**Wadi Hammamat Between Quseir and Quft. May 2nd 2008**

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Well we finally got round to using our permissions from the S.C.A. to visit Wadi Hammamat yesterday. The journey there was pretty uneventful except for the usual sleepy day dreams.

There is definitely something different about the Eastern desert compared to the western desert. You can feel the difference as soon as you enter it, not too sure how to word the feelings I get on entering the Eastern desert, but there is, let’s say, a calm about it, a more relaxed atmosphere which could be attributed to the cooling Easterly wind which carries with it moisture from the Red sea, hence the reason for so much vegetation in the Wadis as you drive through. Wadi Hammamat is steeped in history and even today with its newly tarmac road retains the charm of a trade route in way or another. The trucks that slowly crawl through the Wadi carrying their loads destined for either end of the Wadi prove that the trade routes that were first found in Egypt all those years ago are still important today and provide life lines to the various communities to which the delivery of such goods are a valuable source of income and not only to the recipient but also to the small communities that still live and work in these Wadis. One such community if it can be called such was the cafe in the centre of the Wadi half way between Quft and Quseir. The area is known as Bir Umm Fawakhir and has been documented through history by many travellers and more recently by The Bir Umm Fawakhir Project which was under the supervision of the Oriental Institute. The project was managed by Carol Meyer and the reports which can be found online (seen notes at the end of this report) are well worth reading through, they give an in-depth account of life in the Wadi not only based around the mining that took place there but also the day to day living of the inhabitants of this village and the outlining villages in the nearby Wadis.

The cafe that lies in Bir Umm Fawakhir was a welcome sight for us and provided me with the much needed hot water for my coffee which my body was crying out for.

It was here at the cafe that we were met by our guides for the day, which Moamen Saad had organised for us. Moamen who has accompanied us on the previous trips was the former inspector for the Red sea area and it was this area that he was familiar with as it fell under his jurisdiction. I don’t know who was more excited at finally being in Wadi Hammamat, Moamen or us.

After a much needed coffee break we were introduced to Awad Ali Mahmoud, one of the guardians of the area. After the introductions we set off on our first walk of the day to the so called workman’s village that just happened to be situated across from the cafe in one of the Wadis.

This village has played a major part in the research carried out by the Oriental Institute and has been investigated, mapped and in place excavated to determine its date of habitation as well as its main functions and that of its inhabitants. The conclusion set out in the annual reports, as I previously stated make for good reading and provide an in-depth review of the area.

We were lucky to have arrived so early in the morning as to allow us time to walk around and explore the entire site. I did my usual and walked off in my own little world taking in as much of it as possible, trying to make sense of the mixture of housing and their layouts, architecturally speaking the huts had been built with due care and diligence, the main sandy road that ran down the centre of the village helped bring to life images of the village in its heyday. The houses are in extremely good condition given their remoteness and the activity of looters in the area, there is still much eveidence of door jams, complete windows, niches and such like architecturally details that I could draw an image of the house in their entirety.

The small narrow streets if they could be called such that ran between he houses would of been well shaded and given the close proximity of the houses to one another this would of been a desired effect given the climate and environmental conditions out there which are harsh to say the least, especially in the mid day sun.

The village though did lack the usual utility buildings such as a main grain store, church/sanctuary, communal meeting room or hall. Without these buildings being present it does pose the question as to whether this village was inhabited all year round or whether it was frequented as and when gold from the mines in the locality was required or other minerals, stone ETC for that matter. Was the village a kind of modern interpretation for barracks? There was also no mass of pottery sherds that you usually equate to ancient towns and villages. The pottery that was on lying on the surface was in abundance but by no means in the quantities that we have become accustomed to. The sporadic layout of the village also raises questions as to how it evolved, was this ongoing project, new houses being built for new incoming families of workers it did not seem as if the village had evolved normally around itself. I concluded from what I could see and the evidence on the ground that the village was indeed some kind of billeting for the workers of the mines and quarries and that it had evolved of a long period of time, for ever being extended to house more and more workmen some of which I would say lived their entire life there but it was by no means a permantley inhabited village, there was just too much missing from the picture to prove this.

