

The Oriental Institute

News & Notes

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NEWS FROM EGYPT!

NEWSLETTER FROM THE QUSEIR EXPEDITION, EGYPT

January 31, 1978

(Dear Members and Friends:

The Oriental Institute expedition to Quseir on the Red Sea began much as the preliminary visit last year ended (described in "News and Notes," March, 1977)—with a vehicle which refused to start. This difficulty was quickly solved by replacing the battery, and we were soon making the difficult time-consuming drive through the Wadi Hammamat to the Red Sea coast. In spite of the fine asphalt road, it was extremely difficult to pass by the numerous inscriptions and rock drawings without stopping for at least a brief look. And the list of stopping places grew longer as our friend, Dr. Haini el-Zeini, a long-time explorer in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, pointed out new and often unpublished rocks covered with drawings.

The town of Quseir is a small quiet port in which the main industry is a large phosphate mining company. This company has kindly provided us with very comfortable little resthouses which we are slowly filling with archeological materials. The chief attraction of Quseir is the sea, which is generally blue or turquoise and not at all red, other than during the magnificent sunrises. The other attraction of Quseir, for us at least, is the ancient port, which lies about 8 km north of the modern town. This is where we have been working during the past two weeks preparing to excavate.

Our first project was the careful mapping of the town, the rolling mounds perched on top of the rocks of a raised coral reef. The town was almost ten hectares in area on the north side of the wide channel where the Wadi Quseir al-Qadim enters the sea. On the landward side, the edge of the town breaks off at steep cliffs some six meters above what is now sabkha (mud flats), which we are suggesting may have been an open lagoon in earlier times. In the course of the mapping, we became aware of stone walls leading into the sabkha toward an "island" almost in the middle of the wadi channel. It is tempting to hypothesize that this was a causeway or a quay leading toward the main port facilities, perhaps even a lighthouse. As we mapped the fragments of white stone walls on the surface of the site and the patterns of mounding, we noticed two large square buildings which may have been khans or caravanserais (i.e., merchants' quarters for the assembly and storage of goods before shipment inland to the cities of the Nile Valley).

In order to gain an idea of the nature of this architecture and artifactual material (including the goods traded), we put in two small sondages or trial trenches (each 3 x 4 m). As this work proceeded, we had days of extremely high winds which raised an annoying dust while digging. At the sondage in the western edge of the mound, the wind threatened occasionally to blow Ray Johnson and the others literally over the edge of the mound, as they stood on the edge shaking a screen with great billows of dust issuing forth. This test pit was obviously part of the city garbage dump and as such yielded an impressive record of the daily articles used in ancient Quseir. The great masses of pottery were in large part fragments of amphorae, the ubiquitous storage and transportation vessels of the classical world. The interiors of these jars were often coated with a bituminous material which gave a strong odor to the area. The soil itself contained so much fibrous material that it resembled a peat deposit. The screening revealed that some of these organic remains were twigs, branches, pine needles, chips of wood from wood-working, and seeds (even including parts of large pinecones). The rest of the organic materials was man-made artifacts: a great variety of ropes and twines and fish netting (as one would expect in a port), wooden pegs and other wooden objects, including a fine bowl, beautifully woven basketry, matting in many different patterns, and cloth, both plain and in colored plaids. The careful inventory, including glass, metals, and worked shell, is already too lengthy to describe here. Every trowel of soil produced a new surprise, such as the tiny corroded piece of bronze which, when cleaned and restored by Richard Jaeschke, became an amulet of Anubis (see fig. 1). We have found Roman, Byzantine, and Mamluk coins, but the real inscriptional potential of the site is indicated by the wide range of other written materials found. The small sondage in the garbage dump has yielded five languages: Latin and Greek on fragments of papyrus, Demotic Egyptian, Greek, and Arabic ostraca, and South Arabic (Himyaritic) scratched on a jar

(see fig. 2). An Arabic inscription on an ostrich eggshell was found on the surface of the mound. Thus our initial assessment of the periods of occupation of the ancient port (Ptolemaic-Roman through Mamluk) seems justified by the artifactual remains.



Figure 1.

