



News & Notes

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*Issued confidentially to members and friends
Not for publication*

THE "YEAR OF STAIRWAYS" FOR DIG AT RED SEA PORT

Quseir, Egypt
February 26, 1982

Dear Friends,

This season's excavations at Quseir al-Qadim finished last week, and this report is being written lounging (for the first time) on the sandy beach only a few hundred yards from our trenches. Carol Meyer, stretched out on a blanket, sighs: "The end of the dig!" The day is a moderate sort, a few puffs of clouds but very bright all the same. About 9:30 the wind came up — a cool breeze wanting a light jacket but not the more usual colder north wind which tears at your field book and blows plumes of dust from the sieves. With today's breeze comes the comforting slapping sound of waves, not the usual crashing surf against the beach and bluffs. The coral reef is just visible as the tide goes out.

The weather at Quseir is constant and moderate and hardly forms a topic of conversation except for the wind which shifts direction suddenly and can change the relative humidity from 30% to 80% in half an hour. But the weather is the core of the news we have received from home. In addition to such letters from home, we have, in a sense, "received" hundreds of other letters this year. Our excavations in the Islamic areas, especially one residential complex which we completely uncovered, produced fragments and entire letters written in Arabic on paper and dating to the 13th century. These include lists of spices and the price paid, a letter from a mother to her son, fragments of a Quran, and fragments of an astronomical chart. Especially interesting is the little drawing of a ship, (see Figure 1). Many of the letters refer to a certain shaikh who may have owned this house. One of the letters seems appropriate to the season and may be freely translated as follows:

From the Mamluks, Hassan, Mohammad and Omar

Thanks be to God alone

We kiss the earth a thousand and a thousand times that God may preserve you. O God, God, we are in cold weather, as only God can imagine. Oh Father please buy a shawl for each of us because we are dying of this terrible cold. Buy them whatever the price, as much as God wants. Also we could use two water bags. We have been in al-Qasr al-Yamani (the Yemeni palace) for three days and, as long as this wind persists, we cannot travel by sea or by land. And if you are able, please buy a few cakes for us and send them here. . . ."

Whether these poor soldiers ever received their shawls and cakes we cannot say, but we are mindful of the wonderful cakes which Martha Bell regularly sends to us from Chicago House in Luxor. This generous sustenance has contributed to a completely successful season of excavation.

Speaking of sustenance, the Islamic residence produced thousands of date pits (and a large gunny sack to keep them in), fish, garlic, and even a corner full of carob seeds (and fruits). The preservation provided constant surprises such as a knotted piece of cloth containing finger nail clippings and two wooden keys (one with the owner's name) secreted under bricks in front of a door — exactly as if placed under the welcome mat. This portion of excavation, supervised by Fred Hiebert, Lisa Heidorn, Gillian Eastwood, and Jan Johnson was finished in four weeks, so a second Islamic area was uncovered. This is known as "confusion hill," an industrial area with a large circular structure with much burning. So far, no reasonable hypothesis—kiln, bakery, etc.—seems plausible. One of its more surprising aspects is a Byzantine coin found in the area.

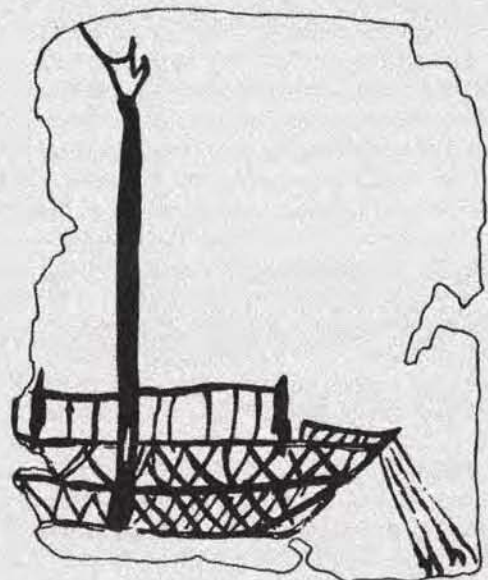


Figure 1. Little ship of 13th Century

In both the Islamic and Roman areas this was a year for stairways. The Islamic residence had two internal stairways leading to the roof, the wooden treads still in place. In the Roman area, the central building produced, in true archaeological tradition during the last week, a well-constructed stone stairway in the corner of the courtyard. Frantic expansion of the squares revealed an anteroom with a wooden threshold and partial door jambs. These efforts followed weeks of slow, careful excavation by Bruce Williams and Hanna Boulos of the rooms along one side of this large structure. They were able to document carefully the construction of vaulted roofs and debris from the second story of this building.



