

1982 Season of Excavations at Quseir al-Qadim

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The excavations at Quseir al-Qadim were undertaken to explore the international trade of this small port on the Red Sea in Egypt. The third season of excavations (January–March, 1982)¹ was

1. These excavations, which are sponsored by the Oriental Institute and funded by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society, encompassed 36 workdays and employed 25 workmen. The field staff of the 1982 season consisted of Gillian Eastwood, Lisa Heidorn, Fredrick Hiebert,

designed specifically to

Carol Meyer, J. S. Nigam, Hanna B. Tadros, Catherine Valentour, Bruce Williams, and the authors. Salaah Sultan and Mohammed Hagraş joined us as representatives of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Egyptian Antiquities Organization for all of their cooperation and assistance to us, this season and throughout the seasons of work at Quseir al-Qadim. Special thanks for assistance with the 1982 season go to Ahmad Qadry, Mitawi Balboush, Abd el-Raouf Yusef, Mohammed Salah, Mohammed Sogheir, and Husein al-Afyuni.

We would also like to thank Sally Zimmerman, Judy Cottle, David Rosenberg, Lisette Ellis, Fred Hiebert, Carol Meyer, Helen Alten, and Joan Barghusen for their many hours of work sorting, label-

examine the central institutions of this port during the two periods of its occupation—Roman of the first and second centuries of our era and Ayyubid-Mamluk of the 13th and 14th centuries. For the Roman period this involved expansion of previous trenches (F8d–F9c and G8b)² in the Roman Central Buildings. Likewise, a 1978 trench which had indicated the importance of the “Islamic knoll” (K9b) as a central feature of the Islamic town was enlarged in 1982. The results of this extremely successful season include an impressive corpus of material for this Roman and Islamic port and permit a conclusion of this research project at Quseir al-Qadim. The determination of the character of the mercantile settlements of the two, very different, cultural periods now depends

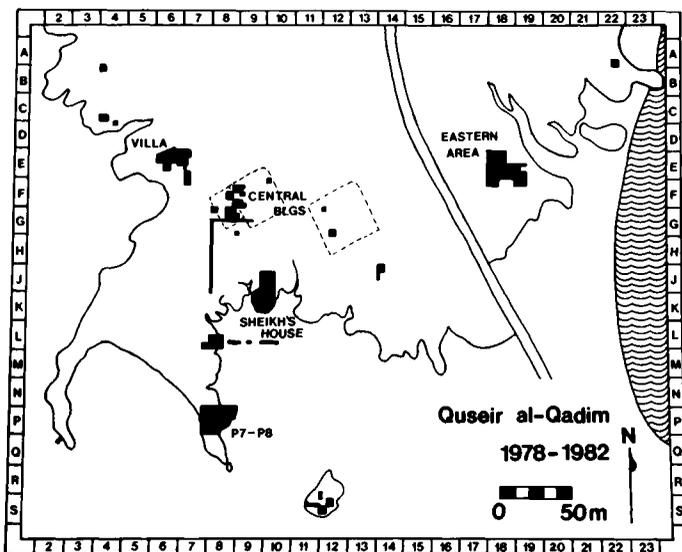
ling, and preparing objects and proofreading manuscript. Without their help, we would have accomplished much less.

2. Reported in D. S. Whitcomb and J. H. Johnson, *Quseir al-Qadim 1978: preliminary report* (Cairo, ARCE, 1979), and *Quseir al-Qadim 1980: preliminary report* “American Research Center in Egypt Reports” (Malibu, Udena, 1982).

on the analysis of the immense amount of evidence, both artifactual and architectural, provided by these three seasons of excavations.

The center of the Roman town is dominated by two large buildings, each approximately 30 m. square. The excavations concentrated on the northwest corner of the western Central Building, where a series of rooms faces onto a central courtyard. In the corner of the courtyard was a stone-paved staircase leading to the second floor or roof. Both in techniques of construction and in architectural form there are many points of similarity with structures uncovered at Karanis, in the Fayyum. The northernmost room had a niche in the wall within which was a large cat wrapped in linen. (Subsequent analysis has shown that this cat had consumed five mice shortly before, and perhaps causing, its death.³)

3. We are indebted to Dr. J. Boessneck, Institut für Palaeo-anatomie, Domestikationsforschung und Geschichte der Tiermedizin der Universität München; and Dr. Omar el-Arini, Director of Conservation, Egyptian Museum, Cairo, for this analysis.



