Mamluks

13. D. A. AGIUS, “‘Leave your homeland in search of prosperity’: the ostrich egg in a burial site at Quseir al-Qadim in the Mamluk period” ... 355
14. P.-V. CLAVERIE, “L’ambassade au Caire de Philippe Mainneuf (1291)” ... 381
15. N. COUREAS, “Controlled Contacts: The Papacy, the Latin Church of Cyprus and Mamluk Egypt, 1250-1350” ... 395
16. Y. FRENKEL, “Women in Late Mamluk Damascus in the light of Audience Certificates (ṣamāʿār)” ... 409
17. C. MORISOT, “L’acte de Ḡaqmaq au profit de la Mekke” ... 425
18. D. S. RICHARDS, “The Office of Wilāyat al-Qāhirah in Mamluk Times” ... 441
20. J. VAN STEENBERGEN, “Taqwim al-Buldān al-Miṣrīya (C.U.L. Ms. Qq. 65). Identifying a Late Medieval Cadastral Survey of Egypt” ... 475
21. U. VERMEULEN, “La Tenue Protocoleà à la Cour Mamlouke” 491

EGYPT AND SYRIA IN THE FATIMID, AYYUBID AND MAMLUK ERAS

IV

Proceedings of the 9th and 10th International Colloquium organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 2000 and May 2001

U. VERMEULEN and
J. VAN STEENBERGEN (eds.)

UITGEVERIJ PEETERS LEUVEN – DUDLEY, MA 2005
"LEAVE YOUR HOMELAND IN SEARCH OF PROSPERITY":
THE OSTRICH EGG IN A BURIAL SITE AT
QUSEIR AL-QADIM IN THE MAMLUK PERIOD

INTRODUCTION

A range of Arabic documents were discovered during excavations conducted by the University of Chicago archaeological team at Quseir al-Qadim on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (8 km north of the modern port of Quseir [Figure one]) between 1978 and 1982. In recent excavations by a team from the University of Southampton (1999 to 2003), more Arabic documents have been unearthed from a medieval rubbish tip and a burial place, with more or less similar content to the Chicago finds.

1 This study is part of a three-year AHRI funded research project (2002-2005) entitled "Reconstructing the Quseir Arabic Documents" (www.qeads.leeds.ac.uk). My thanks to them for funding this research. I would like to thank the participants of three seminars in Leuven (2000), Southampton (2000) and Leeds (2001) where the paper was discussed. A number of scholars were consulted in the course of researching this article and, therefore, I would like to thank: Frédéric Bauden (Université de Liège), Lucy Blue (University of Southampton), Taieb el-Azhari (Helwan University, Cairo), Li Guo (Notre Dame University), Dirk Huyge (Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels), Mustapha Lahlabi (University of Leeds), Fred Leemhuis (University of Groningen), Anne Macklin (University of Southampton), Ian R. Nelson (University of Leeds), Andrew Petersen (University of Cardiff), David Peacock (University of Southampton), Jackie Phillips (University of Cambridge), Anne Regourd (University of Leeds), Donald Richards (University of Oxford), Joern Thielmann (University of Mannheim) and Cheryl Ward (Florida State University).

I was invited by some members of the Southampton team to look at the documents photographed in 2000. My initial approach was to conduct a pilot study with the aid of my research student, Radia Kaseiri.

In addition to the bulk of the 1999 and 2000 finds, approximately 170 paper fragments, which were located in trenches 2B and 2C of the site (see Figure two), my attention was drawn to an inscribed ostrich egg (QaQ 1999 022), fragments of which were found in a burial place situated on the beach, north-east (see Figure three). Numerous ostrich eggshells were unearthed at this site by both the Southampton and the Chicago teams. The Southampton finds were located within the funerary structure on the top of the burial mound. There were literally thousands of sherds of ostrich egg, the bulk of which did not contain any Arabic writing: "[they] were simply found through all layers of the mound".

