



# News & Notes

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## A VISIT TO QUSEIR ON THE RED SEA

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The drive down the Nile Valley is very picturesque. From the time one leaves the outskirts of Cairo there is an unbroken succession of green cultivated fields, orchards, and palm trees punctuated at regular intervals by villages and towns. One sees the river only occasionally; more often, the road runs beside a great canal—almost a river itself. Everywhere, in the villages and towns and in the countryside, the road always seems crowded with people walking or riding donkey-carts and with cows and camels. This constant coming and going in the green shade of trees was an attractive accompaniment as we drove into Upper Egypt this March.

After we passed the city of Qena, within an hour's drive of Luxor and Chicago House, we suddenly made a left turn and headed directly away from the river, the green shade, and the people. Within an hour we were in the Wadi Hammamat and gazing on the rugged emptiness of the Red Sea hills, as the mountains are popularly called. Our destination was the little port of Quseir on the Red Sea. Over the years, members of the staff of Chicago House had occasionally visited this town as a diversion or out of curiosity to see the Red Sea, but we had other ambitions—not just to visit the ruins of the site of ancient Quseir (Quseir al-Qadim) but to lay plans for an excavation and survey under the sponsorship of the Oriental Institute.

Why Quseir? As long ago as 1954, Professor Helene Kantor of the Oriental Institute postulated that the initial pre-Dynastic contacts between Mesopotamia and Egypt came by way of the Red Sea and entered Egypt through the Wadi Hammamat. This wadi was a natural trade route as witnessed by inscriptions and monuments (including caravanserais) of Pharaonic, Ptolemaic, Roman, and Islamic times. Recently a stele describing an Egyptian expedition to the land of

Punt has been discovered at the Wadi Gawâsîs to the north of Quseir. The site of ancient Quseir testifies to the continuing importance of trade with the lands beyond Egypt. The most recent remains belong to the period of the Mamluk sultans of the 13th and 14th centuries, when the trade spread as far as China. Before the Islamic period, the port was a trade center for the Ptolemies and Romans, for merchants trading in incense and other products of south Arabia and Africa. These same products led the Pharaohs to launch great sea voyages, the evidence of which may lie beneath the classical port.

It was afternoon when we finally arrived on the site of Quseir al-Qadim. The ancient mound is large, perhaps 30 hectares in area; it is bounded on the east by the shore of the Red Sea and on the south and west by a low, flat *sabkha* (the silted mud flats of an ancient lagoon). On the north the mound blends gradually into a low coastal terrace which extends inland. No trace of a city wall could be detected from the surface remains. The modern road to Safaga crosses the inlet and bisects the site itself.

This road creates an artificial division of the site into two parts, a division which seems to correspond to the two most evident periods of occupation. Most of the pottery to the east of the road (the seaward side) was clearly 13th-14th century Mamluk wares. This collection was enhanced by imported glazed wares and Chinese ceramics including celadons and Sung wares. A fine range of glass was also found including cut and molded pieces and fragments of enameled glass (possibly from mosque lamps). Here, as elsewhere on the site, the preservation of artifacts has been remarkable. The general litter of rope, matting, sticks, and other organic material was taken to be modern at first. Careful examination of culverts and animal burrows re-

vealed that this was certainly not the case and that these artifacts were contemporary with the occupation of the site. In one burrow a piece of cloth was extracted from the section, a textile composed of multi-colored threads in a design reminiscent of Coptic textiles.

We returned to the modern town for the evening, where the director of the local phosphate company—a large and important industry in present-day Egypt—welcomed us and gave us lodging in his resthouse. The following morning we returned to the ruins, where we noticed that, on the landward side of the road, the character of the artifacts changed. Glazed Islamic ceramics were noticeably absent and most of the pottery was a bright red ware, often coarsely-ribbed large storage jars. This was mixed with turquoise glazed pottery, all of which suggested a late Roman date for this part of the site. Surface indications of structures were visible on all parts of the site, but the wall fragments associated with this Roman pottery were often made of white limestone instead of mud brick. These limestone walls were clearly part of a well-planned town which faced the inland bay rather than the sea. Buildings of this same material could be traced in mounds within the *sabkha*, suggesting a harbor facility. In most areas it was difficult to estimate the depth of the occupation, although there were indications that the cultural overburden may exceed 2 meters in depth. Between the impressive Roman and Islamic remains, there was little opportunity for more ancient Pharaonic remains to be revealed. While no clearly early artifacts were found, our brief visit cannot rule out the existence of earlier periods in some part of the mound.

