In February, 1982, the excavations at the Red Sea port of Quseir (al-Quṣayr al-qadīm) were winding down. The ancient port lies eight km to the north of the modern town of Quseir and is located at the end of the Wadi Hammamat which connects the Luxor region of the Nile valley with the Red Sea. The third, and final, season’s work was concentrated in what the archaeologists termed the “Islamic knoll,” especially in one particular residential complex in the central area of the town. The complex was completely uncovered by the team, revealing a well-built house that had a number of storerooms and apartments as well as two stairways leading to the second floor or roof. The excavations provided constant surprises. Secreted under bricks in front of a doorway—exactly as if placed under a welcome mat of sorts—was a wooden key, on the obverse of which is inscribed, in black ink, something like “the key of al-ḥājj [so-and-so],” which might have contained the house owner’s name. Inside the house,
several hundred paper fragments, mainly personal and business correspondence written in Arabic, were found alongside other small objects. The paper fragments, as well as other objects, were clearly discarded trash, and were strewn all about the house, inside and out. They obviously had never been kept deliberately or in any order. In these shredded fragments, reference to a certain “shaykh” is being constantly made; the complex was thus named the “Sheikh’s house.”

This book is about the Arabic documents uncovered from the “Sheikh’s house.” These paper fragments form a private “archive,” in a loose sense of the term, that sheds light on the activities and operations of a family shipping business on the Red Sea shore during the late Ayyubid and early Mamluk era in the thirteenth century. The documents promise great potential as a mine of information for the study of social, economic, and maritime history of Islamic Egypt. They will also be beneficial to the general study of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade, and the economic history of the pre-modern world.4

Aside from their documentary significance for socio-economic historical inquiry, the fragments also bear testimony to medieval Muslim popular belief and communal rituals; among the codices unearthed are samples of block printed amulets, poetry, zodiac charts, prayers, and what appear to be words of magic. These will be of immense interest to specialists of the history of printing, Arabic paleography, letter writing, language, magic, astrology and astronomy.

This book, by examining and analyzing these fragments together, tells the story of Everyman in an interesting place at a significant time. The time was the thirteenth century, a remarkable era that saw revolutionary changes that would eventually shape the world economy for centuries to come.5 The place was a remote port town on the Red Sea, the trade routes to which played an essential role in mapping out the key territories within this “world system.” Since

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3 Personal electronic communication with Katherine Burke on October 27, 2003.

4 The renewed interest in Quseir is evidenced not only by the continuing publications of the material uncovered by the Chicago team, but also by the ongoing excavations conducted by the Southampton and Leeds team; for up-to-date information, see the team’s website: http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/research/quseirdev/.

all the activities described and reconstructed in this book are centered around one household, a local merchant and his extended family, our first goal in the following pages is to piece together the life and history of this merchant family. The family story provides us with a microscopic view of Quseir, a port that saw modest volumes of traffic and a relatively short period of prosperity but was nevertheless significant in its own right, having peaked at a critical juncture of the economic and commercial development in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. By making the key Arabic texts available, our second goal is to enable other researchers to further use these documents and answer questions in related areas. The book consists of two main parts:

Part One is an introductory essay on the historical and cultural context of the documents in question. Descriptive and conceptual in method, the three chapters deal with, respectively, the “Sheikh’s house” and its inhabitants, the Red Sea commerce as reflected in the textual evidence of the trade activities around the house, and aspects of popular belief and culture as revealed through the non-commercial texts. Chapter 1 sets the stage and introduces the characters, major and minor. The focal point is men and women living and working in and around the “Sheikh’s house.” Who are they? When did all of this happen? What were their relationships to one another? Chapter 2 begins with technical aspects of commerce and trade, such as weights and measures, commodities and prices, and so forth. Special attention is then given to larger issues of trade patterns, business practices, and the monetary situation, as well as trade routes, both domestic and international. By asking questions such as, “What was being traded, and how?” this chapter explores the commerce-oriented material culture in this Red Sea port against the international backdrop of Mecca pilgrimage caravans and Indian Ocean trade routes. Chapter 3 deals with a different arena: life, death, and everything in between. Based on an examination of the

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non-commercial textual material found in the “Sheikh’s house,” it sets out to look into aspects of the spiritual culture of the community: the things people did, or believed in, or worried about, besides selling and buying. The texts—charms, amulets, prayers, sermons on behalf of the dead and the dying—give the modern reader a rare chance to glimpse the mindset and practices held by ordinary men and women in this small provincial town, the way they went about their daily business, and, more importantly, the way they coped with disasters and anxieties. The seemingly all-too-human desires—healing ailments, mourning the dead, and seeking God’s protections in the affairs of this world and the hereafter—may have less to do with orthodox religiosity than with popular belief and communal rituals, but are nevertheless significant for our better understanding of the culture, and psyche, of the time and place. This chapter also maintains that in many ways magic practices and prayers were not divorced from trade and economy. In the concluding remarks of Part One, the “big picture” issues are addressed, those concerning the significance of the documents in question for historical inquiry in general, and for the study of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean commerce in particular. While our focus is on the case study of the rise and fall of a particular merchant family, references will be made, and comparisons will be drawn, to Islamic legal writings on business practices and commercial partnership as theory, and to contemporary documents (especially the contemporary Cairo Geniza papers) as reflections of the reality.

