

Consumption, Trade and Innovation

Exploring the Botanical Remains from the Roman and Islamic Ports at Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt

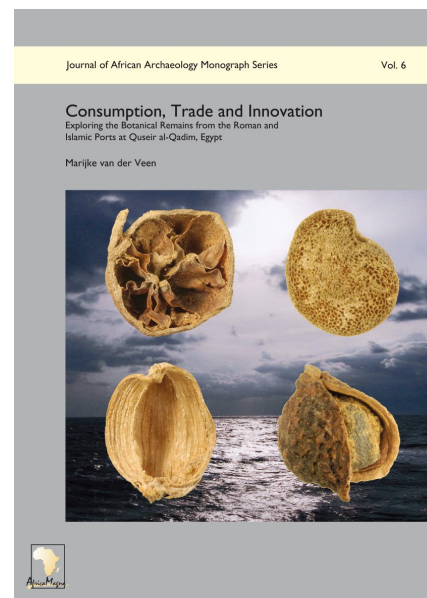
By *Marijke van der Veen*

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Studies of food and foodways are vital to exploring past (and present) cultures. The food remains discovered at the port of Quseir al-Qadim are especially revealing, offering important information about the ancient spice trade and the food practices of those engaged in this trade. Quseir al-Qadim acted as a transshipment port in the Indian Ocean spice trade during both the Roman and medieval Islamic periods. It is located on the Red Sea coast of Egypt and was active between ca. AD 1–250 (Myos Hormos) and again during ca. AD 1050–1500 (Kusayr).

This monograph describes the analysis and interpretation of the botanical remains (foodstuffs, wood) recovered during the excavations that took place between 1999–2003, conducted by the University of Southampton, UK. The spectacular preservation conditions at Quseir al-Qadim meant that food remains and wood were found in abundance, including fragments of onion skin, citrus rind, garlic cloves, aubergine seeds, banana skins, wooden bowls, spoons and combs, as well as many of the Eastern spices traded through the port, such as black pepper, ginger, cardamom and betelnut.

These remains are fully analysed and discussed under three overarching themes: trade, agricultural innovation and food consumption. The results provide significant new evidence for the Eastern trade and for the changes in agriculture that indirectly resulted from it. They also allow real insights into the lives of those working in the ports. They show the changes in the nature and scale of the Indian Ocean trade between the Roman and Islamic periods, as well as a major shift in the way the inhabitants of the ports saw themselves and located themselves in the wider world.

Richly illustrated and thought-provoking, this volume identifies how studies of food enable fuller dialogues regarding 'globalization' and also highlights clearly the importance of food in the dynamics of cultural identity and geopolitics.



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