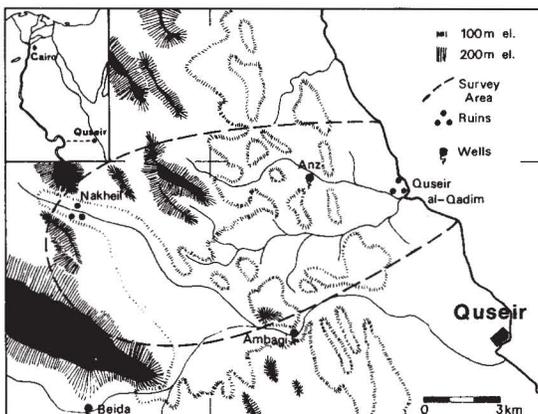
As we thought about how people could have lived on this coast in ancient times, we realized that the search for a landward occupation in the mountains is an obvious part of any future archeological program. A possible area of settlement is the edge of the *sabkha* in the direction of Bir al-Anz, which is the nearest

direction of Bir al-Anz, which is the nearest supply of fresh water. We were able to circle behind the mountains of Quseir and examine the site of Nakheil. Here are found a road station or caravanserai and a small settlement. This site was dated by late Roman ceramics and seems to have been impermanent, used either as a seasonal encampment or for short term occupation (this aspect is very reminiscent of primitive mining sites found in Oman and, indeed, some slag was found on the eastern side of the plain). Careful survey of this area between Nakheil and Quseir will undoubtedly uncover other such sites and possibly inscriptions within the mountain passes like those of the Wadi Hammamat.

The result of our trip was, foremost, a precise impression of the potential of the site of Quseir al-Qadim and its immediate region for purposes of a research program including both survey and excavation. Given the spectacular results of the excavations in the Wadi Gawâsîs during the last two years, excavations which have generated interest in the Red Sea coast among many archeologists and Egyptologists, we believe that the time for an expedition to the site of Quseir is not only ripe but should not be postponed.

Thus, when it came time to leave Chicago House in Luxor, we left with an eagerness to report on our findings and begin plans for the excavation of Quseir. The whole house turned out to wave us good-bye, Jan was given a bouquet of roses, an "official" photograph was taken, we shook hands all around, jumped in the car, turned the ignition, and—nothing but a dead silence. The smiles and waving hands turned into straining backs and much puffing as we were pushed out of Luxor and back to the Oriental Institute.

(Anyone who would be interested in more information or in assisting the project is invited to contact Jan Johnson or Don Whitcomb at the Oriental Institute.)



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## YEMEN: LAND OF SHEBA AND DHAMAR ALI

This last March, I was in Saudi Arabia analyzing and preparing a publication on pottery from our survey done in 1976. At the end of my stay in Riyadh, having about a week's time, I looked into the possibility of visiting Yemen, a country on the southwestern edge of the Arabian peninsula, bordering the Red Sea. I knew nothing about Yemen, except that the Queen of Sheba was from there, that the area was important for the trade in frankincense and myrrh, and that Yemen had a role in the international trade between the Islamic world and China about 1200 A.D. I vaguely recalled six- and eight-story buildings perched on mountainsides—probably a remnant image from some *National Geographic*. My main reason for wanting to go to Yemen was the fact that a good friend of mine, an Iraqi woman archeologist, had just gotten a job in Sana'a, the capital of the Yemeni Arab Republic (distinct from the People's Republic of South Yemen, to the south), as advisor to the Department of Antiquities.

Yemen had long been closed to outsiders, and I presumed that this was still the case. But people in Riyadh said that they had been there and that the country was wide open and fascinating. I inquired about a visa and found that I could get one in about a half hour. I flew to Jeddah, a Saudi city on the Red Sea, went to the Yemeni embassy, and in a half hour had a visa. I flew to Sana'a the next day.

The plane goes out over the sea, then veers to the southeast over a coastal plain that looks very uninviting. This area, the Tihama, is perpetually hot and humid. We quickly came to mountains. On almost every mountainside, even the highest, there were agricultural terraces. These terraces, fed only by rainfall, cover hundreds of acres and are the result of millennia of human labor. As we began to approach Sana'a, situated about 8,000 feet high in a valley surrounded by mountains, we could see that some of the peaks were dead volcanoes. Even the craters had terraces in them. While the plane was dropping for its landing, we could see little villages on the tops of mountains, on the edges of cliffs, in the most unexpected places. We could see individual houses in the middle of open fields, and they were truly six and more stories high, made of stone or mud brick, with windows and roof lines decorated with whitewash. Circling Sana'a, we could make out the old city wall, still standing for most of its length, but outgrown on all sides by the city. I do not know how many people live in Sana'a, but it cannot be more than two hundred thousand.

