



Review

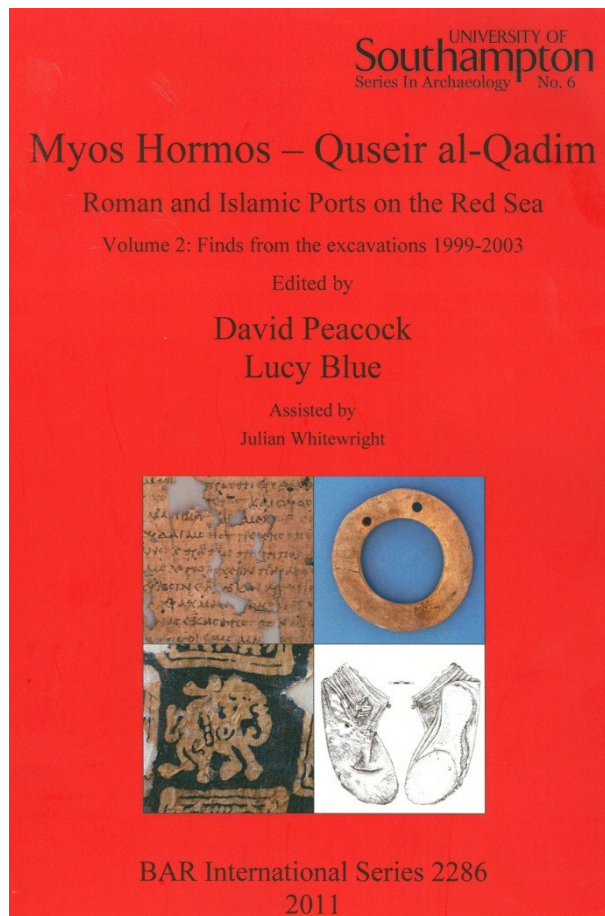
MYOS HORMOS-QUSEIR AL-QADIM ROMAN AND ISLAMIC PORTS ON THE RED SEA VOLUME 2: FINDS FROM THE EXCAVATIONS 1999-2003

Edited by David Peacock and Lucy Blue.
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Reviewed by Chiara Zazzaro
University of Naples "L'Orientale"

M *Myos Hormos-Quseir al-Qadim Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea, Volume 2*, edited by David Peacock and Lucy Blue, is an extensive final report about most of the archaeological finds from the excavations conducted by the University of Southampton at the Roman and Islamic ports of Myos Hormos-Quseir al-Qadim from 1999 to 2003.

The five-year project of excavation had the important merit—among various others—of correctly identifying the archaeological site near the modern town of Quseir with the ancient port of Myos Hormos that, together with Berenike, facilitated Rome's trade with India and the East on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea. Archaeological investigations also focused on the Islamic Quseir al-Qadim (old Quseir) port, providing a unique record of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade network in the medieval time.



The importance of the book is determined by the contribution of several specialists from different disciplines and branches of archaeology and by the editors' long-time specializations in, respectively, ceramic and stone materials at the peripheries of the Roman Empire and maritime archaeology of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

Considering the impressive quantity and the variety of archaeological data collected and analysed in the course of the five-year project, the book is naturally eclectic in several respects: single chapters are written either by senior scholars or by younger scholars or PhD students, all providing invaluable contributions; both traditional and innovative methodological approaches to research are applied; most contributions have the aspect of catalogues, with some being broader thematic accounts focused on specific groups of finds, and

others being short reports that will be further extended in monographs (such as the chapters on pottery, textile, palaeobotany, ostraca, and paper documents). All contributions are, however, consistent with the main scope of the project, which is to answer questions concerning the function and use of the materials found, their distribution on the site, what they can tell us about activities of the town and port and its inhabitants, as well as about visitors to the port.

The first part of the book focuses on imported materials; such analyses contribute to the sense of the wide spectrum of contacts and trade occurring at that time. The chapter “Pots With Writing” illuminates trade contacts with South Arabia, Syria, India, and Rome in the Roman period and on the presence of foreign merchants at the site, while the chapter on the medieval ceramics demonstrates the existence of a Red Sea-Indian Ocean trading network that reached as far as Asia.

The chapter on Roman vessel stoppers consists of a meticulous description of the wide typology of vessel stoppers found at the site. Not only does the author give further information on trade and traded products but he also provides an important contribution to the methodological study of this category of finds.

The chapter on the amphora wharf, a variety of traditional technique of harbour construction, constitutes an illuminating and important account of the port facilities. It might, therefore, have been better placed in the middle part of the book devoted to the maritime-related artifacts.

The chapter on ceramic lamps includes finds from Ptolemaic, Roman, and Islamic contexts, as well as imports from Italy. The glass chapter is a catalogue of glass objects from both Roman and Islamic contexts; despite exhaustive descriptions, this study lacks information on technology and provenance that, according to the author, will be the object of future detailed scientific analysis. It is worth mentioning the discovery of a glass weight of a type that was used by Jewish communities, attesting the possible presence of Jewish merchants at the site.

The chapter on a small collection of terracotta figurines gives insight into aspects of Roman religion at the site. The next chapter, on a small number of identifiable Ptolemaic and Roman coins, integrates a wider collection of coins found during the University of Chicago excavations in 1978, 1980, and 1982, which are described in Appendix 1 of the book. Although the coin collection does not provide accurate information about the coinage in circulation at the port, it is important for the chronology of the site. One coin of Ptolemy III represents a further evidence of Ptolemaic-era activity at the site.