Sketch map of the site of Quseir al-Qadim

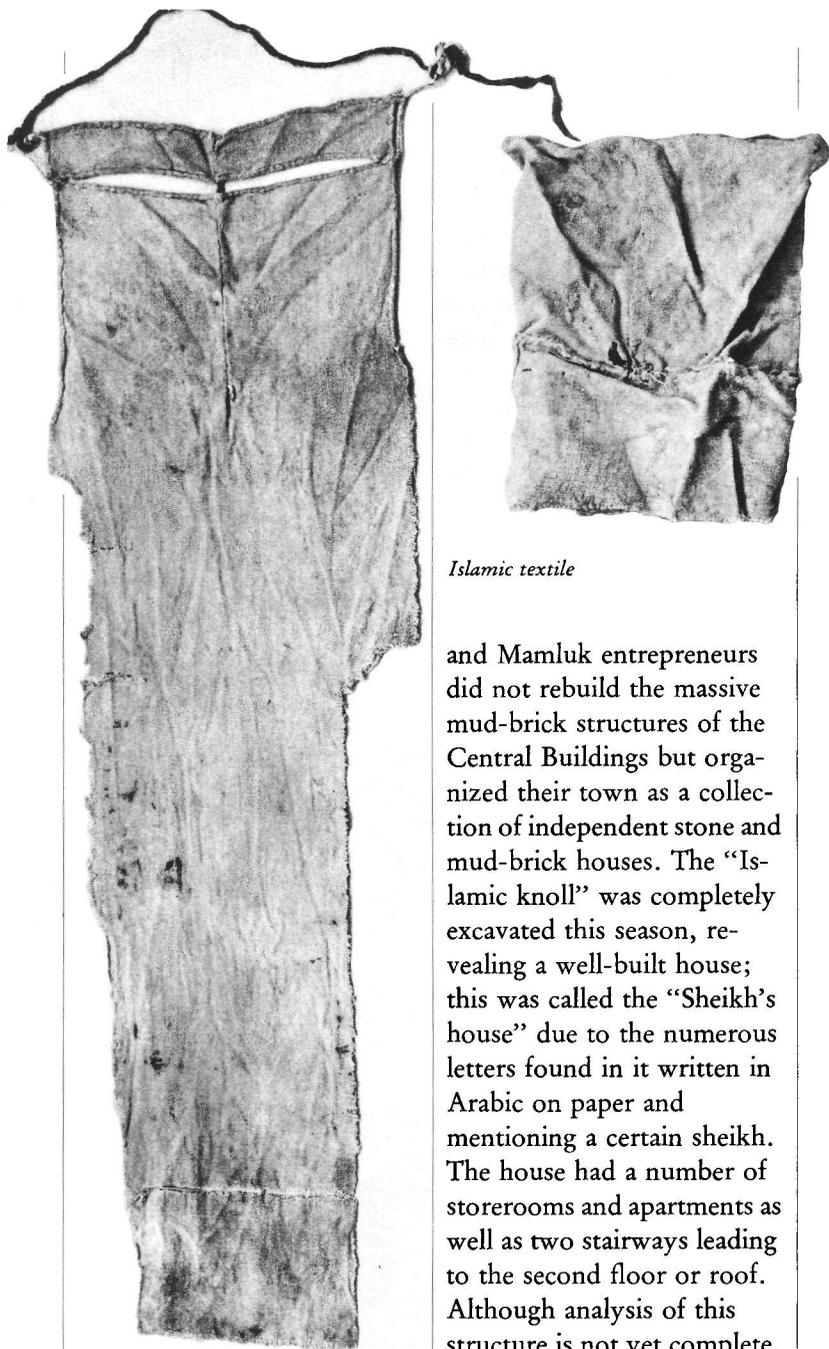
A second Roman building, called the “White Building,” was constructed against the west side of this Central Building. This building consisted of a series of at least three long vaulted rooms (9×4 m.) with doorways opening west onto the main street connecting the harbor area to the south with the residential section of the town in the northwest. The rooms were paved with mud brick; at least one had a series of large depressions, perhaps for storage vessels or amphorae, of which masses of fragments were found in the fill of these rooms. Placed in

the rubble fall of this building was a Roman burial—the first from this site (the Romans normally used a separate necropolis)—of a young woman buried under curious circumstances. In any case, the Roman town can be seen to be centered on these large official structures.