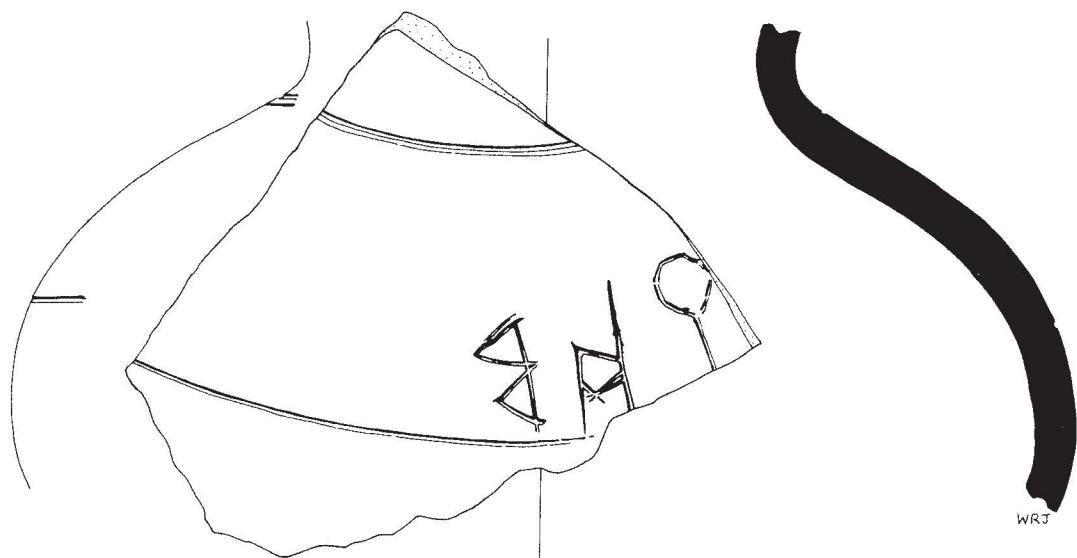


Fig. 2. Sherd (ostracon?) with Epigraphic South Arabic letters "Y D M" (probably to be read "yadūm").*

The second sondage was made in a small room near the harbor in order to give us a feel for the architecture (salt-encrusted) and stratigraphy (sandy) which we will encounter on the site. The building seems to be late within the occupation of the site. Ann Roth has found there nice glazed Islamic pottery, a small Kufic (Arabic) ostracon, and painted pottery similar to much we found in the late settlement near the gold mines in the Wadi Fawakhir (half way through the Wadi Hammamat).

Because of our desire to know more about the region around the ancient port and earlier use of the area, we have been doing a survey of the region, in which Martha Prickett has found everything from paleolithic flint assemblages through a Roman camp to relatively modern rock inscriptions. Martha's work has been aided greatly by suggestions from Dr. el-Zeini, and we have all benefitted greatly from the help and eagerness of our Inspector from the Department of Antiquities, Samir Ghurbashi Omar.

We return to Quseir Friday after a week in Luxor working up materials collected so far, and we will begin formal excavations by exploring the buildings of the harbor, including the "island" and one of the "caravanserais." For now, we have some conception of the site based on our just-completed contour maps and look forward with great anticipation to the surprises it will soon offer us.

Janet H. Johnson

Donald Whitcomb

*YDM is well-known as a proper name in Epigraphic South Arabic inscriptions from what is now Yemen. It occurs as a personal name, both as a first name and as a second name for officials and rulers; it also occurs as a tribal name. Most of these inscriptions occur roughly between the sixth century B.C. and the sixth century A.D. The shape of the letters looks somewhat early, but it is impossible to be sure, since the few paleographic criteria that have been evolved hold only of monumental inscriptions (research by Gene Gragg).

LETTER FROM PROFESSOR KLAUS BAER,
HIERAKONPOLIS, EGYPT

10 February 1978

Dear Friends,

A weekend (Friday, that is) at Chicago House for some much needed library work gives me a chance to report on the work we've been doing at Hierakonpolis.

First, to resume discussion of a subject raised in a recent *Docents' Newsletter*, we are not staying in tents or even tombs (actually, most of the tombs at Hierakonpolis have developed leaky ceilings and holes in the walls that admit the wind and would make rather drafty homes in the chilly winter nights of Upper Egypt). Instead, we are living almost luxuriously, if rather on top of each other, in the ground floor of the modern villa of Hag Saad Arafa, a prominent citizen of El-Qara, a village about halfway between Edfu and our site.

