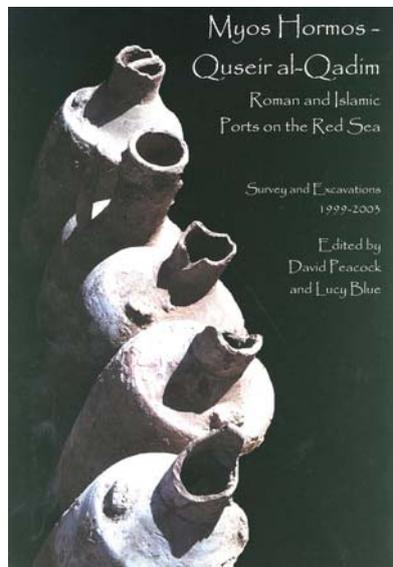




BOOK REVIEWS

Peacock, D. & L. Blue. Eds. 2006. *Myos Hormos – Quseir al-Qadim. Roman and Islamic Ports on the Red Sea. Survey and Excavations 1999-2003.* - Oxford, Oxbow Books

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During the last 20 years the Eastern desert of Egypt and the Red Sea coast have received a great deal of attention from both Egyptologists and scholars interested in the Graeco-Roman period. Amongst the ports on the Red Sea mentioned by the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is Myos Hormos. Its location still remains a matter of discussion, but at present scholars agree that it was located in the area around Quseir and Quseir al-Qadim.

In this volume Peacock & Blue publish the results of five years of archaeological investigations carried out by the University of Southampton in Quseir al-Qadim, which Peacock suggested was the location of Myos Hormos (Peacock, 1993). The volume focuses on the survey of the entire archaeological area and of

its surroundings, as well as on the numerous trenches excavated at the site. A second volume dedicated to the small finds will follow, which will include a general discussion about the historical conclusions (p. 174). Quseir al-Qadim is located about 8 km north of the modern town of Quseir. The ancient settlement was founded on a peninsula formed by a coral reef running north-south, which enclosed to the west a lagoon connected to the sea by a narrow channel located to the south of the settlement. The lagoon and part of the channel are now silted up and have been thoroughly investigated by the excavation team.

The volume is divided into two parts, with contributions from numerous specialists. The first part (pp. 1-61) deals with the study of the

region and the sedimentary investigation of the harbour area.¹ The history of previous investigations are summarized and discussed in the Introduction (pp. 3-6). The second part (pp. 65-177) is devoted to the excavation report itself and is divided into chapters according to locations. Different authors discuss the trenches separately. A summary of these results together with a conclusion is to be found in Chapter 9 and a Bibliography closes the volume (pp. 178-180). No index is provided.

A variety of different methods and surveying techniques were used to collect data concerning the tracks connecting the harbour to the Nile, the sources of water, the position and extension of the Roman and the Islamic harbours, and their settlements. The area has been mapped and surveyed in previous occasions (p. 7) by Meredith (1958), Reddé & Golvin (1987), Prickett (1979: 257-352), Zitterkopf & Sidebotham (1989) and Cuvigny (2003). The data collected during the new survey was compared with those published from previous campaigns. Beside new discoveries, such as a group of rock engravings and Greek inscriptions found in Wadi Quseir al-Qadim (pp. 17-26), the survey and study of the Bir an-Nakhil settlement (pp. 26-32) and the identification of a number of new 'towers' (p. 10), some new interpretations and descriptions of features and buildings, which were already published such as the so-called signal towers (pp. 9-11), the walls in Wadi an-Nakhil (p. 33) and the *hydreuma* at Bir an-Nakhil (pp. 32-33) are presented.

Due to the lack of information and evidence, the functional interpretation and the dating of most of the features is very difficult; nonetheless the authors often suggest new interpretations that sometimes are not fully proven. For example, the groups of huts at Bir an-Nakhil, which were previously interpreted by Prickett (1979: 299-300) and Brun & Reddé (2003: 137) as a quarry or mining settlement, have been identified as a monastic settlement (pp. 26-32).

The function and the dating of the signal towers are also dealt with. The towers located between Coptos and the Red Sea coast are interpreted as a coherent system dated to the Roman period,² despite the lack of evidence for many towers, planned for quick communications between the harbour and Coptos, or a sort of control points for the safety of the tracks.

No attempt to justify the absence of artefacts around the towers, their scant height (0.7-1.5 m) and the system of signals is present. Their presence along *widjan's* edges or on tops of hills facing the *widjan* has been regarded as key to understand the access routes to Myos Hormos, of which the main approach has been identified in Wadi an-Nakhil, Wadi Quseir al-Qadim, and Wadi al-Anz. In this context, Bir an-Nakhil (*hydreuma* with potsherds of 1st-2nd c. AD) has been identified as Myos Hormos main source of water during the Roman period.

