



Figure 1. View of the Sheikh's House from the north. Photograph by D. Whitcomb

QUSEIR AL-QADIM

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It has been a long time since the site of Quseir al-Qadim was the subject of an *Annual Report* article (see *Annual Report* 1983). Recent work, however, has provided an excuse to revisit the ancient port that was the subject of excavations in 1978, 1980, and 1982, by Donald Whitcomb and Janet Johnson. Quseir al-Qadim lies on the Red Sea coast of Egypt, about 80 km south of Hurghada, and 8 km north of the modern port town of Quseir. The site mound is about 10 hectares, or 25 acres, in area and sits at the head of a coral bay that once served as the harbor. Behind

¹ Two interim reports have been published on the excavations by Whitcomb and Johnson, along with numerous short articles: Whitcomb and Johnson, *Quseir al-Qadim* 1978; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "Quseir el-Qadim und der Rote Meer-Handel," *Das Altertum* 26/2 (1980): 103–12; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "Quseir al-Qadim," *The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1979–1980* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 30–35; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "Egypt and the Spice Trade," *Archaeology* 34/6 (1981): 16–23; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "Quseir al-Qadim," *The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1980–1981* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 32–35; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "1982 Season of Excavations at Quseir al-Qadim," *The American Research Center in Egypt Newsletter* 120 (1982): 24–30; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "1982 Season of Excavations at Quseir al-

Qadim," *The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1981–1982* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 30–40; Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, *Quseir al-Qadim 1980: Preliminary Report* (American Research Center in Egypt, Reports 7; Malibu, 1982); Donald Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson, "Quseir al-Qadim," *The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1983–1984* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 17–18.

² This was reaffirmed by recent excavations of the University of Southampton. Although they have been publishing preliminary reports for all periods of occupation, the investigation of Myos Hormos is the primary goal of Southampton's excavations: D. P. S. Peacock et al., *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadim: A Roman and Islamic Port Site, Interim Report 1999* (University of Southampton - Department of Archaeology, 2000); D. P. S. Peacock et al., *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadim: A Roman and Islamic Port Site, Interim Report 2000* (University of

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Quseir al-Qadim, 1982
The Sheikh's house

