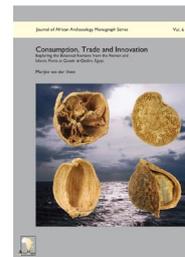

BOOK REVIEW



Consumption, Trade and Innovation. Exploring the Botanical Remains from the Roman and Islamic Ports at Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt. By Marijke van der Veen. Journal of African Archaeology Monograph Series 6. Africa Magna Verlag, 2011, 313 pp. ISBN 978-3-937248-23-3 (Hardcover). € 69.80.

Trade in spices from the East (especially Arabia and India) to Europe across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea flourished and formed a major component of international commerce during the Roman and medieval Islamic periods. Several historical sources, including written texts, have documented this trade. Archaeological studies have focused on reconstructing this commercial activity through the examination of the archaeological record including botanical remains (*i.e.*, seeds, grains, fruits, vegetative parts of plants, wood, and charcoal). While the book discusses in detail a large assemblage of botanical remains recovered from excavations, it is written to highlight the archaeological and historical importance and relevance of these remains. It has sections that are technical and specialist in their detail, but each chapter also has an introduction and discussion sections that are intended for a wider readership. There, the results are set in their wider cultural, historical and agricultural context, making the book valuable for archaeologists, historians, agronomers and geographers interested in long-distance trade, the role of food and cultural identity.

This monograph synthesizes the results obtained from research carried out between 1999 and 2003 by Marijke van der Veen and her team (University of Leicester, England) at Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt, a transshipment port on the Red Sea coast that actively participated in the spice trade. An archaeological excavation of this site was undertaken by a British team from Southampton University (1999–2003) under the direction of David Peacock and Lucy Blue.

The objectives of this work are to enhance our understanding of the nature, scale and impact of trade in foodstuffs and to shed light on a more human aspect of the trade, especially the daily lives of merchants and other inhabitants of the port. The exceptional significance of the botanical remains from Quseir al-Qadim has been attributed to three factors. First, the size of the dataset

with its high species diversity (95 crops) and the excellent condition of preservation of most specimens makes the archaeobotanical assemblage from Quseir al-Qadim one of the richest in the world. Secondly, the occurrence of two major cultural periods, *i.e.* Roman (early first to early third centuries AD) and medieval Islamic (mid-late eleventh to fifteenth centuries AD), at the same location enables an interesting opportunity to compare two different civilizations. Finally, the location and function of the site offers a rare chance to study the early stages of organized long-distance trade in foodstuffs as well as the roots of our modern global economy.

Chapter 1, “Introduction” (*p.* 1–37; written by Marijke van der Veen) includes an outline of aims, research questions, objectives, data collection, and methods applied to retrieve the botanical remains. It also sketches the geographical and archaeological settings and cultural chronology at Quseir al-Qadim, as well as aspects of trade in the Indian Ocean during the Roman and Islamic periods. Quseir al-Qadim was called Myos Hormos in the Roman period and Kusayr in the Islamic period.

Chapter 2, “Spices – Culinary and Medicinal Commodities” (*p.* 39–73; written by Marijke van der Veen, Alison Cox and Jacob Morales) provides readers with numbers and morphological descriptions of the archaeobotanical remains of eleven imported plants and spices discovered in Roman, main and late Islamic periods at Quseir al-Qadim. These include: black pepper, rice, coconut, mung bean, belleric myrobalan, black myrobalan, cardamom, fagara, ginger, turmeric, and betelnut. This assemblage reflects a cosmopolitan group of species domesticated in various parts of the world.

Archaeobotanical records including textual references, origin, uses, and importance, are reported for the eleven taxa in question. What is missing here is the

Arabic name for each plant. Low numbers of rice remains (hulled grains, naked grains, husk fragments) were recorded from Roman and Islamic samples. The presence of rice in the Roman samples indicates that it had been imported from India partly to feed Indian merchants at Quseir al-Qadim. On the contrary, tenth century textual evidence suggests that rice was cultivated in Egyptian oases (especially El Fayyum) during the Islamic period. Although not attempted by the author, further morphological studies could refine the identification of rice grains to the level of cultivar (e.g., *Oryza sativa* var. *japonica* or *O. sativa* var. *indica*). A summary is presented at the end of the chapter including the integration of these results with other Roman ports on the Red Sea, such as Berenike (CAPPERS 2006). This chapter ends with a discussion of the consumption of spices as food preservatives, commodities, and luxuries (p. 64–70).