The core of Part Two is a critical edition, in chapter 5, of eighty-four original Arabic texts, with translation and commentary. This is preceded by chapter 4, which is devoted to paleographic and linguistic matters, chief among them the classification of the various types of documents, and the features of the “Middle Arabic” language as seen in these particular documents. While in chapters 1–4 attempts were made to utilize all the available (that is, decipherable) documents found in the site, the criteria for choosing only eighty-four documents for edition lie largely on the utility, that is, the relative completeness, of the manuscripts; those too fragmentary to make any meaningful context were therefore left out. The focus on editing and analyzing these “economic texts” is justified by the fact that they form the overwhelming majority of the textual findings. Selected pieces of non-economic texts, such as private letters and
miscellanies—prayers, words of magic, poetry, amulets and charms (discussed in detail in chapter 3)—are represented in the editions as well.

Some of the material in chapters 1 and 2 first appeared in my articles “Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 1: Business letters,” “Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 2: Shipping notes and account records,” *JNES* 58.3 (1999): 161–90, and *JNES* 60.2 (2001): 81–116, and “Golden Dinars and Silver Dirhams in the Red Sea Trade: In light of the Quseir documents,” *Proceedings of the Red Sea Trade and Travel Conference* (forthcoming). It has since been thoroughly revised. Of the Arabic texts included in chapter 5, eleven have been published in the above-mentioned articles; however, new reading of certain words and slight amendments to the translation have been made throughout.

Research at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, where a substantial portion of the Quseir documents is currently housed, was supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities through the American Research Center in Egypt. During my stay in Cairo in the summer of 1999, I managed to examine, hand copy, and take measurements of all of the fragments that could be accounted for (RN 964–RN 1093). The bulk of the writing was done during a sabbatical leave from my teaching duties at the University of Notre Dame in the academic year 2002–2003, sponsored by a generous grant from the American Council of Learned Societies. For the generous financial and logistic support of these institutions, I express my sincere gratitude.

The list of the persons to whom I owe a large debt of gratitude is not short but sweet. My thanks first go to Janet Johnson and Donald Whitcomb, the directors of the Quseir excavations, for giving me the opportunity to study the material. Whitcomb not only provided me with the microfilms of the original material, but also has diligently kept me informed over the years about any new finds, new publications, new ideas, and new anything “Quseirian.” I would also like to thank Katherine Strange Burke for sharing with me her thoughts and ideas on the project; her diligent and skillful editorial assistance is greatly appreciated as well. Katherine is currently writing her dissertation at the University of Chicago under the supervision of Whitcomb, on archaeological findings from the “Sheikh’s
house.” I wish her all success and hope that cooperation between the textual scholar and the archaeologist will contribute to a new approach of interpreting archeological findings with the direct help of textual evidence.

In Cairo, I would like to thank Dr. Farouk Askar, the director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo; Mme. Su’ad Muhammad Ibrahim, the deputy director of the Museum; and Mr. Salah Sayour, curator of wooden objects (formerly curator of manuscripts) at the Museum for their kind assistance, along with hot mint tea and cool Cairene jokes, during my regular visits to the Museum over a period of three months. My thanks also go to Mme. Amira al-Khatib of the American Research Center in Egypt and to her able staff for all kinds of help I received while an ARCE fellow.

Portions of the research were presented at the annual meetings of the American Oriental Society (New Orleans, 1998), the American Research Center in Egypt (Chicago, 1999), and the “Red Sea Trade and Travel Workshop” at the British Museum (2002). I would like to take this opportunity to thank members of the audiences for feedback, encouragement, and suggestions. Many colleagues and friends have shared with me their enthusiasm for this project and supported me along the way, among them Dionisius Agius, Paula von Bechtolsheim, Lucy Blue, Remie Constable, Wadad Kadi, Donald Little, Paul Lunde, Carl Petry, Warren Schultz, Francine Stone, John Sutton, and Daniel Martin Varisco; my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to all. Special thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewer for his/her insightful suggestions to improve the manuscript. Needless to say, all the remaining errors are solely mine.

Finally, a few technical notes on transliteration and signs are in order:

(1) For the Arabic documents, the “RN” represents the original registration number assigned to each cluster of fragments; sub-division of a, b, c, and so forth, of each fragment was my own device. During the course of discussion in chapters 1–4, the RN number of the texts to be published in this volume is marked with an asterisk. The texts are arranged according to topic, and within each topic, a loose chronological order is being followed when possible.

(2) A simplified version of the Library of Congress system is used to transcribe Arabic terms, with two exceptions: the unpronounced tā‘ marbūţa is omitted altogether, and the alif maqṣūra is spelled as ā not ā.

(3) The following signs have been used in preparing the Arabic texts:
[ ] lacuna in the manuscript

. . . . . illegible text

< > conjectural additions by the editor

<< >> deletions in the manuscript

{ } deletions by the editor

( ? ) uncertain reading

/ \ text written above, or below, the line

(4) In the English translation, the square brackets [ ] are used to indicate additions suggested by the editor, while the parentheses ( ) contain explanatory content.