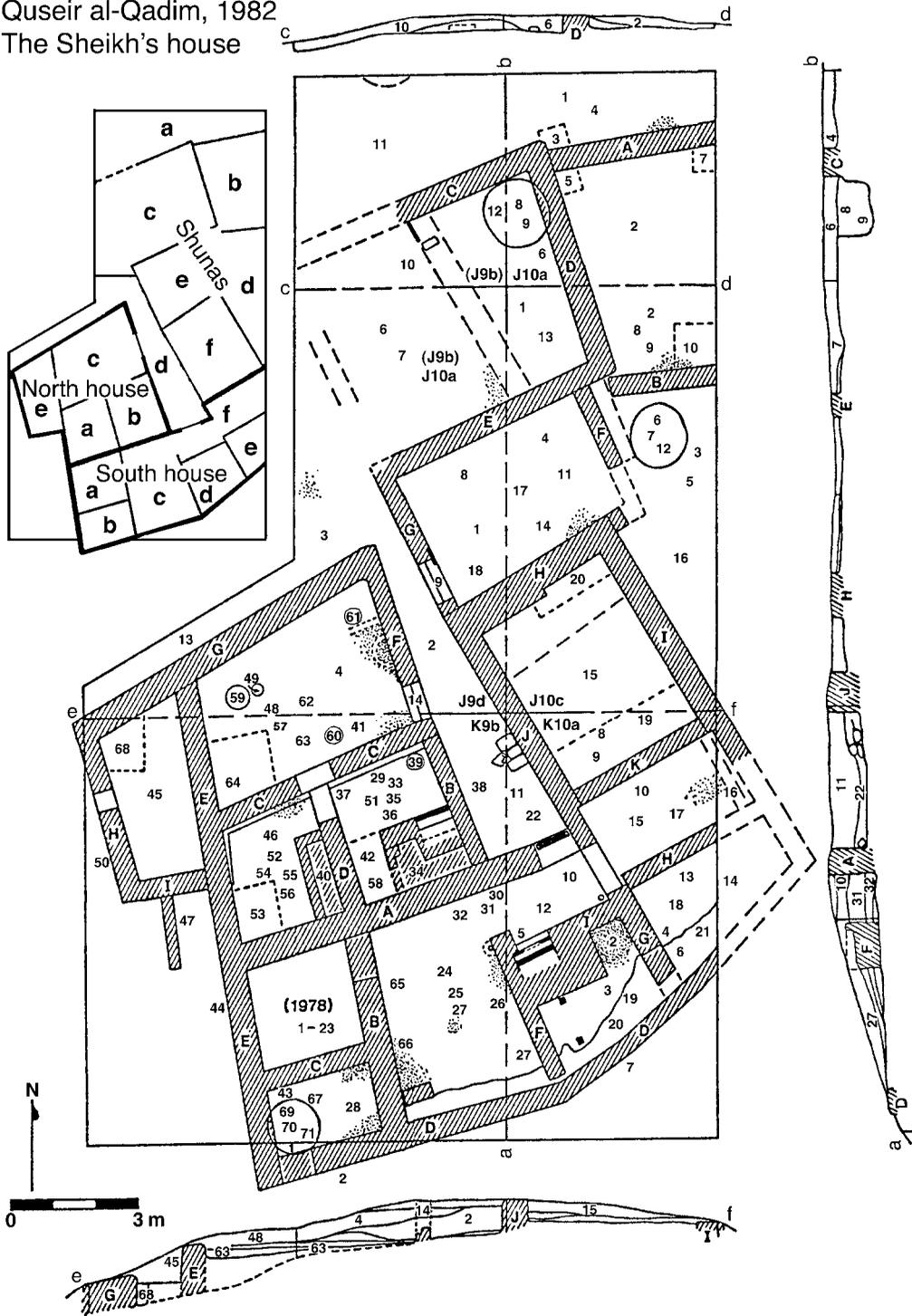


Figure 2. Plan of the Sheikh's House. Drawing by D. Whitcomb

it extensive *sebakh* or mud flats become badlands comprised of terraces and raised beaches. The coastal plain here is only about 2 km wide before the low hills of the Red Sea mountains begin as one moves westward toward the Nile Valley. Behind Quseir the Wadi Hammamat stretches west to the towns of Qena and Qus, connecting this Red Sea coastal region with the Luxor region of the Nile Valley. The area is extremely arid, having a mean annual rainfall of 3.4 mm, and no source of freshwater less than a day's journey away. Vegetation is sparse and consists mainly of small shrubs.

According to Whitcomb and Johnson's excavations,¹ the two main periods of occupation and use of the port are the Roman (when it was known as Myos Hormos) and the late Ayyubid to Mamluk.² Other periods are in scant evidence: a few traces of the Ptolemaic period are seen in carved blocks scattered throughout the modern town, and the Ottoman fortress, in modern downtown Quseir, has been recently cleared. Although the Roman period was well investigated, the Islamic periods have been at the center of the Oriental Institute's work since the excavations.

"The Sheikh's house," revealed during the 1982 season, has been the focus of recent work on Quseir al-Qadim. This area was a hill or knoll on the southern edge of the site, sitting above the silted-in Roman bay (fig. 1). This complex of stone and mudbrick-walled structures is interpreted as two adjoining houses, associated storerooms, and a passageway between them. The two houses are on the west and south sides of the knoll, and the storerooms line up northwest to southeast along the east side (fig. 2). Each house consists primarily of one large room (approximately 5.5 × 4.0 m each) and two smaller rooms alongside the large room, usually 3.0 × 2.5 m. Each preserved a stairway to the second floor or roof, with some wooden treads extant. The storerooms were larger (ca. 4.0 × 2.0–5.0 m) and each was entered off the corridor. Two large wooden keys were hidden beneath the threshold of one of the storerooms. One key is inscribed with the name of its owner, which is possibly read as Hajj Baraka (fig. 3).³

The excavation of these houses provided a rich assemblage of artifacts, all well preserved due to the region's aridity. Artifacts of wood, leather, fiber, basketry, floor matting, bundles of reeds (probably for roofing), cloth, paper, and plant matter were found in and around the house, in addition to the expected artifacts of ceramic, glass, and stone (figs. 4–10).

