



Glass bead trade in the Early Roman and Mamluk Quseir ports – A view from the Oriental Institute Museum assemblage



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results of an interdisciplinary study of thirty-five bead artifacts found at Quseir port sites and presently stored in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago. Many of the glass beads were ascribed to chronologically mixed contexts of the Early Roman Myos Hormos (1st–3rd c. A.D.) and Late Ayyubid-Mamluk Quseir el-Qadim (13th–14th c. A.D) periods. For both periods textual sources mentioned the overseas trade contacts of the Red Sea ports, and Carol Meyer (1992) and Peter Francis Jr. (2002) suggested the possible Indo-Pacific origin of some of these beads. While monochrome and decorated drawn and segmented, beads should point to the Mediterranean or Middle Eastern glass workshops, monochrome drawn and more or less rounded objects were considered by Peter Francis, Jr. as Indo-Pacific. By combining both macroscopic and compositional analyses, in particular, using laser ablation-inductively coupled plasma-mass spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS), we present a bead typology and chronology of maritime bead trade subject within two main periods of Quseir occupation.

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1. Introduction

More than sixty glass beads were found during the excavations of the Oriental Institute (University of Chicago) at the Red Sea site of Quseir, directed by Donald Whitcomb and Janet Johnson in 1978, 1980 and 1982 (Whitcomb and Johnson, 1979, 1982) (Fig. 1). The archaeological remains have been ascribed to two general periods of the sites occupation: the Early Roman period (ca. 1st–mid-3rd c. AD) when the site was known as *Myos Hormos* and the late Ayyubid to Mamluk period when the site became *Quseir al-Qadim* (13th–14th c. AD). The beads were published in the excavation reports (Whitcomb, 1979: 196–198; Meyer, 1982: 226). Additionally, they were gathered in a separate volume on Quseir glass (Meyer, 1992: 41–2, 94–5, 180). Most of the beads were returned to the Cairo Museum before Peter Francis Jr.'s visit to the Oriental Institute Museum (OIM) in 1993

(Francis, 2002: 48, Note 20, p.228). For the same reason, the authors could not study many of the glass beads found in Quseir.²

Many recent studies have brought new evidence of the involvement of the Egyptian Red Sea ports in the Indian Ocean trade. For instance, Tomber (2008, 2012) has shown the extent of trade through pottery, Botan (2014) through the glass vessels, Francis (2002) and Then-Obłuska (2015b, in press) through the beads, and Sidebotham (2011) and Seland (2014) have discussed the bigger picture of trade in a wide variety of goods. Furthermore, both Carol Meyer (1992: 94–95, 128, 136) and Peter Francis (2002: 48, Note 20, p. 228) have suggested the presence of so-called Indo-Pacific beads at Quseir. Additionally, two of the eleven beads found during the more recent excavations at Quseir al-Qadim have been said to be similar to Indo-Pacific ones

² Among them, one described as a black and white bull's eye green bead (Meyer, 1982: 226, Pl. 59f) and some glass beads from Room C of the North House (Burke and Whitcomb, 2004: Fig. 22 - locus K9b-41 - RN82-392 and locus K9b-49 - RN404). More beads are mentioned as having been found in an Islamic wooden cosmetic box (Johnson, 1982: 332, Pl. 68: m, Fig. 22, locus E18a-14, RN 348 - "one green, one yellow, two translucent blue, and two decorated"). Six red beads alternating with six yellow ones were found originally strung with a larger blue bead at the end (Meyer, 1992: 94, 160, 180, cat. 585, locus G8b-2, RN80/81; Meyer, 1982: 226, Pl. 59e). Except for the strung fragments mentioned above, the remaining finds were found as single items.