Intriguing questions arise from the study of the Quseiri ostrich egg such as: What was the intention of writing on an ostrich eggshell and what is the text’s message? What is the significance of ostrich eggs in an Islamic burial site? What do they symbolically represent? An attempt is made in this paper to answer these questions. It is divided into three parts: the first is an historical outline of Quseir al-Qadim from classical and medieval primary sources; the second will look into the role of ostrich eggs play in the society and culture of the Levant in terms of their utility, adoption as decorative objects and symbolic representation; and the third will discuss the writing on the ostrich eggshell, its interpretation and the clues the excavation site can offer in terms of religious and trade contacts at the harbour of Quseir al-Qadim.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF QUSEIR**

Quseir al-Qadim was an important trading centre in the Roman period (1st to 3rd centuries of the CE) and was known at the time as Myos Hormos. As well as the numerous evidences of Roman occupation, there are ephemeral Islamic remains of the 7th/13th and 8th/14th century late Ayyubid to early 9th/15th century Mamluk periods. The excavations have provided important information as to the geological and topographical structure of the Roman and Islamic harbours and have identified a number of environmental factors that have influenced the settlement pattern (Figure four).

Trade with the spice lands via the Red Sea during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods is well attested to in classical works of Strabo (d. after 21 CE), Pliny the Elder (d. 79 CE) and the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (written in the 1st c. CE). Goods were shipped to Myos Hormos, then to Qift (Coptos c. 100 km NW), an important trade town on the Nile and up the river to Alexandria for further shipment across the Mediterranean. An important question arises as to why Myos Hormos lost its importance during the Roman period and why thereafter there seems to be no sign of habitation until the medieval Islamic period, almost one thousand years later? A possible answer is the difficulty which ships had to cope with in sailing up the Red Sea against the prevailing wind. This is probably why Berenice, further south on the Sudanese border, became, in spite of the distance from Qift, the preferred landing. But this is only one hypothesis; there could be many reasons for the desertion of Myos Hormos.

Close to Berenice was the Arab port town of "Aydhab about 17 days" to 20 days journey from Qus (c. 400 km [NW] — south of old Qift).

---

1. A. Macklin, “The human remains”, in D. Pencoak, L. Bell, N. Bradford and S. Moser (eds.), Myos Hormos, Quseir al-Qadim: A Roman and Islamic Port on the Red Sea Coast of Egypt. Interim Report, Southampton 2000. p. 49. Many skeletons and two substantial graves were recovered. Ship timbers in many pieces were found and stitched were also found; they were probably used as lids for coffins (ibid).


3. Written communication from Anne Macklin (27 October 2003).

4. Myos Hormos, an important harbour linking the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, is well documented by the Greek geographer Agatharchides in 116 BCE (Strabo, The Geography, transl. H.L. Jones, vols. I-VIII, London 1930, 17.4.45), the PERIPLUS of the mid-first century CE (The Periplus Maris Erythraei, transl. L. Casson, Princeton, NJ 1989, p. 54) and others. Whitcomb and Johnson (Quseir al-Qadim 1978, p. 28) suggested that the excavated site was not Myos Hormos but the rather minor Roman harbour of Leukos Limeni based on Ptolemy’s (d. 282 BCE) reading and an ostracum bearing the name Leukos. However, the Southampton team has recovered a number of materials which point to the fact that the site was Myos Hormos: A piece of papyrus gives the name of the site as Myos Hormos; in addition, an important archive of ostraca was uncovered detailing activities of sea trade in the region, see Pencoak, Bell, Bradford and Moser (eds.), Myos Hormos, Quseir al-Qadim, 2000. p. 11, 51-52.

5. Strabo, Geography, VII. p. 133; VIII. p. 119-121; 17.1.44-45; for spice harbours see Periplus, p. 16 also (7.3.10-11) trading with the western Indian Ocean.

6. See Strabo, Geography, 17.1.45: "...this because the Red Sea was hard to navigate particularly for those who set sail from its innermost recess...".