The textiles were among the more spectacular finds, as in addition to many undyed pieces of linen and cotton, a few brightly colored resist-dyed pieces were found. These blue or red on natural designs are made when a resist, such as wax, is applied to the cloth in a pattern before it is dipped in dye. The resist prevents the dye from penetrating the fabric, leaving a colored pattern on a natural or white ground. They are likely of Indian origin, although some may have been locally made. Some of these textiles have been published by Gilian Vogelsang-Eastwood,⁴ but

Southampton - Department of Archaeology, 2001); D. P. S. Peacock et al., *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadim: A Roman and Islamic Port Site, Interim Report 2001* (University of Southampton - Department of Archaeology, 2002); D. P. S. Peacock et al., *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadim: A Roman and Islamic Port Site, Interim Report 2002* (University of Southampton - Department of Archaeology, 2003); D. P. S. Peacock et al., *Myos Hormos - Quseir al-Qadim: A Roman and Islamic Port Site, Interim Report 2003* (University of Southampton - Department of Archaeology, 2004). Also see <http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research/QuseirDev/>.

³ Fredrik T. Hiebert reads the inscription *miftah al-haji baraka* "Key of Haji Baraka" in "Commercial Organization of the Egyptian Port of Quseir al-Qadim: Evidence from the Analysis of the Wooden Objects," *Archéologie Islamique* 2 (1991): 127–59. For alternate readings, see Li Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic Documents of Quseir* (Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts 52; Leiden, 2004).

⁴ Vogelsang-Eastwood, Gillian, *Resist-Dyed Textiles from Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt*. (Paris, 1989).

⁵ Burke and Whitcomb, "Quseir al-Qadim: A Community and Its Textiles," *Ars Orientalis* 34 (forthcoming).

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Figure 3. Wooden keys to the storerooms, one inscribed

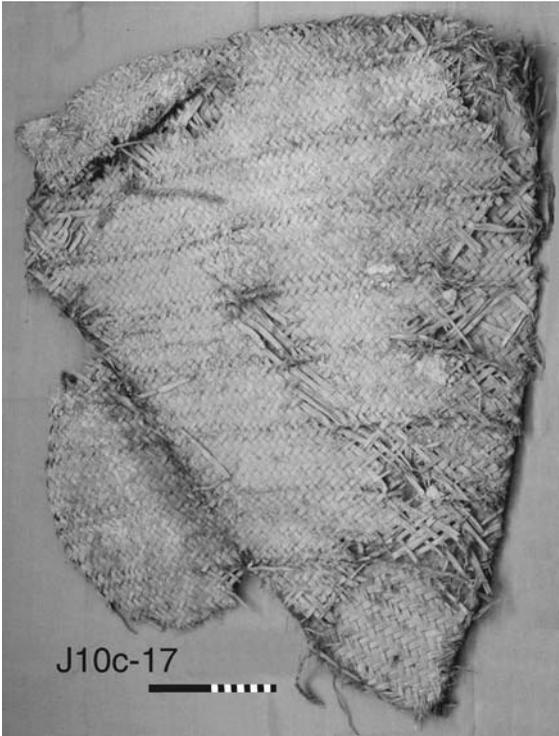


Figure 4. Basketry

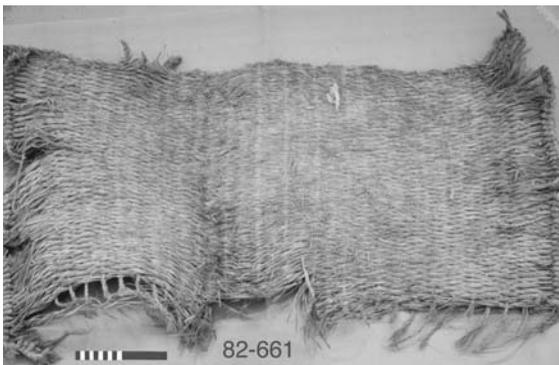


Figure 5. Matting

Photographs by D. Whitcomb



Figure 6. Rope coils



Figure 7. String



Figure 8. Leather shoe



Figure 9. Rope sandal

recently Whitcomb had the opportunity to present those found at the Sheikh's House at a University of Michigan conference, "Communities and Commodities: Western India and the Indian Ocean (eleventh–fifteenth centuries)." Whitcomb and I subsequently coauthored a paper for *Ars Orientalis* on these richly decorated textiles and their archaeological contexts (figs. 11–12),⁵ showing that the imported fabrics were found alongside ceramics imported from Yemen, China, and possibly Nubia (fig. 13) and seem to have been considered valuable.

