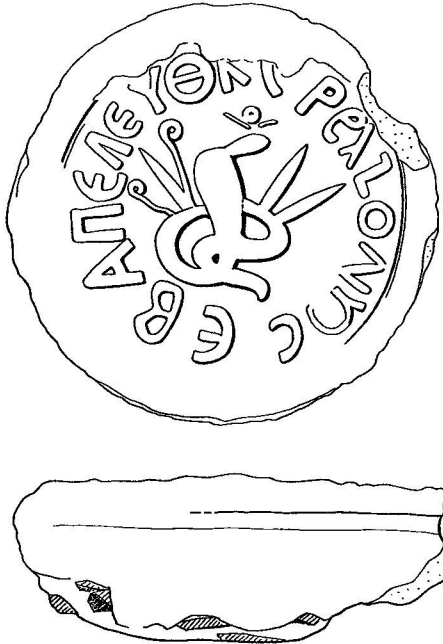
Quseir site plan

ding and mapping revealed that the town was laid out in the rectilinear pattern normal for classical cities, with streets defining regular insulae. The center of the Roman town was dominated by two large buildings, into which a number of *sondages* were placed which indicated a re-use in Islamic times of these substantial Roman buildings. These buildings may have been administrative centers with the functions of later *khan's* or *funduq's* serving the merchants of their time.

The entire site seems to have been built and occupied in the earliest period of the Roman Empire in Egypt, the first century B.C. The Roman occupation lasted until the fourth century of our era. The northwestern part of the city may have been an industrial section since a small iron-working furnace and much iron slag were found in this area. This area was soon abandoned, however, and covered with Roman refuse, showing a contraction of the size of the town during the Roman period. As a dumping ground for sherds and organic waste, this area provided concentrations of well-preserved artifacts, particularly organic remains ranging from cloth and



Fragments of ostrich eggshell with Arabic inscription, so-called "ostrichicons"



A plaster plug used to seal an amphora, with a Greek inscription and symbol of *agathodaimon*—a Roman bottle cap

wooden objects to seeds and papyrus fragments, objects reflecting both the trade goods vital to the port and materials of daily life of these merchants and sailors. Many of the objects, especially the pottery and glass, illustrate the commercial system, a trade ranging from Roman Italy through Quseir to East Africa and China.

Immediately south of the large central buildings was a rectangular depression, now filled with *sabkha* (mud flats), which appears to have been the ancient Roman harbor. South of this harbor is what we called the "island," in the center of what was probably open water in Roman times. Excavations on the "island" failed to reveal any trace of buildings; rather, it was composed of lenses of sands and gravels mixed with Roman artifacts to a cumulative depth of over three meters. We now believe that the island is the spoil heap from Roman dredging operations as they attempted to keep the harbor free of silt.

Most of the harbor area is covered with the remains of buildings dating to the Mamluk period, a reoccupation of the port almost 1000 years after the Romans. Excavations on the western edge of the harbor revealed a series of houses and streets belonging to the period of the Bahri Mamluks (14th century of our era). We recovered regular domestic units composed of two storerooms, an anteroom, and a sitting room; and streets and semi-private courtyards with benches and floors thickly covered with matting. Artifacts of the earlier Roman occupation had been carefully swept down the slope of the ridge and plastered over. Some of the walls of the Mamluk houses may be parts of reused Roman buildings.

The most exciting group of objects from the Mamluk levels throughout the city was a collection of crumpled paper, the remnants of private letters written in Arabic with descriptions of life in this 14th century town, a love letter, and, we hope, descriptions of the commerce of the period. In addition, numerous inscribed pieces of ostrich eggshell were found in association with Muslim burials. Inscribed materials from the Roman period include ostraca and papyrus fragments in Greek and Latin; other languages found on the site and during the survey were Coptic, Demotic Egyptian, South Arabic, and Nabatean. These written materials will

amplify the large collection of well-preserved artifacts in the illustration of life in a classical and medieval port.

While the excavations in Quseir al-Qadim recovered evidence of the daily life and activities of its merchants, the expedition also conducted an intensive survey of the hinterland of the port in order to understand the exploitation of the natural resources during these two historical periods and to discover traces of human occupation during other periods. The survey extended about 20 kilometers inland from the ancient port, concentrating mainly in the valley of Nakheil, where a Roman Caravanserai and mining camp were discovered. Evidence of other mining operations for iron, manganese, and gold were found as well as numerous cairns and rock drawings (ranging from prehistoric to modern). Earlier remains with paleolithic and neolithic flints were also recovered. Most of the remains, however, seem to be connected with the caravan routes of Roman and Islamic times. While the survey did not discover traces of predynastic or pharaonic occupation in the immediate vicinity of the ancient port, this was not a crucial aspect of our work. It is our belief that the study of Islamic and classical remains, important in their own right, will also ultimately answer questions and suggest hypotheses for the interpretation of earlier archeological materials when they come to light in our subsequent seasons at Quseir al-Qadim.