By the 4th/10th century, ‘Aydîhâb was becoming a trade centre for Egypt, linking the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean at a time when the efforts of the ‘Abbâsid caliphs to maintain the political unity of the Muslim world was faltering: social and political unrest was felt in many places where Islam had laid its roots. The attempt by the Crusaders to establish in the Levant a number of small states in the 5th/11th century is remarkable but this did not last for long. However, one century after the Europeans had settled in the Levant, the Crusaders were virtually destroyed by the Ayyubids with a strong government under the leadership of Salâh ad-Dîn (reg. 564-589/1169-1193). The Mongols, sweeping most of Central Asia almost up to the Mediterranean coast, disturbed the balance of Muslim society in the 7th/13th century, but were finally stopped at the battle of ‘Ayn Jalût in 659/1260 by the Mamlûks, the rulers of Egypt.

Egypt controlled the spice trade by way of ‘Aydîhâb on the Red Sea as Muslim ships interrupted the Levantine trade by continuous threat, raiding the ports towns of the eastern Mediterranean. We know from the Andalusian traveller, Ibn Gûbây, (d. 614/1217-1218) that the Red Sea was at this time the safest route: he wrote

"[‘Aydîhâb] is one of the most frequented ports of the world, because of the ships of India and the Yemen that sail to and from it..." [his nîma ‘alîf ‘alîmarâk ‘d-dhâr ’a bi sâdâb ‘anma marâkib al-hurâl wa l-yâmân talâfât flîhâ wa amîlî minâh].

Not only was ‘Aydîhâb a trade centre but in the words of the traveller, a pilgrim meeting place [zâ’i’dân ‘alîmarâk al-hurâl qay-yâdîr wa l-wâdir]. The position of ‘Aydîhâb as a trade and pilgrimage centre was ideal: it was located almost opposite Jeddah, the port of Mecca. But the ‘Aydîhâb route was gradually abandoned for Quseir (c. 100 km east of Qus) probably during the Mamlûk second part of the 8th/14th century (after 767/1365-1366), It is not clear what brought about this change but it seems to have been gradual and politically significant, as Qus (five days journey to Quseir) became the capital of Upper Egypt. Naval units were then stationed in Quseir in order to control the Red Sea commercial and political operations.

11 J.C. GARDIN, "Kusayy", in J.F., V. p. 519.
13 "Ibid."
Sailing up the Red Sea against the prevailing wind was difficult. From the diaries of the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battûta (d. 770/1368), we read that in 732/1331, at the end of pilgrimage, he was about to board a ship from Jedda owned by a certain ‘Abd Allâh at-Tunisi bound for Quseir. He said he did not board the ship because of his suspicion that she was not safe enough. As it happened, he comments, when the ship was in the open sea she foundered and only the shipmaster and some merchants managed to escape death, the rest including some 70 pilgrims drowned.\(^7\) The story does imply that Ibn Battûta was aware of the dangers of the prevailing wind and that the ship he was about to board would not have made it because of her bad condition. A final, perhaps more important point, is that the story does confirm the Quseir-Jedda pilgrimage route.

The land route was perhaps safer: caravans could have proceeded from Jedda to Yanbo or Al-Wejh and then crossed over by small boat to Quseir. But there are, as far as I am aware, no Islamic sources that mention this alternative route.

THE ISLAMIC FINDS

The choice of Quseir as a harbour, after one thousand years of absence since the Roman period, remains a mystery. The University of Southampton archaeological group has not yet come up with any findings to explain this gap but we know through historical texts that al-Mamûk’s presence at Quseir was to protect the annual pilgrimage to the Holy Cities and the shipping of the eastern trade, known as the spice trade.\(^8\) Although Quseir was the principal Egyptian port for the Muslim pilgrimage at the time it was also a haven for Christian missions bound for Ethiopia.\(^9\) The Egyptian historian al-Qalqasândî (d. 821/1418) notes that some vessels reached Quseir because of its proximity to Qúsu, which still has valuable ilâshi ba’dû l-murâki’îb li qurbihi min Qúsu.\(^10\) It was, “... a

---

\(^1\) Ibn Battûta, Travels, II, p. 213; ibid. Voyages, II, p. 251.