The airport terminal of Sana'a is new, built in traditional Yemeni style, with well-laid, well-cut stones. The passport and customs people are fast, and I was greeting my Iraqi friend in a matter of minutes. We drove into the town which is as intact as any traditional city I have seen except Herat or Ghazni in Afghanistan. In fact, Afghanistan is the only country I have seen that rivals Yemen in its genuine, non-westernized character. The developers are just beginning to arrive. The house I stayed in looks like those around it, made of well-laid stone, with a beautifully thought-out plan, excellent but simple mechanisms for hinges, locks, and so on. The interior, including the natural, unstraightened roof beams, is plastered and covered with whitewash. The windows are intricate floral traceries of colored glass set in plaster. The house could be a hundred or more years old, but it was built six years ago. There is a living tradition of excellence in crafts that is unmatched in the Near East. As wages go up and concrete comes in, this tradition will pass.

Just down the street from where I stayed is the American embassy, with two or three houses for the ambassador and offices. The ambassador's residence is one of the tallest, oldest buildings in Sana'a and must be marvelous to live in. I had lunch there, high above the rest of the city, and met the Minister of Education who has a PhD in genetics from Yale. He is a learned, witty, most impressive man. Our ambassador, an Arabist with degrees from Pennsylvania, is at heart an archeologist. He began to sell me on the idea of work in Yemen from the moment I met him.

Roaming through the streets of Sana'a, one is struck by the good sense, humor and self-reliance of the Yemenis. All adult men carry a curved dagger. Men who have committed minor crimes walk about with empty scabbards—their daggers have been impounded. Women are veiled, but have a great deal more freedom of movement than in other countries. They work in offices and attend schools and universities. It is common to see a man and wife walking along holding hands, or with their arms around each other. This is very unusual in the Near East. I was told that in the Tihama, which in some ways is an extension of the East African coast, women are not veiled, have much more of an active role in everyday life, and even take part in commerce. In many ways, Yemen seems to be one of the most liberal countries in the Near East. I was only there a week, but the freedom that Westerners feel to relax and be themselves seems to support my notion.

The market is not really a covered suq like those in Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, and Teheran. There are metal or cloth awnings, but no real permanent covering because this is unnecessary. Sana'a, being so high, stays relatively cool all year round. The temperature almost never rises above 85° Fahrenheit. It is in the monsoon belt and gets torrential rains in July and August and little monsoons in April and November, when it rains about an hour each day. Otherwise, it is one of the most pleasant places in the world to live. Only a scarcity of ground water keeps the the mountains of Yemen from becoming a metropolitan area.

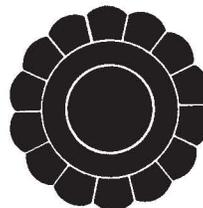
In the mountains, I saw dozens of ancient towns, some with ruined buildings five meters high. I saw Paleolithic hand axes below cliffs pocked with caves. Some of the caves are man made, with inscriptions in Sabaeen or Himyaritic, and many are still being used. Near such man-made caves there are mounds, some of which have been dug into by local people searching for building materials.

I also saw several dams as long as 600 meters. Some have been called Sabaeen and have been dated to about 1000 B.C. Others are Himyaritic, from about the time of Christ or later. At Marib there is a famous dam, one of the few that have been studied and published. In a nearby temple at Marib a magnificent bronze statue of the Himyaritic king Dhamar Ali was discovered. It is about 8 feet tall, nude, and in late Roman style.

You might begin to think that I am impressed with Yemen. I am so enthusiastic that, even before I left it, I had decided to help start research there. I have begun, with others at the Institute and the University, to look into the possibilities of an American research center in Sana'a. We're also trying to field a small archeological survey team within the next year. We have no funds, no equipment, and no vehicle. We can probably raise money from foundations for future seasons, but there would be too little time to apply for this year. Given the promise of full cooperation from the Yemeni officials, we should begin while that promise is in full bloom. If anyone would like to help open a potentially fantastic location, we would be very grateful. Your help need not be just in terms of money. We could use tents, a four-wheel drive vehicle, and a plane table with a scope alidade, even a used one.

Yemen is one place you can visit flying from Cairo. See the pyramids, then try Yemen. You will find that the welcome from the Yemenis and the foreign community will make you feel at home.

McGuire Gibson



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IRAN TOUR 1977

Some spaces are still available on the Oriental Institute sponsored tour to Iran this fall. Information available from the Membership Office, 753-2389.

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