The paper artifacts were also a breathtaking find, as thousands of fragments of letters, documents, and even the occasional ink drawings (fig. 14) were discovered all over the site, including at least 871 from the Sheikh's House alone. These documents were found scattered among the rest of the debris that remains from the occupation and abandonment of the houses and storerooms, for the most part having been crumpled up and thrown away after they had served their purpose. However, at least one letter was found still rolled and carefully tied with string. According to research by Li Guo of the University of Notre Dame and formerly of the University of Chicago, four of the letters bear dates that cluster within the first four decades of the thirteenth century (A.D. 1200–1240); likewise, the coins found in this area were minted in these same years of the Ayyubid period,⁶ with only a few coins of the previous (Fatimid) period and no Mamluk issues of the subsequent period (fig. 15). Thus the occupation of this house or house and storeroom complex seems to have lasted less than half a century.

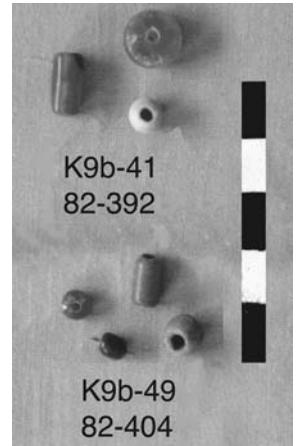


Figure 10. Beads. Photograph by D. Whitcomb

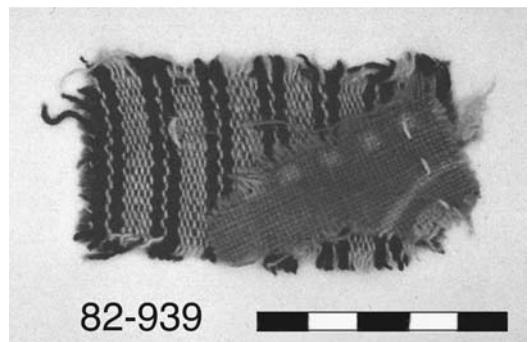


Figure 11. Two pieces of cloth sewn together, one of woven blue and natural stripes, the other red resist-dyed. RN82-939 from locus K10-a20. Photograph by D. Whitcomb

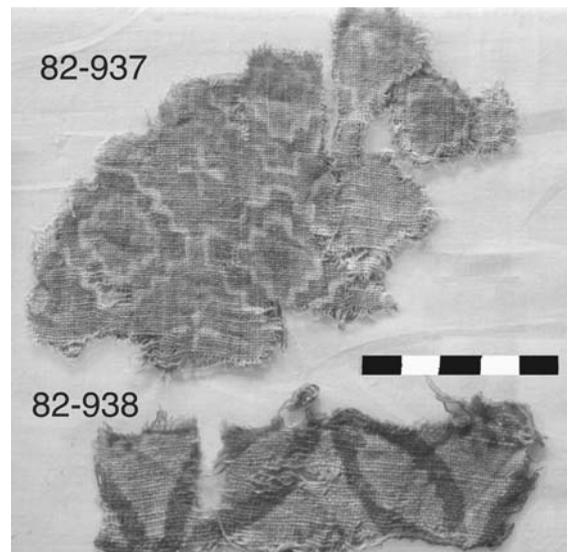


Figure 12. Resist-dyed textiles. Photograph by D. Whitcomb

⁶ This comprises the reigns of Ayyubid sultans al-Malik al-'Adil and his son al-Malik al-Kamil. Precise dates on the letters read range from 1215 to 1235, though this is only a small fraction of the total inventory (Li Guo, "Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 1: Business Letters," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58 (1999): 161–90; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*).

⁷ Guo, "Arabic Documents, Part 1"; Li Guo, "Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 2: Shipping Notes and Account Records," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 60 (2001): 81–116; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*.

⁸ It was originally thought that the inscription on the above-mentioned key read *miftah Sheikh Abu Mufarrij* "key of Sheikh Abu Mufarrij," which would have tied in nicely with the content of the letters.