The chapter on metal and metalworking is essentially a catalogue of the identifiable iron and copper alloy objects from Roman and Islamic contexts such as fittings and household

objects, gaming pieces and toys, jewellery, keys, knives, military equipment, religious objects, scale weights, seal tools, vessels, etc. The catalogue also includes a series of finds that are related to maritime activities, such as fishing equipment, nails and fastenings that are hence re-examined in “Ships and Ships’ Fittings” and “Fishing Activities.” In addition to the artifact catalogue and discussion, information on metalworking in the Roman and Islamic period is also provided.

Further important information on the trading networks both in the Roman and Islamic periods is provided in the chapter on stone objects. Particularly notable are discussions, first, of steatite pots, which probably originated from the Eastern Desert or Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and, second, of the obsidian found in the early Roman contexts of Quseir, which was probably imported from the Eritrean coastal region. The latter would confirm the export of obsidian from the port site of Adulis attested in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.

Appropriately, considering the excellent preservation of organic materials due to favorable environmental conditions, finds such as leather, faunal and plant remains—also including wooden artifacts, matting, basketry, cordage and textiles—are extensively treated and described. In most cases, each category of find is discussed in different chapters either in terms of materials and identification or in terms of the artifacts, their manufacture, and use. The selected catalogue of leather artifacts includes footwear, water bags, and various other objects, giving insight into everyday life in the Roman and Islamic periods. The “Wooden Artefacts” catalogue includes a wide range of objects, such as combs, vessels, spatulas, screening, panelling, and pens. The “Worked Faunal Materials” catalogue includes bone, shells, horn, ivory and turtle-shell. This study has revealed the working of hippo tusk and Indian elephant ivory on the site and also less common materials, such as a dugong rib. Interestingly, turtle-shell appears in the form of rings probably employed for fishing in the Islamic period.

The chapter entitled “Ships and Ships’ Fitting” is an extensive and excellent contribution to our knowledge on hull construction, rigging, sails, woodworking, and ship maintenance in the Roman and Islamic period, and includes a subchapter on maritime rock art engravings uncovered during a regional survey in the wadi Quseir al-Qadim. These date, according to the author, to the Middle Kingdom, to the Islamic medieval period, and to the modern era. This chapter is paired with another, “Wood Identification of Maritime Artefacts and Timbers.” Detailed information is provided on the Islamic hull remains reused in burials and the practice of sewn-plank vessel construction recorded on them, on the wood treatment, antifouling and lead sheathing related to Roman vessels, and on a large collection of horn brail-rings. The comprehensive analysis

of these finds and related excavated contexts suggests that ships were certainly serviced and perhaps also built at the site. Other maritime-related information is included in “Fishing Activity,” which illustrates fishing, fish-processing, and fish-marketing at Quseir in the Roman and Islamic periods through the analysis of archaeological evidence such as fishing nets, traps, hooks, weights and floats, and through documentary and iconographic data.

The next chapter focuses on plant remains, providing extremely important information not only for the spice trade but also rituals, cuisine, and food consumption patterns at the port; the over 50,000 plant identifications include exotic products such as pepper, coconut, cardamom, and watermelon. “Faunal Remains” is an exhaustive report on the different species identified at the site and their spatial distribution, with a discussion of the analysed data and additional information on food production and diet.

In the course of excavation at Quseir al-Qadim, an ancient Muslim necropolis was also examined. This was a unique opportunity for studying the burial practice and the bodies. This work is briefly described in Chapter 19 and will be the subject of a more extensive PhD thesis.

Cordage and basketry are the subjects of a complete report covering a wide range of objects, such as rope, containers, pot covers and lids, rope carriers and cargo nets, brushes, sandals, bags, etc., which contributes to our knowledge on this category of finds, which has been understudied until recent times. It is interesting to note that very little change occurred, from the Roman to the Islamic medieval period, in the manufacture of these objects.

The textiles chapter is a brief overview on part of the textiles assemblage, which will be further discussed in a separate

monograph. Particularly interesting is a unique catalogue of Roman maritime-related textiles, such as fragments of sails and webbing strips.

The c. 1,000 ostraca and papyri dating to the Greco-Roman period and more than 1,000 documentary items in Arabic language found at Quseir contribute to extending our knowledge of the various activities at the town and port and on the goods and people involved in the trade that joined the Mediterranean to India. The two chapters devoted to the written materials are short reports aimed at giving a taste of the forthcoming monographs: one includes the discussion of a papyrus dealing with a Roman loan of money; the other is a synthesis of the results of the study of the Arabic-language documents.

Reading the final overview one really gets the sense of how each part of the book has contributed to a better understanding of ancient Myos Hormos-Quseir al-Qadim. The effort made by the editors and principal investigators in collecting all these different contributions and reviewing what the port’s life was like is admirable, enriching our knowledge of the Rome’s trade with India and the East, as well as aspects of port facilities on the Red Sea. Not only has this work confirmed information previously known through literary sources but it has also added a large amount of data about the varieties of materials traded and the scale of exchange, as well as about the identity of the people involved in the trade and on the ancient settlers of the coastal areas. The book is also an important contribution to all other current and future studies on the Red Sea–Indian Ocean trade, and it is an invaluable guide for further investigations that will be conducted in this region.