During my walk about I was able to photograph many differing types of pottery, these pictures can be found on “MySpace albums” for you to look at. The pottery mostly dated from the Byzantine periods and Roman periods (but also from previous periods); however we did find some fine ware which one would not normally attribute to a workman’s village, not exactly their “cup of tea” so to speak. Most of the fine ware could be found at the base of the foot hills from the run off’s, I was compelled to follow one of the trails and this led me to the top of one of the foothills where at the summit I discovered a collection of broken fine ware and some painted pottery sherds, it was as if the fine ware had been deliberately broken at this location on the summit of the hill, could this of been some kind of offering? There was no plausible reason for the accumulation of the fine ware in such a remote location and it was obvious that they had not been collected and merely left there, due to the run off along the slopes of the hills to their bases where the trails began, the reason had to be for some kind of libation act, possibly giving thanks for water, wine, as water would off been and still is a valuable commodities in this part of the world, in my mind worth its weight in gold, excuse the pun.

But the only problem with this theory is that the Oriental Institute report and findings pinpoint the village to a Byzantine era with possible links to the late Roman period, this would not therefore allow for such pagan activities as libation acts of worship by the Coptic inhabitants, possibly Gnostic but definitely not Coptic.
The time was coming close for us to depart and the others were calling for me to return with them to the cafe, there was enough time for some quick photographs of the fine ware and some birds eye shots of the village in the Wadi below before I turned to return to the cafe, the village left more questions in my mind than I had originally turned up with, even with the Oriental Institutes reports to hand I still hand huge gaps in the village history and its function in such inhospitable place.

On returning to the cafe I asked Moamen if any further excavation or projects had taken place at Bir Umm Fawakhir, but to his knowledge none had since the Oriental Institutes project. Further investigation I believe is warranted at the site and the locality to determine exactly the time line of construction on the site and its function with regards to the silk trade route and also more importantly its relationship with the local Bedouins, as in the Western desert which I have travelled extensively a lot can be learnt from the Bedouins with their deep traditional beliefs and customs, something may just be sitting there in their culture that may shed some light on this now dormant ghost town.

From the cafe we headed westward towards Wadi Hammamat itself, stopping at various locations along the way which Moamen had knowledge of either Petraglyphs or Pharaohnic inscriptions which we could photograph or catalogue for our research. We were attended by our second guide and guardian for the day; Nassr Hamdan, a local Bedouin who had first rate knowledge of the area and knew exactly where to look for the inscriptions and petroglyphs which are scattered along the road side on the faces of the once busy quarries but all but quiet and still now.

The Bedouin are a remarkable people in my book, a whole culture within Egypt itself, I have come to trust the Bedouin of Egypt’s desert terrain. They sometimes act in the most irrational way to us westerners but look a little more closely and what you actually see is a person who is in total harmony with his surroundings, their knowledge of the desert and how to respect the environment in which we are guests in is second to none and should always in my book be adhered to, to the letter.

After 1 hour rolled into 4 hours off stop start stop start, at all the locations along the road side towards Quft and the climbing up and down over the rugged foothills I was in need desperately of a coffee, thankfully our driver Ahmed had kept my thermos cup full of hot water into the front seat and it was time for me to relax and watch form the window as Maria jumped in and out of the van taking the all important photographs for us and our research.

The nest major stop was what Moamen referred to as the BEER, a hand dug water hole, possibly dating to the roman period and was sunk to a depth of 34 meters, and winding spiral staircase with windows at intervals led the way to its bottom. The staircase had unfortunately been left to rack and ruin at the bottom and was precarious to say the least, it was s shame to see such a feet of engineering and a life support for so many over the years being left o to just fall apart like this. The amount of work that had gone into providing the travellers over the years with water from this hole seemed to be in vain as modern man and his plastic spring water bottle driving his automobile along this tarmac road was oblivious that this was once the life line for the travellers of this road and if it were not for this water hole so many would probably of perished in the heat of the unforgiving desert.