The topographic survey of the site (11 hectares) was carried out using a Total Station and the data was processed with ArcGIS and AutoCAD MAP (the results are presented in Figs. 1.2 [p. 2] and 3.1 [p. 35]). Geophysical techniques were used to investigate most of the archaeological area and particularly the silted lagoon with the aim to locate the ancient harbours. 214 squares of 20 x 20 m have been mapped with a GeoScan Research FM36 Fluxgate Gradiometer and subsequently six trenches were excavated in correspondence with significant magnetic anomalies. The geophysical survey results are shown in six illustrations (Figs. 3.2-3.6 [pp. 36-41]). However, no visual interpretations of the anomalies are given. This would have been useful to help the reader to understand the positions of walls, streets and other features. Moreover, it would have been of great interest to compare the geophysical illustrations to the archaeological plans of the trenches. The most remarkable result of the geophysical survey is the identification of the harbours edges.

To determine the sedimentary history of the harbours, and their locations and extent in Roman and Islamic periods, more than 100 pits were dug and cores from 7 to 28 m deep were drilled. Methodology, locations and results are well presented (pp. 43-61). The authors demonstrate that the Roman port was located in the lagoon and that the access channel was 150 m wide and relatively deep. Siltation started in Roman period and was probably the reason that the harbour was abandoned at the beginning of the 3rd c. AD. The Islamic period port (12th-15th c. AD) was located in the channel, at that time a small bay or *mersa*. The reconstructions of the supposed Roman and Islamic waterfronts are shown respectively in figure 4.13 (p. 59) and figure 4.14 (p. 60).

The aims and research questions the excavation intended to answer are clearly presented at the beginning of Part II (p. 65). According to the authors most of the objectives have been reached although new questions arose and further research is still needed.

In total, 21 trenches were excavated in four areas: the Roman harbour, the Islamic harbour, the Roman town and the Islamic town. Each trench and what was found in them is described and illustrated with locations plans, detailed plans, drawings of sections and photographs. Surprisingly a comprehensive plan with all the buildings and features found and visible on the surface is not present. This lack does not help in creating an overview of the site and makes it difficult to evaluate the general conclusions reached by the authors in contrast to previous publications. The trench plans are not uniform in scale and orientation, which is probably due to page constraints. The complete lack of elevations on the detailed plans, together with the fact that few photographs are used, means that it is not always easy to interpret the features and understand the relationship between them.

An impressive system of walls and layers of complete amphorae was discovered on the shore of the Roman harbour. The use of complete amphorae to strengthen the ground and form a good drainage system is well known throughout the Roman Empire (Pesavento Mattioli, 1998), but this is, to the best of my knowledge, the first time it was found in Egypt. The *amphorae* used are mainly Dressel 2-4. Around the beginning of the 1st c. AD work started on the drainage system, probably to transform the mangrove swamps into exploitable land. A number of buildings near the shore are interpreted as workshops, storage rooms and areas for repairing boats. A major building, within which painted plaster was found, is interpreted as a public building, possibly a temple or a synagogue (pp. 116-127). Generally, the features brought to light are quite shallow and close to the surface of the *kom*. The erosion and (partial) destruction of these features mean that the interpretation of these features remains subjective and the features are open to interpretation. The building techniques and materials, such as local stones and mud bricks, are not dealt with in any great depth.

The conclusions reached by Peacock & Blue often contradict most of the previous publica-

tions concerning this area. The editors of this volume are firmly convinced that Quseir al-Qadim is identifiable with the Roman Myos Hormos and with the Mamluk Quseir (p. 174). *Papyri, ostraka* and documents on paper found but not yet published, are said to give ample evidence for this interpretation. However, the archaeological investigation did not provide evidence dated back to the Pharaonic and Ptolemaic periods, whereas according to the ancient sources, Myos Hormos was a Ptolemaic foundation. Nothing substantial from this period has been found in Quseir al-Qadim and in Quseir. The Roman presence is attested from the reign of Augustus through to the first half of the 3rd c. AD. The harbour was located in a sort of bay in the lagoon, well protected by the northern winds, to the west of the town. About one thousand years passed before a new settlement and a port were re-established in the area during the 12th c. AD. The Islamic port was settled in a small bay that originated by the siltation of the channel and lagoon. Apparently, this harbour did not have quays. The Islamic settlement and cemeteries were located to the east and south-east of the Roman town.³ Workshops and areas for repair of the vessels were identified in both harbours. According to Peacock & Blue, the urban layout did not follow a regular grid pattern, as was suggested by Whitcomb (1996: 750), but rather an organic development that was probably influenced by local geomorphology. The buildings are basic and there are no traces of monumental architecture. Decorative imported materials were not found during the excavations.

The project of the Southampton University is an excellent example of a multidisciplinary approach of investigation of ancient settlements. Excavation, although essential, is only one of the techniques used in the investigation. The results are remarkable and will increase in information after the publication of the small finds in the announced second volume.

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Endnotes

- 1 As Peacock stressed (1993: 232), the investigation of the lagoon sediments was a priority to establish the possibility of the presence of a harbour in Roman period.
- 2 The 'towers' are considered by Brun, Cuvigny & Reddé (2003: 227) as part of a different group of features from the towers identified along the road Coptos-Quseir, mainly because of their small dimensions.
- 3 The Roman necropolis is not mentioned.

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