The merchants who returned to Quseir, after 1000 years of abandonment of this port, came with much the same purpose as those of the Roman period. The Ayyubid

Excavations in progress on central Roman administrative building.





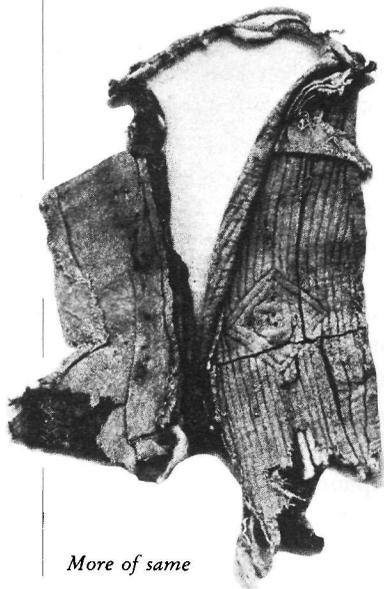
Woman's veil, Islamic period.

Islamic textile

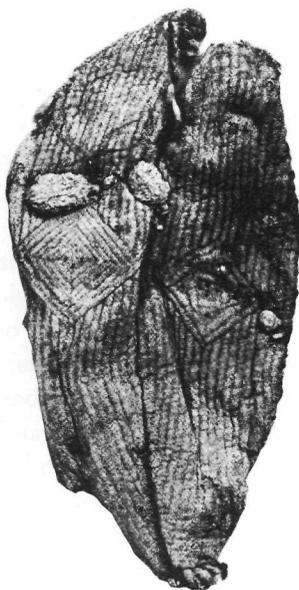
and Mamluk entrepreneurs did not rebuild the massive mud-brick structures of the Central Buildings but organized their town as a collection of independent stone and mud-brick houses. The "Islamic knoll" was completely excavated this season, revealing a well-built house; this was called the "Sheikh's house" due to the numerous letters found in it written in Arabic on paper and mentioning a certain sheikh. The house had a number of storerooms and apartments as well as two stairways leading to the second floor or roof. Although analysis of this structure is not yet complete, it appears that the building

may have been subdivided into a complex of two residential units in the early Mamluk period.

Below the knoll was a wide flat area, the silted fill of the older Roman harbor. Along the edge of this area were structures which continue to be problematic (L7-L8); at present they appear to be workshops, perhaps associated with the suq or market area. One of the more surprising finds in the workshop area was a late Byzantine coin (12th century). The central feature of the workshops was a large circular structure made of mud bricks and burned red on the top. Nearby were



More of same



Islamic hat

small rooms or bins filled with ashes and, on top of the debris, numerous fragments of heat-cracked basalt grinding stones. Northeast was a small yard with a hearth area and, beneath the walls, a flooring of sherds and another circular fired area. No slag, wasters, seeds, or bones were found to give a clue to the identification and function of these structures.