Digging with a jack hammer

The excavation of some four meters of brick debris, mostly congealed into a solid mass of salt or caliche, necessitated some innovative digging techniques. Through a generous loan of an air compressor by Amoco Oil Co. we tried digging with a jack hammer (see picture). Initial caution led to a proficiency which allowed first the removal of caliche off the roof fall, separation of the vaulting bricks, and finally removal of detritus to just above the floor. The hammer could even pop the debris off a mud floor, though we usually reverted to traditional hand picks for this work. The hammer saved an immense amount of time and labor (and equipment --we had already broken two steel railroad picks and numerous handles on this salt), and proved a useful tool for the conditions at Quseir though it will be an unlikely addition to general archaeological excavating technique. Its noise does spoil the tranquility of the archaeological scene.

Next to this central building is the "white building," excavated by Carol Meyer and J. Nigam, an archaeologist from the Indian Archaeological Survey who assisted us with our unpainted Indian artifacts. They uncovered two long halls--probably storage magazines--with fine tiled floors and vaulted roofs. Outside the door of one of these rooms was a small oven, presumably where the guards made tea. Cut into the rubbish of one of these rooms was a Roman burial, a young girl wrapped in cloth with purple bands and covered with a folded piece of matting. She must have been one of the occupants of the Roman town, sometime in the 2nd century.



Figure 2. Running elephant on cloth

The cloth of this burial was identified as Roman by Gillian Eastwood, a specialist in textiles, who has analyzed thousands of scraps of cloth from the excavations. Plentiful this year is the Indian resistant-dyed cloth with varieties of colorful patterns, including animals on either side of a tree and running elephants (see Figure 2). Even more interesting are the number of tiraz cloths and silks, including a piece of Chinese silk damask. The "laundry" which Gillian had to do each day did include interesting articles of clothing, some knitting, and fragments of tapestry and kilims. Cloth bundles, such as the finger nail clippings, were turned over to Cathy Valentour, our conservator, who was kept as busy as ever.

The season has been an extremely productive one, and we will be sorry to leave the quiet of Quseir next week when we finish registration, drawing, and photography. By the time we reach Chicago (about the time you receive this letter) we hope to be able to show something of the beauties of the Red Sea and the small Roman and medieval Islamic port and the eastern trade in which it participated.

Sincerely yours,
Donald Whitcomb

SPECIAL EXHIBIT

Publishing the Past

Oriental Institute Publications: 1974-1982

"Publishing the Past" is a special exhibition of recent monographs, research reports, and edited volumes featuring the work of eminent Oriental Institute scholars on topics ranging from Islamic leather bookbindings and Babylonian astrology to computer-aided analyses of the lost Amorite language and x-raying the mummies of ancient Egyptian royalty. Included are reports on archaeological field work in Iraq and Egypt, Cyprus and Nubia, and linguistic studies of ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Egyptian and Aramaic (a cognate of Biblical Hebrew).

Of special note are the illustrated volumes prepared by the Oriental Institute Epigraphic Survey of the Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions decorating the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak in the upper Nile valley.

Exhibit opens April 13, 1982

RECENT ORIENTAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS

THE GREAT HYPOSTYLE HALL AT KARNAK, vol. 1: *The Wall Reliefs*, OI Publications, vol. 106, Harold Hayden Nelson, ed. W.J. Murnane. 1981. xxv pp, 276 pls. (c) \$75.00.

This volume records the reliefs in the Great Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Amun-Ré at Karnak. The plates include all the reliefs on the walls of the Great Hypostyle Hall, scene by scene, along with schematic drawings of each complete surface, showing the relative positions of the scenes and their role in the decorative program.