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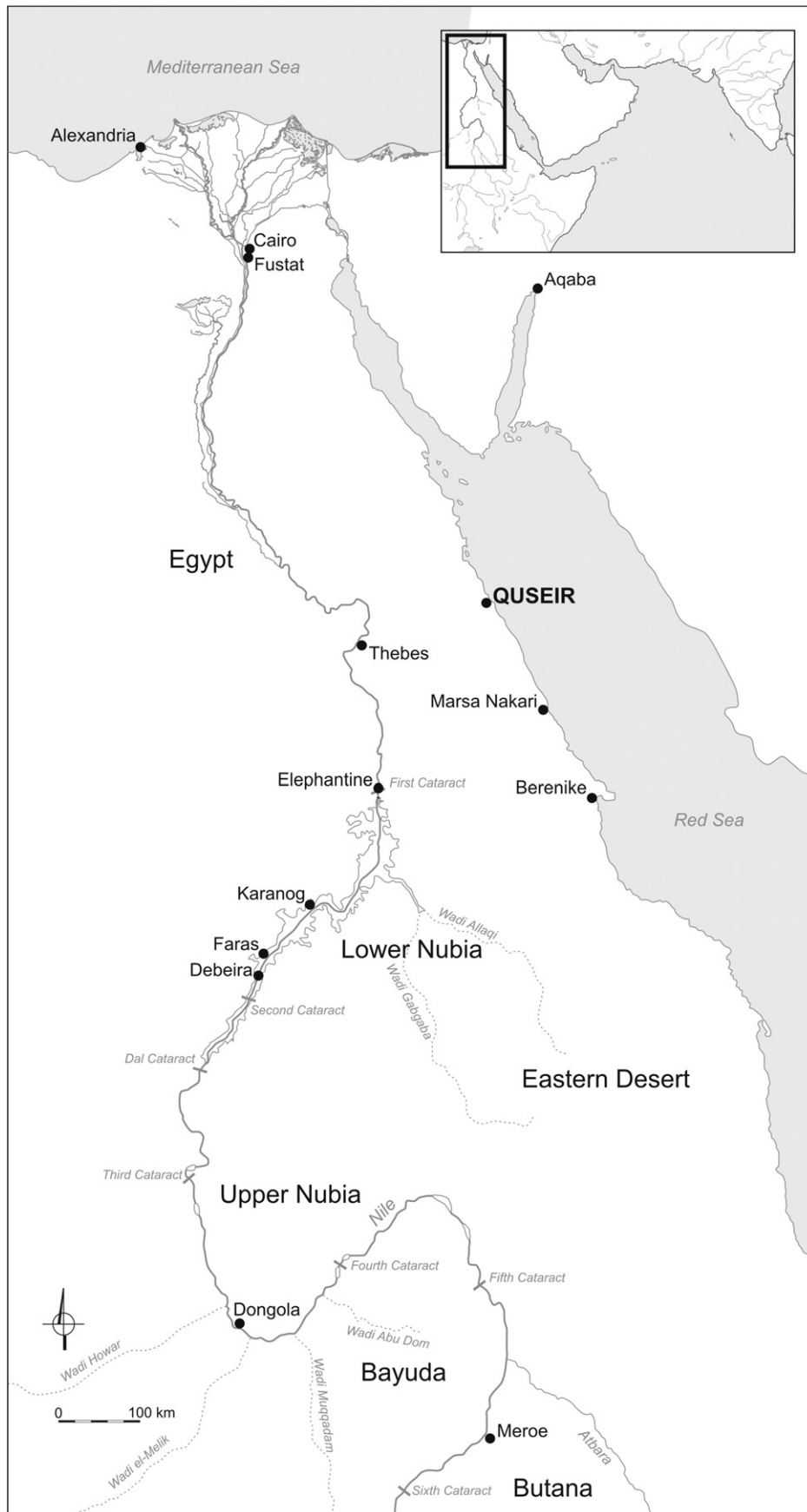


Fig. 1. Map showing the locations of Egyptian and Nubian sites mentioned in the text (by Szymon Maślak).

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