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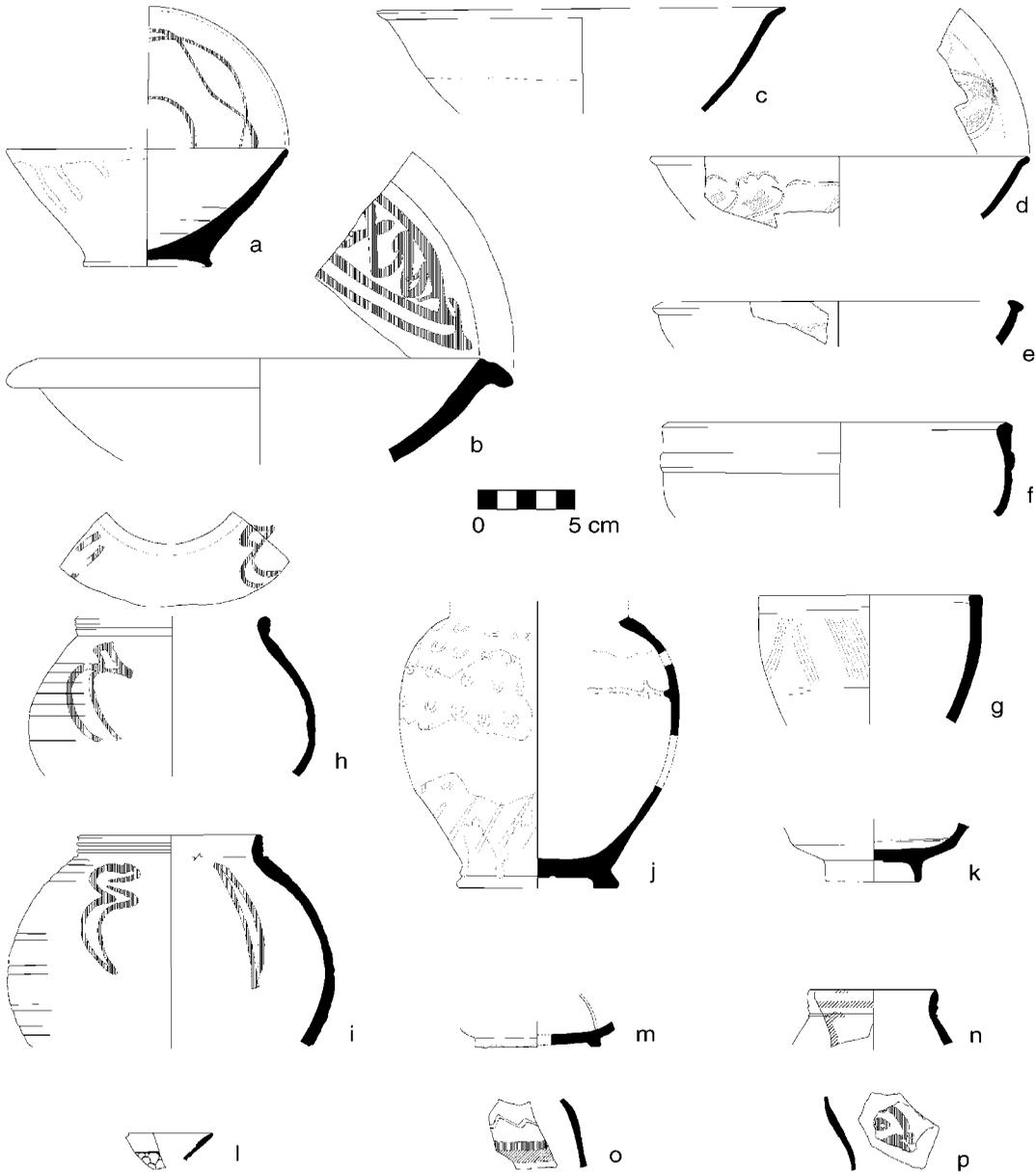


Figure 13. Pottery plate showing ceramics from Yemen (a–b), China (c–d), and possibly Nubia (h–i) alongside Egyptian wares found at the Sheikh’s House. Drawings by K. S. Burke

Guo is publishing the documents and letters from excavations at the Sheikh’s House,⁷ mostly business letters, shipping notes, and account records written in Arabic that detail the business transactions which were undertaken by a certain Sheikh Abu Mufarrij⁸ and his son Sheikh Abu Ishaq Ibrahim b. Abu Mufarrij as they participated in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea to Nile Valley trade during the late Ayyubid period (ca. A.D. 1200–1250). Through painstaking reading and reconstruction of the letters and business receipts (fig. 16), Guo is able to describe the family and the family business, identifying not just the two sheikhs, but three other of Abu Mufarrij’s sons,

their mother, their uncle (Abu Mufarrij's brother), and numerous named business associates and employees of the two principal partners. The main commodity traded seems to have been grain, presumably intended to feed the *Haramain*, the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, across the Red Sea. Numerous other articles are identified in the shipping notes, however, such as cooking oil, baked goods, and nuts, in large enough quantities to suggest commercial use, and vegetables and other perishables that were probably for local consumption. Textiles, found in great quantities in the excavations, also figure prominently in the shipping documents and were an important commodity. Luxury goods such as henna, rosewater, perfume, pearls, and semiprecious stones appear more rarely and may have been intended for local use.