The contents of this volume represent the swan song of Harold Hayden Nelson (1878-1954). As field director of the Oriental Institute Epigraphic Survey at Luxor, from its inception in 1924 down to 1947, he was intimately involved with all aspects of recording the Theban monuments.

Editor William J. Murnane comments in the Preface that it was perhaps inevitable that Nelson's attention should eventually be drawn to the Great Hypostyle Hall in the Temple of Amun-Ré at Karnak. The paradox of this building—one of the most famous, yet among the least known in all of Egypt—apparently weighed on his scholar's conscience, and accordingly, in conjunction with his duties as field director of the Epigraphic Survey, he undertook to record the reliefs inside the hall as his own personal project. Regrettably, his manuscript could not be published before his death in 1954, and the project lapsed for nearly a quarter century thereafter.

In the summer of 1977, the project was entrusted to Dr. Murnane who made a final check of the drawings during the 1977-80 Chicago House seasons. Adjustments were made on the original drawings in Chicago. Copies of Nelson's uncorrected drawings have been deposited with the research archives at the Oriental Institute. In addition to the drawings, states Dr. Murnane, Nelson's papers also include preliminary copies of the inscribed material remaining in the hall on architraves, abaci and columns, which it is hoped can eventually be worked up into a form that will bring the publication of the reliefs and inscriptions in the Hypostyle Hall to completion.

THE TEMPLE OF KHONSU, vol. 2: *Scenes and Inscriptions in the Court and the First Hypostyle Hall*, OI Publications, vol. 103, by The Epigraphic Survey. 1981, xxiv + 93 pp., 96 pls. in portfolio (38x48 cm.) \$95.00.

This report records the reliefs in the courtyard and in the first Hypostyle Hall of the Khonsu Temple at Karnak. The volume includes translations of the texts and a glossary for volumes 1 and 2.

Comments Kent R. Weeks in the Preface: "The history of the late Twentieth Dynasty and of the early Twenty-first has been based perforce upon only meager evidence. Some of the most revealing has been carved on the walls of the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak. Because many of the reliefs in Khonsu Temple have been altered by recarving, erased by later generations, eroded by weather, or (it must be admitted) have seemed at first glance so banal and repetitive, they have proved especially difficult subjects for egyptologists."

Professor Weeks explains that the present Temple of Khonsu, built during the Twentieth Dynasty, is the work of many hands. Ramesses XI and Herihor constructed the front of the temple (the pylon, court, and first hypostyle hall), and it is their decoration of this area that fills most of this volume. The building was begun, however, during the reign of Ramesses III, utilizing both newly quarried stone and inscribed blocks taken from earlier (principally Eighteenth Dynasty) structures and recut. Additions to the temple and alterations continued for over a millennium, and the resulting cutting and recutting of reliefs pose epigraphic problems of sometimes bewildering complexity.



By now you will have received your invitation to the annual dinner on May 10, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Museum. Since birthday parties are always fun, we hope many of you will attend. John Carswell has planned a very entertaining program and has some other surprises for us as well. We are all looking forward to seeing you on the 10th.



Bronze spike with crouching lion from Iraq: Bismaya, Temple Mound Shaft. From the Oriental Institute collection which Barbara Hall will present in her illustrated lecture on April 21 at 8 PM in Breasted Hall.

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APRIL LECTURE

Barbara Hall, Museum Conservator and Associate Curator of The Oriental Institute, will present an illustrated lecture, the seventh in our series on the Technology of the Near East. This lecture, entitled, *Conservation and the Oriental Institute Collection: Preserving Evidence of Ancient Technology* will be given at 8 PM in Breasted Hall on April 21.

OTHER SPRING LECTURES

"Recent Archaeological Investigations in Afghanistan"
Henri-Paul Francfort, CNRS, Paris, May 3, 8 PM, Breasted Hall.

"Assyrians at Nippur"
McGuire Gibson, The Oriental Institute, May 19, 8 PM, Breasted Hall.



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