\(^2\) Several documents describing the spice trade come from the 9th/11th century. One Geniza document (a corpus of business and private letters) There are sporadic references in the paper fragments under study to spice merchants using Quseir as a port for loading and unloading merchandise.

\(^3\) Gârîn, “Kisârat”, p. 519.


\(^6\) Al-Qalqasândî, Sâhib, III, p. 537.


OSTRICHES

Before looking at the different functions ostrich eggshells had in some societies I will mention depictions of ostriches found on a number of materials in the Levant.

As birds, ostriches were hunted in the desert for meat and feathers, until fairly recent times. They were extinct in Egypt on the Red Sea coast in the 1890s and they were still around in the Arabian Peninsula late as the 1940s. The most common depiction of an ostrich on walls in a hunting scene but the animal mosaic of the 6th century CE in the baptistry at Mount Nabo (Jordan today) shows two men leading an ostrich, a zebra and a giraffe (camelopard). The significance of the context of a place where pilgrims came to be baptized is difficult to determine. Both Egyptians and Nubians since antiquity have hunted birds. You find ostrich hunting scenes painted on a number of rock tombs in the Naga area and Idimah, some going back to the Middle Kingdom. In Pharaonic Egypt, one hunting scene illustrated on a golden sheath shows Tutankhamun (fl. c. 1350 BCE) shooting an arrow and killing one of two ostriches. Hunting ostriches is often associated with kings and nobles: “(it) was the principal recreation of the Assyrian kings”. But commented on an Assyrian cylinder seal showing an ostrich hunt dated some time between 1160-1090 BCE.

Apart from the value of ostrich meat, their feathers fetched a high price and their use is well documented in royal circles. Interestingly, modern times ostrich feathers are attached to the bumpers of taxis in the Middle East as a symbol of speed or perhaps luck.

Ostrich eggshells as drinking cups and perfume containers

Bibby found ostrich eggs at a burial mound in Dilmun Bahrain (3000 BCE) and he could clearly identify the eggs being cut away from the top and used as drinking cups. He also noted traces of red paint round the top. Ostrich eggs cut and painted and used as drinking cups were common for a long time, way into the medieval Islamic period. Moreover, ostrich eggs were used as containers “for transporting and storing liquids” as well as canteens. Ibn Battūta recounts an interesting story about ostrich eggs used as drinking cups. His ship was struck by stormy weather on the Red Sea in 729/1329; the crew and the passengers were hungry and thirsty until finally there emerged a roadstead called Ra’s Dawâ’ir near ‘Aydhâb: “We landed there and found on the shore a hut of reeds, shaped like a mosque, and inside a large number of ostrich shells filled with water, so we drank from these and cooked [some food]” [fa nuzalât bīhi wa waqâdatu bi sâhil-i ‘arîs qayâb ‘alâh hâyât màrî qisîr hâyât an-nâ‘ u mâ dâmîlât u mâ ’fâ sarînî minhu wa jâhÎhû] What is interesting about this is the uniqueness of the incident for in all his travels from Morocco to China, Ibn Battûta only mentions ostrich eggs this one time.

Ostrich eggshells were used as perfume containers in Pharaonic times. On a wall relief from the temple of Ramses II (reg. 1303-1200 BCE) at Beît al-Wali, it shows the pharaoh enthroned, receiving emissaries from Kush in Nubia among the tributes to the king one can see rings of gold, incense jars, a fan and piles of ostrich eggshells on a shelf. Their use was to store perfume, an important commodity among the royal circles.

