CHAPTER 3

Ladies of Quseir: Life on the Red Sea Coast in Ayyūbid Times

Donald Whitcomb

The excavations at the port of Quseir al-Qadim, on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea, searched for evidence of commerce, both written and artifactual, and for its development over time. Objects of daily life as well as the private correspondence of a mercantile community were recovered. The letters of the inhabitants of the “Sheikh’s house” have been studied by Li Guo, and Katherine Strange Burke has studied their clothing and other articles of daily use. One of the less explored aspects of this community continues to be the evidence for the daily lives of women and their contributions to the community.

The Sheikh’s house shows signs of occupation in the early thirteenth century (1200–1250) and of interactions both direct—with upper Egypt, the eastern coast of the Red Sea, and Yemen—and indirect, with East Africa, India, and the Mediterranean.1 The broad archaeological goals of these excavations may have tended to ignore the small-scale processes of daily life that take place in households and in their communities.2 This is not to say that the research of Guo and Burke has avoided evidence of daily life, but that this aspect of the archaeology of the medieval Islamic world has tended to be given only secondary importance in past publications.3

1 The excavations at Quseir al-Qadim, located 8 kilometers north of the modern port of Quseir, were conducted by the University of Chicago from 1978 to 1982. The main publications are: D. Whitcomb and J. H. Johnson, Quseir al-Qadim 1978: Preliminary report (Cairo, 1979); idem, Quseir al-Qadim 1980: Preliminary report (Malibu, 1982); and, idem, “Quseir al-Qadim,” in The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1983–1984, ed. J. H. Johnson (Chicago, 1983), 17–18.
The Commercial Milieu

The archaeological site of Quseir al-Qadim first attracted attention due to its location, the closest point from the Red Sea coast to the Nile valley, the route traversing the Wadi Hammamat, famed for its inscriptions and Roman stations (Fig. 3.1a). This site is now identified with the Roman port of Myos Hormos, which Strabo made famous in the early first century when he claimed that 200 ships left the port yearly and engaged in trade with India. Historical information in the Encyclopaedia of Islam (1982) is inaccurate since the excavations

---