The Beer was once part of a major station of fort with stone walling and lookout towers. Today the outer wall can be still seen and the front entrance to the fort aligned to the North. Scattered around the protecting wall of the water hole lay half broken unfinished sarcophagus, an ironic reminder for me that the desert can give life as well and take it away and these sarcophagus lying around the water hole was a stark reminder of this.

We continued on and came to the final stop of the day, Qasr el Banat or “Palaces of the girls” as it is also referred to as. Here a lonely outcrop sits on one side of the road inscribed with graffiti from various different time periods another reminder of how long this trade routes has been here and how many different travellers have trodden these lonely paths. On the other side of the road another station this time the interior walls and outer walls were clearly defined and one could get a clear image of the structure from these emerging foundations. The station would have been a pleasant site to the weary traveller as he approached this site form either route, knowing that food, water and shelter would be on offer even a posilbilty of business may be on offer. The site had undergone some excavation but most of the trenches that were located within the walls of the building were attributed to looters looking for the possibility of antiquity. Good luck digging in this heat.

Overall the day proved to be an enormous help to our research and into the understanding of one of Egypt’s most well known Quarry areas, not just for its gold and precious stones and other such material but also for its wealth of inscriptions and rock art which we were so privileged to see and photograph. A most memorable day again it would not of been possible if it were not for Moamen Saad and the permission of the SCA. All of whom we are very grateful to.

I would like to think that we will return to this area as we both believe there is much more to see and investigate in Wadi Hammamat, with special regard to the quarries which in my opinion we did not even scratch the surface on. The entire area was at one time alive with cottage industry, but it will take some time to investigate and explore the numerous Wadis and cliffs to truly find the massive quarries that are referred to in history.

I refer of course to the great expedition that was organised by Ramessenakhte, the high priest of Thebes for the removal of Bekhen stone for the statues of Ramesses IV around 1150BC. The Map or Turin papyrus was drawn by Amennakhte, son of Ipuy, and provides great detail of Wadi Hammamat including the gold mines, Bir Umm Fawakhir and the quarry face itself, but the main detail of the TP is the description it offers of the expedition itself. A total of 8362 men were sent to Wadi Hammamat according to the inscription left by them on the face of the quarry which we visited ourselves, but this figure just beggars belief. The workers village at Bir Umm Fawakhir could never have supported such an amount of men nor could the wells in the vicinity provided enough water for such an outrageous amount of men not to mention their associated families that would have joined them on the trip and the associated auxiliary team behind the scenes providing food, water, shelter etc. However, saying this, it does prove that the Bir Umm Fawakhir was in situ at that time and that there was a settlement there no matter how small or large it was, this does in some way warrant further investigation at the site of Umm Bir Fawakhir to see whether in fact the ancient village itself lies either beneath the sands of time.

This amount of men and their entourage would have left an indelible mark on the landscape of this Wadi, but we did not see this. However saying that, if you had a total of 1000 men left permantley at the quarry face while the other 7000 or so dragged the stone back and forth to Thebes, then we might be reaching an accurate account of what took place, it is exactly this picture that stirs the imagination when entering Wadi Hammamat as I mentioned previously, so many men working in a common goal for what they perceived as the living God, nothing was impossible. Quite a feat of not just engineering but motivation of men. It is a shame that we today as a society cannot work together in such harmony.

We will continue to research the area and bring you missives as and when we find out more that is relevant to the topic.
Please excuse the fact that we have written in detail the exact course of our research and what it actually entails, as many of you are aware we are in the process of writing many articles for publishing on the research results so far, and hopefully we will be able to bring them to you soon.

Until next time.

Dr John Ward GM.KT. & Ph.MA.Maria Nilsson GM.K.T.