Ostrich eggshells as decorative objects and their symbolism

Ostrich eggs have been adopted as decorative elements in churches and mosques, a custom that goes back to Egyptian antiquity. Often you
see in Ethiopia the whole egg used as ornamentation on roof-tiles of Coptic churches.\(^{40}\) They are hung from the vault of Egyptian Coptic churches and it is also customary to find ostrich eggs hanging as an icon carrier, a reminder for the faithful that as the ostrich is保护 the eggs so they should protect their lives with spiritual thoughts.

They are used as part of light fittings in Ottoman mosques although it is not clear whether these are real eggs or ceramic equivalent.\(^{41}\) There are also displayed on the top of a minaret in West Africa and Sudan during medieval Islam we have examples of ostrich eggs used as decorative objects: One finds brass lanterns with their bottom part shaped as ostrich eggs in the courtyard of the Fatimid Al-Hākim mosque in Cairo (Figure five). Half-shaped marble ostrich eggs decorate the mihrāb (prayer niche) of the al-`Azhar mosque (renovated in 1566) (Figure six).

It was customary in Yemen among the Jews to have ostrich eggs kept in the shelves of their home on the birth of a child. They are emptied and pierced on opposite ends with a tassel attached to the bottom of one side. The presence of an ostrich egg when a mother at birth symbolically represents fertility\(^{42}\) and, in the case of a number of cosmogonic myths, the egg symbolizes creation.\(^{43}\)

```
40 See St. Myros-Haye, “Aksam: An African civilization of Late Antiquity” (online at www.net.)
43 There is an interesting hadith which may be attached to the symbolism of an ostrich egg. It is reported by Muhammad b. `Az-Zubayr that Abi Talib transmitted from Basra (who reports it from Hasn b. Hasna) (d. 110/728) that he saw a number of young men were on pilgrimage when they learned the location of an ostrich egg. They did this being in a state of tariqah (i.e. not committing sex) so they went to `Ummar and `Ali for some advice. In this matter, the reason they had to bring about the mating of a good horse with as many young virgin she-goats as the number of eggs that were gathered and make an offering of their newborn baby. They were told that if a she-camel aborts, the damaged ostrich eggs would not be lawful. Muhdi b. `Abd Allah, Les trésors de la postérité ou les des proches parents du prophète (Khād al-dār al-`āfa) fi maqāmāl dâr al-`āfa, fr. Bauden, Cairo 2004, p. 184-186. In this hadith there is an important attack on the ostrich egg which suggests that some symbolic meaning probably related to fertility the cycle of life and death.
45 One bestiary account found in the Aberdeen university library (Latin MS 24 dated c. 1200) revolves around the ostrich looking for the group of stars called the Pleiades in order to lay its eggs. A very interesting account; there is firstly the story and secondly the moral lesson extracted from the story. The intention of this account, like the rest of the bestiary accounts, is a religious discourse whereby the anonymous author addresses the readers on moral issues. Here we are told that when the ostrich covers the eggs in the hole, it immediately forgets them and never returns to them because she is preoccupied with heavenly matters, so must man, the commentary continues, be concerned with God and not earthly matters (fol. 4r). Way what we have here is an arresting image — the ostrich gazing at the stars, searching for the propitious moment to lay her eggs. It is an image which has its roots in the natural world; for the Pleiades are known to become brighter as the weather becomes warmer and the ostrich must lay her eggs before the heat of summer. But ostriches do not in reality consult the stars, so here the use of the ostrich and her eggs carry the moral of the story. The image of the eggs left behind in the sand represents earthly values and the ostrich searching for the Pleiades symbolizes mankind’s desire to leave behind earthly values and find spirituality. The whole imagery is an allegory of the journey from the material world to eternity.
```
displayed on top of minarets? Are they purely decorative? Although this practice has pre-Islamic ancestry it does suggest, as T. Insoll remarks, "a symbol of the unity of Islam, and of such cultural significance that the tendency today is to perpetuate their use with ceramic or manuscript copies.