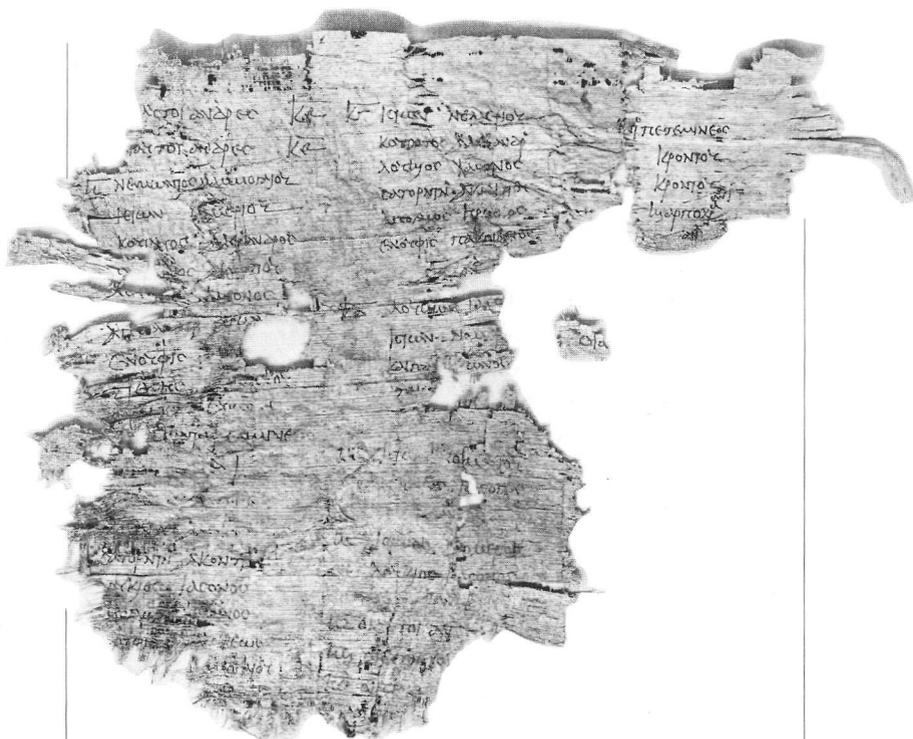
Because of Quseir's function as a port, archaeological interpretation of it requires an examination of data from both an internal, Egyptian perspective and an external perspective based on the en-

tire Indian Ocean. Two members of this season's staff were very directly concerned with the kind and extent of the trade going through the port. Through the courtesy of the Ford Foundation in India, J. S. Nigam, a member of the Archaeological Service of India who is an expert on Indian ceramics, joined us. He was able to identify both actual Indian artifacts (mainly ceramics and textiles) and objects of Indian design testifying to the India trade and suggesting the presence of Indian merchants in Egypt. The quantities of textiles are particularly informative for the Eastern trade, and analysis of thousands of pieces by Gillian Eastwood, our textile specialist, has revealed numerous Indian resist-dyed textiles. Some imitate Chinese silks; indeed, actual pieces of Chinese silks have been recovered this season.

Much of the interpretation of both the Islamic and Roman port will ultimately derive from the documentary evidence recovered in the excavations. This season produced a number of papyrus documents for the first time as well as hundreds of Arabic

letters. Many of these letters appear to be merchants' notes and correspondence, including lists of goods and spices together with the prices paid for them. Found mixed with these were fragments of Quranic texts in red and black ink, apparently utilizing block printing. Another series of fragments appears to be parts of an astronomical text.

The documentary evidence derives special importance from its architectural and artifactual context. The ceramics, for instance, range from imported Indian and Chinese wares (celadons and porcelains) to Yemeni and Syrian wares. The 1982 expedition field-tested an artifactual typology which proved very successful, indicating that the organization of this material is approaching a reliable predictive stage. As the evidence for trade through the port has increased, the importance, for the functional interpretation of commerce in both the Roman and Islamic periods, of the Egyptian artifacts and their excavated context has expanded. Thus, while many further details of Quseir al-Qadim might be explored,



Greek list of names of workmen (?)

the materials already excavated form a contextual whole which seems relatively complete and ready for the more arduous task of interpretive discovery.

A sample of the utilization of the data assembled so far is a preliminary interpretation of the Islamic glass from Quseir.⁴ Comparison of the Eastern Area glass (excavated

in 1980) with that of the Sheikh's house and other areas shows a general duplication of forms and decorative features. However, there is a striking absence of marvered wares, enameled glass

4. D. S. Whitcomb, "Islamic Glass from Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt," *Journal of Glass Studies* (in press).