Using Guo's reading of the contents of the letters, and Whitcomb and Johnson's registration book and locus sheets, the letters can be re-inserted into their archaeological contexts creating a more detailed view of the Abu Mufarrij family and its business. For instance, Guo points out that occasionally the same letter will mention both Sheikh Abu Mufarrij and Sheikh Abu Ishaq Ibrahim b. Abu Mufarrij, probably indicating that the son, Sheikh Ibrahim, took over the family business while his father was still alive.⁹ Because the earliest occupational strata of the house contain business letters addressed to Ibrahim, the son, it would seem that he was already running the business, or helping to run the business, when the family moved to Quseir, or in any case to this two-family house; that most of the letters are addressed to his father is probably indicative that Abu Mufarrij still owned the business that his son managed. According to Guo, most of the extant letters are missing the names of the sender and recipient, but of

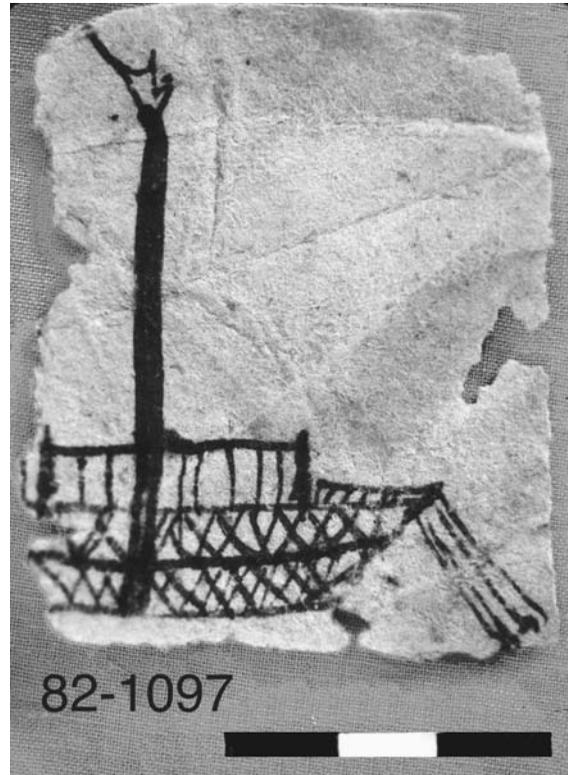


Figure 14. Drawing of a ship. Black ink on paper. Photograph by D. Whitcomb



Figure 15. Gold coins of the late Ayyubid period found at the Sheikh's House. Photograph by D. Whitcomb

⁹ Guo has determined this relationship and the position from letters to Sheikh Najjib, of which at least ten are known; see Guo, "Arabic Documents, Part 1"; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*.

¹⁰ Guo, "Arabic Documents, Part 1"; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, pp. 2–3.

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Figure 16. Letters in Arabic. Photograph by D. Whitcomb

those that retain this information over thirty are directly addressed to Abu Mufarrij, an almost equal number are addressed to his warehouse, and nearly thirty letters are addressed to Ibrahim.¹⁰ Concentrations of letters addressed to Ibrahim are found in the main living rooms of both houses, which are the largest rooms of each house, although a few more are scattered throughout almost all areas of both houses and the storerooms. Almost all the letters addressed to Abu Mufarrij were found in the large living room (Room c) of the North House, with only one in a storeroom and two in the South House. On the contrary, the South House contains letters almost exclusively addressed to Ibrahim; thus one may suspect that at least in the latest use of these buildings, the elder man and his wife were living in the North House, and his son was living with his own family in the adjoining South House. In this light, an examination of the other artifacts in the two houses, especially the imported pottery and other imported objects, may produce further insights into the way the two families lived and operated under one roof and invite further examination of the kinds of commodities with each man dealt.