**Arabic Writing on Ostrich Eggshells**

The earliest inscribed ostrich egg found in an Islamic necropolis — perhaps that found in minute fragments in Fustat, dated possibly to 442/950-1050. The Chicago egg fragments found at Quseir al-Qadim were dated (only the wording of the last digit is missing which approximates ten years): One reads 87x AH = 1465 to 1475 CE and the other 89x AH = 1485 to 1495 CE. Other inscribed ostrich eggs come from a later period. At the Gayer Anderson Museum (Bayt al-Kreftelia), near Ibn Tulun’s mosque in Cairo, one can see an ostrich egg with a text engraved in ink and Arabic writing consisting of poetic verses. The egg is dedicated to the Sufi šayḥ ‘Affī (11th/12th century), whose mausoleum still exists in Egypt today. Two of these four eggs, also decorated with a map and Arabic writing, have recently been sold at an auction at Sotheby’s and Christie’s. All three eggs are apparently designed by local Egyptian craftsman. One inscribed ostrich egg is found at the British Museum, a 19th-century type made of brass with repeated design.

To piece together the Southampton egg (QaQ 1990 0.22) was not an enormous task once the inscribed shells had been culled from a rest. Writing was normally inscribed on one side of the eggshell and only half of an eggshell out of 23 fragments was reconstructed. Numerous problems were encountered in reading the inscribed egg: apart from the fading ink, most frustratingly, words were missing and some did not have diacritics (dots, top and below, to distinguish sounds) and this made the reading and understanding of the text difficult and sometimes unintelligible. In spite of these technical difficulties, I managed to read the entire text. From the fragments pieced together twelve lines are visible: ten are written horizontally (Figure seven), two lines are vertically written on the margins of the horizontal lines (Figure eight).

**Arabic Text**

Line 1 (a) تَغَرَّبَ عَنِ الْأَوَّلِينَ فَقَدْ طَلَبَ الْعَلَا Line 1 (b) وَفَرَّقَ فِي الْأَنْثِائِ [عِنَّمَ] قَوَالُهُ

Line 2 (a) تَفَرَّقَ هُمْ وَاتَّسَأَلَ مَعْيَةً Line 2 (b) وَعَمَّلَ وَأَدَّىَ وَتَسْخَّرَ مَاحِدٌ

Line 3 (a) فَوَلَىٰ فِي الْأَسْتِبَارِ ذَلِكَ وَمِكَّةَ Line 3 (b) وَفَقَطَ الشَّيْخُ وَأَرْكَابُ شَدَادَ

Line 4 (a) قَوْلُ الْقَفْيِ لِلِّهِ مِنْ خَيْبَةٍ Line 4 (b) بِدَارَهَا وَلَا وَحَامِدٍ

Line 5 كَبِيْبُ الْعَيْدِ الدُّنْيَيْهِ المَجْمَعُ الْمَفْتَرِي الرَّاجِي إِلَى رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ

Line 6 وَعَفَّفَانَا فِي الْأَرْضِ بَاَّثِرَتُهَا مَنْبِيْباً

Line 7 فَرَّقَ الْلَّهُ تَعَالَى وَعَلَّمَهَا حَامِدًا لَوْجْهَهُ مَصَّاً عَلَى

Line 8 وَشَّارَبْنَا مِنْ ذَٰلِكَ غَفَّرَ اللَّهُ لَهُ وَلَوَلَدِهِ

Line 9 وَلَنَ أَعْمَلُ بِالْأَمَانَةِ (الخُيَّرَ) مَنْهُمْ

Line 10 لِلَّهِ مَخْلِصَ (الخُيَّرَ)

Line 11 بَنِيَٰنَدْنَ وَقَدْ

Line 12 [وَلاَ حَوْفُ عَلَيْهِمْ، وَلاَ حَوْفُ بِهِ] مُخْرِجَنَّ.
**TRANSCRIPTION OF TEXT**

*Horizontal lines*

1. (a) "Leave your homeland in search of prosperity"
2. (b) Depart, travelling has five benefits;
3. (a) If it were said that in travelling there is humiliation and hardship,
4. (b) camel-raiding [and] overcoming difficulties;
5. (a) Then certainly the death of the young man is better than his life...
6. (b) In this life...
7. Allah Almighty has honoured and exalted (death); grateful and praying Allah for...
8. Asking Him forgiveness of his misdeeds; He forgives him and his parents.
9. Those who prayed to him that he maybestow (good) on them.