Next comes Chapter 3, “Summer Crops – From Trade to Innovation”, (p. 75–119; written by Marijke van der Veen and Jacob Morales). The cultivation of summer crops in the Middle East and the associated agricultural techniques were an innovation that was established and became widespread during the Islamic period. This fact is supported by the available historical records (WATSON 1983). Using the botanical remains from Roman and Islamic samples, the current study demonstrates that the process of summer crop introduction was complex but certainly can be considered an Islamic period innovation. These summer crops originated from two areas: South Asia, including rice, sorghum, sugar cane, cotton, citrus, banana, watermelon, and aubergine; and Africa, including pearl millet and cowpea. For each crop, discussion is presented on its type, ecology, origin, nature of the botanical remains from Quseir al Qadim, dating evidence, comparable archaeobotanical records in Egypt and the Old World, and textual evidence. In addition, it is determined whether the crops were imported or grown in Egypt, as well as the uses of crops during Roman and Islamic times. In many cases, the authors consider important archaeobotanical questions such as the process of domestication of significant crops including sorghum, pearl millet, rice and watermelons as well as the presence of banana in the fourth millennium in Africa. This chapter ends with a valuable discussion of the types, nature and development of agricultural innovations with particular emphasis on Egypt. Clearly, more early Islamic sites in Egypt should be excavated in order to enrich our knowledge with additional physical evidence on aspects of the agricultural revolution that took place at that time.

Chapter 4, “Food and Foodways – Patterns of Everyday Life”, (p. 139–203, written by Marijke van der Veen, Alison Cox and Jacob Morales) adds another specific dimension to the study on sources of food and

ingredients as well as different ways of food preparation and consumption by the workers and merchants of Quseir al-Qadim. Analysis of dung remains reveal interesting results on types of fodder provided to the working animals at the port (camels and donkeys) and where these livestock were stabled. It was possible to reconstruct everyday patterns of life in the port. A rich diversity of 95 different food and other economic plants has been retrieved from the “*sebakhs*” of Quseir al-Qadim. “*Sebakhs*” is the local name that describes large rubbish dumps, sometimes several meters in height, each full of pottery, textiles, basketry, wooden artifacts, animal and fish bones, plant materials and much more (Fig. 1.7., p. 16 and Plate 4, p. 126).

A total of 60 plants occur in the Roman deposits, 89 in the main Islamic deposits, and 55 in the late Islamic deposits. This botanical assemblage is classified into cereals, pulses, fruits, nuts, oilseeds, herbs, and vegetables. The climatic and soil conditions in Roman and Islamic times are unlikely to have differed much from those prevalent in Quseir al-Qadim today. Also, the site is located in a coastal desert with no opportunity for local farming or plant growth. Therefore, the inhabitants were dependent on imported cereals, pulses, vegetables and fruits from the Nile Valley.

A shift in food preferences is recognized between the Roman and the Islamic periods. Roman foodstuffs were characterized by Mediterranean food plants supplemented by Egyptian foods. In contrast the Islamic diet comprised a wide range of foodstuffs of Eastern origin including tropical spices and summer crops. The authors have applied a unique experimental ethnobotanical methodology in order to reconstruct which part of a plant was eaten and how a fruit or vegetable was prepared for consumption. This approach has been employed to watermelon, citrus fruits, grapes, pomegranates, pulses, and aubergine. Chapter 4 provides the reader with complete methodologies and interpretations necessary in assessing food plant remains retrieved from archaeological deposits. Multivariate statistical analysis has been used to answer specific questions on different routes by which the botanical material may have arrived into the “*sebakhs*”, to explore the spatial distribution of waste disposal and to document variations in the distribution of botanical remains across the site. The chapter ends with a description of patterns of everyday life at Quseir al-Qadim with interesting discussions on nutrition and health as well as eating as practice. The success of this endeavor can be attributed to the excellent preservation status of the recovered botanical remains including fragile and soft parts such as mericarps, bulbs, leaves, tubers, and rhizomes.