The Egypt we are living in is rather different from that seen by the casual visitor. It is not the Egypt of Cairo,

an immense, modern city bursting at the seams with people, with modern shops where just about everything that is available in Chicago can be bought. It is not the Egypt of Luxor, dominated by ancient monuments, visitors, and the facilities needed to accomodate them, a quiet town dedicated to the glories of the ancient world. It is the bustling, developing rural Egypt of the late twentieth century, dominated not by the great pylons of the Temple of Edfu but by the smokestacks of the huge sugar-and-paper factory complex a few hundred yards from our villa (the paper is made out of the pulp that remains after the juice has been pressed from the sugar cane). The Egypt of today is typified by the new power substation north of Edfu, the electric power lines that are just being brought into the little hamlet that adjoins the ancient kom where we are digging, the endless stream of busses on the little highway that goes north from Edfu (some modern, some not so modern), the long lines of heavy truck-and-trailer rigs, all immaculately clean and shining in their bright and sometimes imaginative paint jobs, that are hauling the output of the factory to destinations all over Egypt and, like their peers in the States, are not exactly improving the surface of the road.

Another aspect of modern Egypt needs a little more explanation. There are two clusters of tomb chapels at Hierakonpolis. One, dating from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, is situated a short distance behind the so-called fort of Khasekhemwy, one of the oldest standing buildings in Egypt (twenty-eighth century B.C.) and probably intended to serve as a funerary palace. The other is in a round hill about half a mile further out in the desert; with all the holes in it, it looks from the distance something like a pigeon tower, and that is what it is called locally: Burg el-Hamam. It contains tombs of the New Kingdom. The older group is close to the cultivation and a favorite place for children to escape for some peace and quiet in which to do their homework (at least as long as there are no expeditions or guards to chase them out). As a result, one of the commonest artifacts that I am finding while collating the drawings of the scenes in the tomb of Horemka'wef is sheets of paper with homework and pages torn from textbooks. Some are strangely appropriate—thus a page dealing with the Hyksos was lying on the floor of Horemka'wef's chapel, which dates from about 1645, a generation after the Hyksos invaded Egypt. A sheet of English composition was embarrassingly good; I wonder how well our junior high school students would do if faced with Arabic. A sheet with mathematics on it produced major bafflement, not only in the minds of those of us whose Arabic is shaky but also when shown to Egyptian college graduates such as Abdelghani Zaki, our inspector from the Antiquities Department. The conclusion was inescapable: The New Math has found its way into Egyptian village schools.

How about our work? The expedition is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, Vassar College, and the American Museum of Natural History, and under the direction of Walter A. Fairservis is attempting to make as broad a study as possible of a site that has been an important urban center since early predynastic times; in all likelihood it was the capital of Egypt just before the beginning of recorded history. It shrank to provincial obscurity later, which makes it relatively easy to get at early levels. The work this season is in three parts. Professor Fairservis is working on the kom itself trying to solve the many problems raised by the temple complex where the British in 1897-99 found such important monuments as the Narmer Palette. Professor Hoffman of the University of Virginia is concerned with the settlements out in the desert. The extensive remains of the predynastic town near the cultivation and the smaller settlements, some of very great antiquity, further out in the great wadi still provide a favorable environment for living. I am working in the tombs.

The work is, for much of the time, more painstaking than exciting. Drawings made in the last season have to be gone over line by line and checked for accuracy, and Mrs. Fairservis, our artist, has started work on the New Kingdom tombs. In the nature of things, our technique is different from that used by the Epigraphic Survey at Chicago House. The artist makes tracings of the scenes and inscriptions, mainly to get relative positions and proportions, and then carefully corrects the tracings in front of the wall. The pencilled drawings are gone over by the epigrapher, sometimes muttering under his breath, and corrections are made or suggested. They are returned to the artist for a second session at the wall, presumably also accompanied by mutterings about nitpickers and sometimes by the triumphant discovery that epigraphers, too, seem on occasion to be struck by blindness and overlook not merely a stroke half a millimeter in length but whole hieroglyphs (in self-defense let it be said that the walls we are dealing with are anything but well-preserved; in some cases paintings are so faint that the walls appear to be totally blank at first). The drawings are then traced in ink, and ultimately prints of the inked-in drawings are subjected to a final revision. The work this season consists of the final check on the drawings that Sue Weeks made in our previous season (1969) of the tomb of Horemka'wef and the tracing and first checking of three of the four decorated tombs in the Burg el-Hamam: that of Djehuty, dating to the time of Tuthmosis I, a roughly contemporary tomb belonging to a certain Hormeni, and a third whose owner perhaps was named Ahmose, though the damaged inscriptions will have to be gone over again and again before we can be sure.

