

AT EMPIRE'S EDGE



# AT EMPIRE'S EDGE

EXPLORING ROME'S EGYPTIAN FRONTIER

ROBERT B. JACKSON

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW HAVEN & LONDON

Published with assistance from the Mary Cady Tew Memorial Fund.

*Photo credits:* © British Museum (6.7); Patrick Godeau (1.6, 1.8, 1.16, 2.3, 2.5, 4.1, 4.2, 5.4, 8.5, 8.6, 8.9, 8.10, 8.22, 8.32, 8.33, 10.1, 10.7, 10.8, 10.9); J.-Fr. Gout, © IFAO (8.2, 8.3, 8.4); James A. Harrell (7.1); Norbert Schiller (8.17, 9.2); Chip Vincent/ARCE (8.30, 8.31).

Remaining photos are by the author.

Copyright © 2002 by Yale University. All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Designed by Mary Valencia.

Set in Quadraat type by à la page, Brooklyn, New York.

Printed in the United States of America by Phoenix Color, Hagerstown, Maryland.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jackson, Robert B., 1961–

At empire's edge : exploring Rome's Egyptian frontier / Robert B. Jackson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-08856-6 (alk. paper : hbk.)

1. Egypt—Antiquities, Roman. 2. Romans—Egypt. 3. Egypt—Boundaries.

4. Egypt—History—30 B.C.–640 A.D. I. Title.

DT60 .J28 2002

932'.022—dc21

2001004942

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

To my parents,  
Arthur and Nancy Jackson



# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ix

Preface xiii

Acknowledgments xvii

Introduction xix

## PART ONE THE EASTERN DESERT

I. The Hills of Smoke, Gebel Dokhan 3

C O N T E N T S

II. Mons Claudianus	35
III. The Quarry Roads to the Nile	55
IV. Ports on the Red Sea Coast	75
V. Desert Trade Routes	95

PART TWO  
THE UPPER NILE VALLEY

VI. The Gateway to Africa: Aswan, Elephantine, and Philae	111
VII. Roman Nubia	129

PART THREE  
THE WESTERN DESERT

Overview of the Western Desert	158
VIII. The Great Oasis	163
IX. The Small Oasis	229
X. Siwa Oasis	241
Abbreviations	261
Notes	265
Bibliography	301
Index	337



# ILLUSTRATIONS

## FIGURES

- 1.1. The fortress at Mons Porphyrites
- 1.2. The stairway to the temple at Mons Porphyrites
- 1.3. Fallen columns at the temple of Mons Porphyrites
- 1.4. An inscription on temple lintel
- 1.5. The ramp at Lycabettos quarries
- 1.6. Upper portion of the ramp leading to Lycabettos quarries
- 1.7. Cairns alongside the Lycabettos slipway
- 1.8. Rock face in the Lycabettos quarries
- 1.9. Porphyry bathtub
- 1.10. Main well at Mons Porphyrites
- 1.11. Plaster-covered column at the well

- 1.12. Small hut on a path leading to the quarries
- 1.13. Loading ramp at Wadi Umm Sidri
- 1.14. The fort in Wadi Belih
- 1.15. Walled enclosure near the Badia fortress
- 1.16. Footpath from Badia
- 1.17. View of Wadi Belih
- 1.18. Porphyry statue of Diocletian(?)
  - 2.1. The fortress of Mons Claudianus
  - 2.2. The altar at Mons Claudianus temple
  - 2.3. Stone tower in Wadi Umm Diqal
  - 2.4. Tops of buried walls in Wadi Umm Diqal
  - 2.5. Broken basin near Mons Claudianus
  - 2.6. The great column in Wadi Fatiri
  - 2.7. Diocletian's Column in Alexandria
  - 2.8. Unfinished columns at Mons Claudianus
- 3.1. Roman road near the fort at Wadi Umm Balad
- 3.2. The fort at Wadi Umm Balad
- 3.3. The well at Wadi al-Qattar
- 3.4. Petroglyphs of camels
- 3.5. Fourth-century church atop the headwall of Wadi Naqqat
- 3.6. Entrance to Deir al-Atrash
- 3.7. Ruined fort at El-Saqqia
- 3.8. Upper and lower forts at El-Heita
- 4.1. Excavated room at Quseir al-Qadim
- 4.2. Excavation at Berenike
- 5.1. The Colossi of Memnon
- 5.2. Roman station of El-Zerkah
- 5.3. Roman inscription at El-Muweih
- 5.4. Watchtower on the Myos Hormos road
- 6.1. Ruins of Syene and Elephantine by David Roberts
- 6.2. Feet of royal statue at temple of Khnum
- 6.3. Sanded feet engraved in temple floor
- 6.4. The Nilometer at Elephantine Island
- 6.5. The temple of Trajan
- 6.6. Relief of Hapi in Hadrian's arch
- 6.7. Bronze head of Augustus
- 7.1. Pyramids at Meroë
- 7.2. Temple of Kalabsha
- 7.3. Engraving on wall of Kalabsha temple