*Vertical lines*

(line 11) ... yantaqilima waddan (right)

(line 12) wa la hawwara akhlaamu wa la him yahzanimu

---

44 Poetic licence: the ending of this line should read with a kasra and not generally with a fatha (diphthong).

45 As a result of the poetic licence read ma'jadi not ma'jada. The same applies to lines 3 (b) sadada not sadada and 4 (b) basadi not basada.
line 10 he has the seal of ([?] goodness).

Vertical lines

(line 11, turning to love
(right)
line 12 [On them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.]

INTERPRETATION

The text contains a poem (first 4 lines) and a prayer (the following 8 lines) with words that evoke suffering and joy, life and resurrection, is disappointing, however, that no date shows on the Southampton. The funerary text of the ostrich egg belongs to the ṭadhb ar-riḥla (travel literature) and ḥaqq (pilgrimage) genre. Riḥla (travel) is identified with the experience of the pilgrim. The first four lines are poetic verse, which conforms to the literary standards of a riḥla. Performing the ḥaqq, the fifth pillar of Islam, was the ultimate goal of the pilgrim traveler. The travel was long and risky and the death of the "young man" worthwhile.

OSTRICH EGGS IN A BURIAL SITE

In the pre-Christian era, eggs were found in graves, burial mounds, and other sites. Carved and natural ostrich eggs have been dug up in archaeological excavations such as those recovered by Geoffrey Keen in Dilmun Bahrain (3000 BCE). Ostrich eggs found in an Islamic burial context were decorative but also were placed on tombs.

The second part of line 12 written vertically on the eggshell (if standing) for a known Qur’anic verse which occurs thirteen times in eight different sûras (other see al-Qur’an, II. 38, 62, 112, 262, 274, 277; III. 170; V. 72; VI. 46; VII. 38; X. 99; XIX. 61; XLVI. 13. The verse may serve like a refrain in a song, see Y. A. X. Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary, 2 vols. Cambridge (Mass.) 1946, p. 48. In. 115. I will be able to find which sûra would fit the context of this egg writing once the missing fragments are found.

See BRINT, Looking for Dilmun, p. 77.


mausoleums with a purpose. Karl Christoph Klunzinger (d. 1861), a
medical doctor, posted in Quseir during the 1860s and 1870s, writes that
in one of his visits to Upper Egypt he entered a saint’s mausoleum built
of stone or clay that was frequented by many pious worshippers. He
observes: “attached to the roof [were] a number of interlacing cords,
and from these […] are suspended various glass lamps, little ships,
and ostrich eggs […]” (Figure nine). From the illustration one can see
about 25 ostrich eggs hanging from the middle of the roof of a four-post
tomb structure. Klunzinger’s description of the saint’s mausoleum with
ostrich eggs could be one of the clues leading to the Quseiri finds at
the necropolis. It seems that the Quseiri eggs were part of the mausoleum’s
tomb structure. From the excavations it is clear that the ostrich eggs
were not buried with human remains, “they were placed in the funerary
structure on the top of the burial mound”[a] But who was this “young
man” referred to on the inscribed egg? Was he a saint? A mausoleum
has an important status and would have erected by the followers of a
saintly man.

What is then the significance of the writing on an ostrich egg? Is it
associated with magic? Did the egg have miraculous powers to con
fort the weak and assist the pilgrims in their hajj? Many pilgrims
from North Africa would have taken the Fustät-Qaṣr route across the
desert to the harbour of Quseir al-Qadim. The pilgrims would have
sought the blessings from the person enshrined in the mausoleum and
the text of the ostrich egg would remind them of death and life there
after.