(with one exception), and bracelets from outside the Eastern Area. While this discrepancy may have been of functional significance, when coupled with other artifacts (especially coins and ceramics) it suggests that the Eastern Area was occupied somewhat later than the remainder of the site. Thus, while the Eastern Area is dated to the 14th century (and perhaps into the early 15th), the remainder of the site dates from the 13th and perhaps early 14th century. Thus, at Quseir al-Qadim, marvered wares and enameled pieces seem datable to 1300–1400, and not earlier. In summary, the Islamic glass from Quseir al-Qadim comprises two overlapping assemblages, one of Ayyubid-Mamluk date and the other from the Bahri Mamluk period. Detailed comparisons with glass from Syria and Palestine (and even Corinth) shows a stylistic unity throughout the eastern Mediterranean. More importantly, the glass from Quseir finds closely parallel assemblages at Aidhab, Aden, and on the East African coast. Perhaps most impressive is the evidence of

trade across the Indian Ocean, best illustrated by finds from Pengkalan Bulang, near Penang Island in Malaya. This excavation produced pruned beakers, marvered wares, and vessel forms which exactly duplicate those from Quseir. The excavator recognized the glass as Middle Eastern and dated the collection to the 11th to 14th centuries on the basis of associated Chinese ceramics.⁵

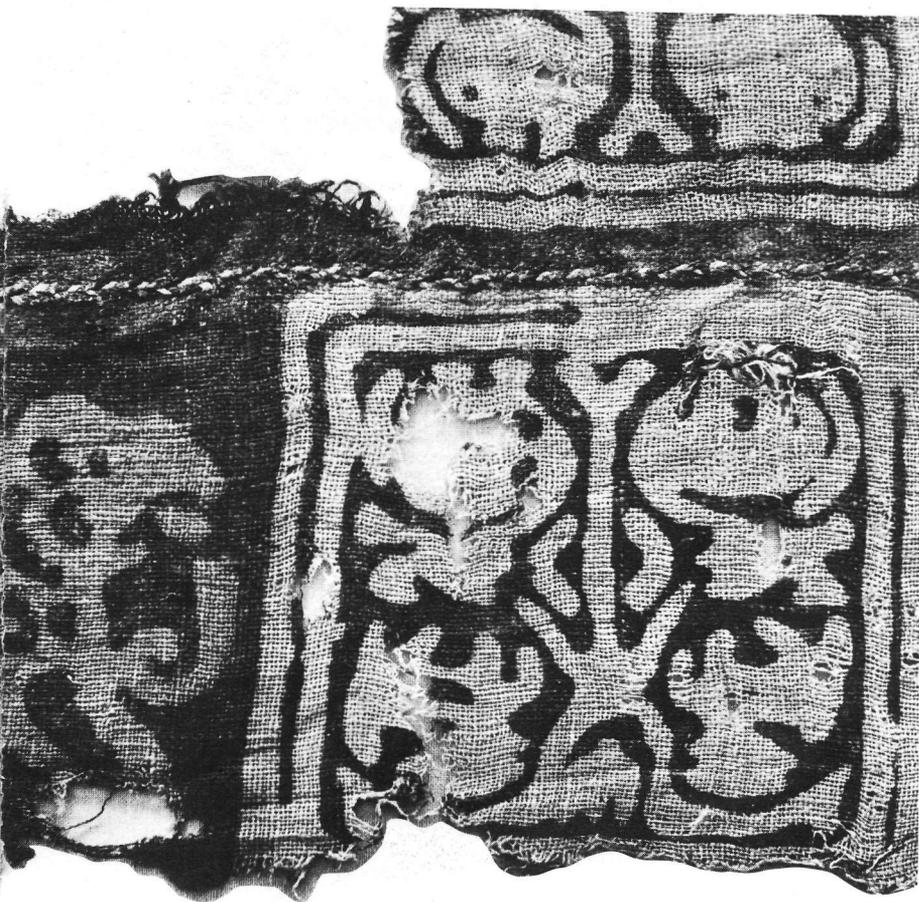
5. A. Lamb, "A Note on Glass Fragments from Pengkalan Bulang, Malaya," *Journal of Glass Studies* 7 (1965) 35–40.



Glass is, of course, but one of many articles of commerce testifying to the close inter-connection within the medieval Islamic world and between it and its neighbors. By implication such commerce illustrates population mobility, both by desert and sea.

Such interpretations, when combined with further field

Indian resist-dyed textile, 14th century.



research on other, related sites, will allow the Quseir al-Qadim excavations to contribute much to our understanding of the history and archaeology of these two historic periods. Ultimately this research project will also

contribute toward the modelling of future research problems, including such wide-ranging topics as Indian Ocean trade, for a range of historic periods, from the Pharaonic through to modern times.