- 7.4. Blemmye pictographs
- 7.5. The temple of Qertassi
- 7.6. Small statue of an elephant
- 7.7. Qasr Ibrim
- 8.1. Fortress at Dush
- 8.2. Golden crown from Dush
- 8.3. Golden bracelet from Dush
- 8.4. Golden necklace from Dush
- 8.5. Stone cairn on the Darb el-Dush
- 8.6. Temple at Qasr el-Zaiyan
- 8.7. The fortress of Qasr el-Ghieita
- 8.8. Hibis temple
- 8.9. Christian cemetery of Bagawat
- 8.10. Scenes from the Old Testament
- 8.11. Tahunet el-Hawa near Bagawat
- 8.12. The fortress of El-Deir
- 8.13. The fortress at Qasr Labekha
- 8.14. Pottery vessel near Qasr Labekha
- 8.15. Tomb near Qasr Labekha
- 8.16. The fortress of Ain Umm Dabadib
- 8.17. Interior of underground aqueduct at Dabadib
- 8.18. Ain Amur
- 8.19. The temple at Ain Amur
- 8.20. Damaged relief on temple wall at Ain Amur
- 8.21. The High Road from Ain Amur
- 8.22. Abu Tartur plateau
- 8.23. Qasr al-Halakeh in Dakhleh Oasis
- 8.24. Bedouin women at Amheida
- 8.25. The temple at Deir el-Haggar
- 8.26. Graffiti at Deir el-Haggar
- 8.27. Painting at Deir el-Haggar
- 8.28. Tombs at El-Muzzawaka
- 8.29. Mummies at El-Muzzawaka
- 8.30. South wall in tomb of Petosiris
- 8.31. North wall in tomb of Petosiris
- 8.32. Landscape along the Darb el-Tawil
- 8.33. Bab el-Gasmund pass near Qasr Dakhleh
- 9.1. Ain Hadra in Farafra
- 9.2. Gilded mummy from Bawiti

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- 9.3. The author's camel near Bahariya Oasis
- 10.1. Ruins of Shali in Siwa
- 10.2. Temple of Umm 'Ubaydah in Siwa
- 10.3. Roman tombs at Ghayt Abu Mansur, west of Siwa
- 10.4. Roman-era wall in Balad al-Rum
- 10.5. Roman temple at Abu Sharuf
- 10.6. Abandoned village of Al-Zaytun
- 10.7. Ancient village of Qara
- 10.8. Tombs at El-Areg
- 10.9. Painting on wall of tomb at El-Areg
- 10.10. Eroded rock formation near Nuwamisah

## MAPS

- 1. Egypt
- 2. The Eastern Desert
- 3. Roman Nubia
- 4. The Western Desert

## PREFACE

**T**his book was unwittingly conceived in 1980, when I first traveled to Egypt as a university student. That sojourn lasted less than a fortnight and included visits to the magnificent temples and tombs at Giza and Saqqara and in Upper Egypt. Yet for reasons I cannot fully explain, it was not these monuments that captured my attention, but rather the desert that loomed beyond their tumbled remains, beyond the green fields of the Nile Valley, beyond the dusty skyline of Cairo—the desert that lurks on the edge of every Egyptian horizon. Those vast, mysterious lands guarded ancient secrets like a treasure, and they ignited within me a desire to explore their depths and to learn what lessons of man and nature they might contain.