There is an old belief that the egg conveys miraculous power to the
dead and can call them back to life. Chicken eggs are used in East Africa
(Kenya and Tanzania) for magical purposes. Muslims place chicken
eggs with Qur’anic verses written in saffron ink next to the bedside or
under the bed of an ill person with the hope that the patient gets well.[b]
So the ostrich egg is not just a medium of decoration but a method of
engaging with and entering the spirit world. It is a powerful symbolic

KLUENZINGER, Upper Egypt, p. 104-105.

Fred Leenhouis (University of Groningen, interviewed on 6 April 2002) suggested
that the Cairo eggs were placed on the posts of the shield’s mausoleum. This may not be
correct for, after reading Klunzinger, it is quite probable that the eggs were hanging from
the roof of the mausoleum.

Written communication from Anne Macklin (27 October 2003).

Information given to me by Faizatul Shiavi (Milton Keynes), interviewed on 10
December 2002.
image of the soul's journey from the body, to life thereafter, hence its first line of the fourth hemistich under study:

Interesting, the death of the young man is better than his life.

The journey of life through trials and perils is now, through death, captured in the symbolism of the ostrich egg. There, the soul waits to be free.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The value of the Quseiri Arabic documents lies not only in the linguistic and purely historical facets, but the site also offers an opportunity to explore new questions of religious and cultural interaction between people in the worlds of commerce and pilgrimage. Patterns of contact dealing with long-distance trade, local adaptation and land utilisation, questions as to all of these are posed by the excavations at Quseir and only if these documents are adequately investigated can answers be found.

The finding of ostrich eggs at Quseir al-Qadim have raised important questions as to their significance in the context of the burial site and in particular that of Islam. It is not easy to interpret burial sites and there will be more unanswered questions if artefacts do not surface. We know very little of how the inhabitants lived at Quseir and such things as diet, so we hope that the Arabic documents will tell us more. Meanwhile, the excavated site of the Islamic necropolis offers some new interpretations as to the reasons for the death of the occupants and burial practices. The burials seem to be a single event — mass burial as a result of accident or pestilence in the 15th century. This is very exciting as archaeologists have always found it difficult to excavate areas where burial places are known to be Islamic.

DIONISIUS ALBERTUS AGIUS
University of Leeds

Fig. 1: Quseir al-Qadim on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (from PEACOCK, BLUE, BRADFORD and MOSER, MYOS HORMOS, QUSEIR AL-QADIM, 2000, p. 12)
Fig. 2: Trenches 2B and 2E and 5 where the paper fragments were found (1999 and 2000 combined) (from Peacock, Blue, Bradford and Moser, *Myos Hormos, Quseir al-Qadim*, 2000, p. 17)

Fig. 3: The Islamic cemetery (NE of the excavated site) where numerous ostrich eggshells were unearthed (from Peacock, Blue, Bradford and Moser, *Myos Hormos, Quseir al-Qadim*, 2001, p. 4)

Fig. 4: Ruins of the site at Quseir al-Qadim
Fig. 5: Brass lantern with bottom part shaped like an ostrich egg (Al-Hakim, Fatimid Mosque, Cairo)

Fig. 6: Marbled ostrich eggs decorated on the Fatimid mihrab of the Al-Azhar mosque of al-Mu’izz, Cairo
Fig. 7: The Arabic text of the ostrich egg (Qurʾān 6:99, 0.22)
(courtesy of University of Southampton)

Fig. 8: A Qurʾānic verse written vertically at the bottom end of the ostrich eggshell (Qurʾān 19:99, 0.22) (courtesy of University of Southampton)

Fig. 9: Mausoleum of a saint with ostrich eggs hanging from the ceiling in Upper Egypt (from C.B. Kozlowski, *Upper Egypt: its People and its Products*, London 2000 (first published 1878), p. 104)