

A R C H E O L O G Y

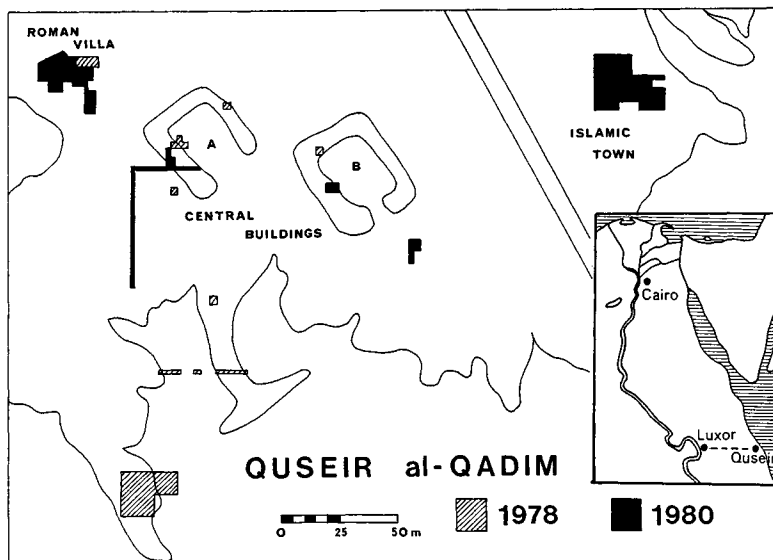
**Janet H. Johnson
and Donald Whitcomb**

Quseir al-Qadim

The small port of Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt, is situated on the north bank of the Wadi Quseir al-Qadim where the wadi meets the Red Sea; it is approximately 180 km. east of Quft (Coptos), near Luxor in the Nile Valley. The first season of excavations in 1978 mapped the entire site and placed exploratory trenches sampling a variety of parts of the ruins. The results have been published as a monograph, *Quseir al-Qadim, 1978: A Preliminary Report* (Cairo: American Research Center in Egypt, 1979), available through the Oriental Institute.

The second season of excavations, which took place from January 6 through February 14, 1980, was designed to explore further the two occupations at the site: the Roman period, from the first into the third centuries of our era, and, after a thousand year abandonment, the Mamluk period, from the 13th through the 15th centuries. In both

Q U S E I R



Site plan of Quseir with (inset) location map

periods the town was established and maintained solely to function as a port in the Red Sea–Indian Ocean trade network involving Egypt, Yemen, East Africa, India, and, in the medieval period, the Far East. The continuation of archeological investigations at Quseir is an attempt to clarify the economic motivation and mechanisms which allowed the foundation and maintenance of this port. Because this town was located in the desert, with no agricultural hinterland, all of the basics for survival had to be imported. Thus, even in the evident absence of architectural embellishments, the environmental situation of this port points to a considerable and continuing capital investment, probably feasible only under the impetus of strong imperialistic governments such as the Roman or the Mamluk. One of the main contributions of archeological research in the Near East has been to document the progress in human settlement in marginal areas, often with unexpected social and technological complexity and success, even when temporary. It is now evident that Quseir al-Qadim was twice an entrepreneurial failure, but the residue of these attempts at settlement offers an excellent opportunity to investigate not only specific historical causes but the larger historical patterns of human adaptation.

The staff charged with the task of finding such evidence included

A R C H E O L O G Y

University of Chicago graduate students Jonathan Brookner, Carol Meyer, and Patricia Wattenmaker (zoologist); other students were Steven Sidebotham (University of Michigan), Scott Redford (Columbia University), Mona Megally (University of Pennsylvania), and Hanna B. Tadros (Cairo University). Professional staff and consultants included Catharine Valentour (conservator, Smithsonian Institution), Wilma Wetterstrom (botanist, Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Roger Bagnall (Greek epigrapher, Columbia University), and Haini el-Zeini. Our very able representative from the Antiquities Organization was Rabia Ahmad Hamdan. As in 1978 the expedition enjoyed the hospitality of the Quseir Phosphate Company and the Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute in Luxor. Funding came from the Smithsonian Institution, Foreign Currency Program, and the National Geographic Society.

The investigation into the structure of the Roman town included further probes into the central buildings, particularly the substantial remains of Building A, and exploratory trenches between this building and the harbor area. The major effort, however, was expended in the excavation of a single Roman house, the so-called "villa," measuring 15 × 14 meters and abutting a north-south street. The original complex may have had as many as ten rooms; however, the two principal rooms were storerooms next to the street. These were found filled with abandoned artifacts, mainly storage jars, both amphoras and small oil jars. The smaller room had a carefully constructed cellar for valuables, which cellar, like the storage jars, the Roman merchant had carefully emptied before he left the site for the last time. The artifacts again clearly indicate the extent of the trade—another Indian inscription (Tamil) was found, along with a piece of Nabatean pottery.

As a complement to our work on the Roman occupation at Quseir al-Qadim we also briefly investigated Bir Kareim, about 35 km. inland, which had been identified during the regional survey conducted during the 1978 season as the closest source of dependable sweet water. Bir Kareim is also the site of a gold mine worked by the Romans. The barracks-like structures of this mining encampment were mapped and the central feature, a small temple set against a hillside, was carefully planned. Very brief clearance of the central cella produced relief fragments of a naos suggesting that this rural chapel may have had some embellishments. More extensive work at Bir Kareim was precluded by the exceedingly heavy winter rains in the Eastern Desert, which destroyed most of the roads. But these same rains brought wild desert flowers to bloom, beautiful to behold and a joy to our botanist.

Q U S E I R



A view north along the "pipeline" trench from the harbor to the central area; in the foreground, an Islamic cross-wall

A R C H E O L O G Y



An Islamic water jug (photo by Steven Sidebotham)

The reoccupation of Quseir al-Qadim in the Islamic period was illustrated through a horizontal clearance of over 500 square meters of the 15th century Mamluk town on the bluffs immediately above the present beach. The excavations revealed a shallow deposit covering a complex of rooms and courtyards. While a degree of standardization of room size and wall orientation suggests some urban planning, an organic development of agglomerative elements is generally indicated. The buildings had stone and mudbrick foundations and superstructures of wood and reed matting (thick accumulations of this organic debris were found throughout the area). One gains the impression of a humble fishing village until one notices the artifactual elements. In addition to Egyptian ceramics, imports include majolicas from the Mediterranean and quantities of Chinese celadons and porcelains. In addition, there are some preliminary indications of contacts from West African medieval kingdoms, probably the result of pilgrimages from these newly converted Muslim states. Other artifacts are no less exciting and problematic, e.g., a number of fine batik printed textiles, probably from Egypt but possibly from India or the East, and a large corpus of private letters written in Arabic. Thus the archeological remains show that Quseir al-Qadim participated, in an accidental and indirect way, as a small conduit through which the entire known world from its eastern to its western extent was economically tied together—and this immediately on the eve of Columbus's voyage.

Q U S E I R



Head of a figurine from the Roman period (drawing by Carol Meyer)



A fragment of Islamic batik, in the Fustat-cloth style, from the fourteenth century; probably printed in India for the Egyptian market (photo by Steven Sidebotham)