There are two rewards. First, the feeling that one is doing something to record monuments that are rapidly decaying. The sandstone in which the tombs are cut at Burg el-Hamam is very soft; the stuff in which the Old and Middle Kingdom chapels were excavated is so loosely conglomerated that it hardly deserves the name of rock. Things are falling apart, not only when we compare our notes and copies with the incomplete ones made by Bouriant almost 100 years ago and published in 1885, but even by comparison with our own drawings of 1969. A whole scene showing workmen carrying grain into storehouses has vanished from the west wall of Horemka'wef, and the self-portrait of the painter is beginning to crumble away on the east. If we had started our work a few years from now, it would no longer have been possible to identify him with the artist who decorated at least two tombs across the river at Elkab—or to draw historical conclusions from this fact.

It is such observations, of course, that provide the moments of real excitement. The resurrection of an artistic personality, precise correlations that allow us to draw conclusions about the suddenness of the Hyksos invasion and about the history of a family that had been the most powerful in Egypt until the coming of the Hyksos and then fled south to Elkab were the rewards of our work in 1969.

The most intriguing observation so far this year has been in the one tomb at the Burg el-Hamam that we will have to leave until next season. It has been inhabited, and the paintings are mostly covered with a thick layer of soot. It will have to be removed by a technician before we can make a reasonably accurate record. It is the largest tomb at Hierakonpolis, with a T-shaped two-room chapel. It belonged to Harmose, high priest of Horus of Hierakonpolis in the time of Ramesses XI. There are some charming pictures of dancers in the front room. The most informative painting is a (relatively) well-preserved one in the inner chapel showing Harmose making offerings in the temple complex at Hierakonpolis. The main sanctuary of Horus is depicted as being a monument of Tuthmosis III, but everything else, including the sacred golden vessels in the temple of Tuthmosis III, is inscribed with the cartouches of Ramesses XI. There is a boat chapel of Isis (the mother of Horus of Hierakonpolis) and a chapel decorated with scenes showing the king making offerings to various gods.

A golden image of Horus of Hierakonpolis on a stand is labelled "the image on a stand of Horus of Hierakonpolis . . . Basi (or Bes)," the name of Harmose's father who was high priest of Horus of Hierakonpolis before him.

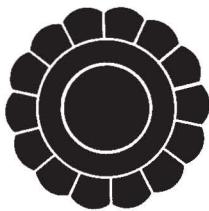
Among the chapel scenes is a stone gateway inscribed with the titles of Ramesses XI and described as "the gateway which is before the [great] god, which Harmose, son of Basi built." In itself, this is somewhat unusual; individuals do not normally claim credit in so bald a manner for buildings erected in the name of their sovereigns. But it fits into the general picture of the latter part of the reign of Ramesses XI when he was evidently losing status in the eyes of his subjects in Upper Egypt. Wenamon, when talking with the Prince of Byblos, calls Ramesses by his given name, Kha'ewese, and describes him as a mere man, in contrast to the true King of Egypt and the World, Amon.

The scene with the dancing girls is part of a fascinating and unusual representation of a ritual of Isis, celebrated only by women. In front of a shrine, in which Isis is seated, is a table piled high with offerings that Henut'o, Harmose's wife, is presenting to the goddess, apparently as her priestess. Among her titles is that of "nurse of (i.e., for) Isis." She holds a sistrum in one hand, a vase in another, and is trailing an ivy-like vine from one arm. In the next scene Henut'o is seated in a kiosk decorated with a frieze of cows' heads and scenes suggestive of the Delta swamps and the worship of Isis. She is nursing a male infant; one is tempted to suggest the young Horus, though no identifying texts survive. Behind this kiosk are the dancing girls, lightly clad, and carrying lotuses and vines; behind them is a group of society ladies, more formally clad in long gowns, also carrying vines and accompanying the dance with tambourines. We may have here the first known representation of an Egyptian ceremony ancestral to what is known of the rituals of Isis in the classical world.

This is hardly the last word on these scenes. I hope to share some of the feeling of excitement that is the reward for endless staring at what, at first sight, seems like a hopeless array of meaningless fragments and tatters.

Sincerely,

Klaus Baer



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