Between 1981 and 1996, I spent seven years in Egypt, first as a student at the American University in Cairo, then as a teacher at Cairo American College. During that time, I hiked more than 1,500 kilometers through the Eastern and Western

Deserts—either with a camel or carrying water and supplies on my back—and traveled several thousand more kilometers by jeep. In the course of my journeys I encountered remains and artifacts from many epochs of human existence: from flint tools of Palaeolithic man to fuel cans of Allied soldiers. But of all these, it was the remains of the Greco-Roman period that sparked my interest most intensely. I was awed by the sight of Roman fortresses thrusting upward from the desert—dying slowly, defiantly, amidst seas of ancient pottery. In size and historical significance, of course, these structures cannot compare to the Pharaonic ruins of the Nile Valley. But Karnak and Luxor have been excavated, reconstructed, and sanitized, and their hordes of tourists, guides, and hawkers inhibit one's ability to appreciate the temples' spiritual majesty. By contrast, far into the desert, resting in the shadows of the fortresses and water stations that mark Rome's most distant frontier and intoxicated by the stillness, one can sense the presence of the soldiers, merchants, and laborers who once brought life to this desolate world.

As my interest in the Roman period of Egyptian history grew, I sought to learn more about the remains I encountered in my desert travels. To my disappointment, I discovered that no author, academic or popular, had ever attempted to present what is currently known about Rome's Egyptian frontier in a single, concise volume. Indeed, I found that to the extent such information existed, it was scattered among academic journals to which the nonspecialist was unlikely to have access. Although these journals contained highly detailed information pertaining to excavations of frontier sites, the beauty and mystery of the sites themselves were usually lost in scholarly prose. Frustrated at not finding the book that I thought should exist and determined to save other interested individuals from the same disappointment, I decided that the only way to discover what I wanted to know about Rome's Egyptian frontier was to write the book myself.

Foremost among my objectives for this book is simply to provide both the student and general reader of ancient history with a description of the most important sites that constitute Rome's Egyptian frontier and a summary of what is currently known or theorized about the Roman occupation of these sites. But beyond describing the quarries, fortresses, and temples that punctuate the desert frontier, I have tried, when archaeological evidence permitted, to convey at least some sense of what life might have been like for the individuals who inhabited these distant corners of the Roman Empire. Toward this end, I have included translations of inscriptions, graffiti, ostraca, and papyri so that the reader might hear the ancient voices of these people speaking of their business affairs, their passions, and their religious beliefs—and in so doing, better appreciate our common humanity.

A few words of explanation are necessary regarding two technical aspects of this book. First, it focuses on the period spanning 29 B.C. and the end of the fifth century A.D. Thus, it includes the two centuries of the late Roman period, ending at approximately the start of the Byzantine period. The actual distinctions between these eras, however, are imprecise, and the inclusion of certain sites (particularly in Kharga and Dakhleh Oases) that appear to date from the late Roman period does not exclude the possibility that, in the future, they might be more appropriately labeled as Byzantine. Indeed, given that many of the fortresses and settlements of the Western Desert have never been excavated, it is impossible to ascribe dates to them with certainty. Second, concerning my use of the term “frontier,” it is not my intention to enter into the academic debate over the location of Rome’s *limes* in Egypt. Although I mention the existence of *limes* when their locations are specifically identified by inscriptions or other written sources, I use the term “frontier” to denote the general area of separation between Roman-administered territory and those regions beyond Roman control.

I hope this book provides sufficient geographical detail to enable the reader who is unfamiliar with Egypt to imagine the varied terrain of its Eastern and Western Deserts, but it is not intended as a navigational guide. Many of the places I discuss, particularly those in the Western Desert, are accessible by automobile, and several publications give adequate information on how to visit them.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the more remote sites, however, I have intentionally avoided stating their exact location out of concern for their archaeological integrity. As I state in this book, many of these sites are endangered by vandalism, modern quarrying, and unregulated tourism, and I do not wish to contribute to this destruction. Instead, I hope that for those who are determined to venture into the desert, this book instills a deeper appreciation of the beauty and fragility of these ancient sites and a respect for their enormous archaeological and historical importance. In addition, I hope it attracts the attention of Egyptian government officials, archaeological funding organizations, and adventure tour companies, so that they might take further steps to protect not only Greco-Roman sites, but all of the ancient sites in Egypt’s deserts.

Finally, although I have made every attempt to incorporate as much of the most recent information on the frontier as I thought appropriate, this is not the definitive work on Rome’s Egyptian frontier. Volumes could be written about many of the subjects and places to which I have devoted only a few pages. Indeed, so much archaeological and historical analysis remains to be done on the desert sites that it would be foolhardy to attempt to write a complete analysis of the frontier at this time. No doubt such a work will eventually be published, but it will be written

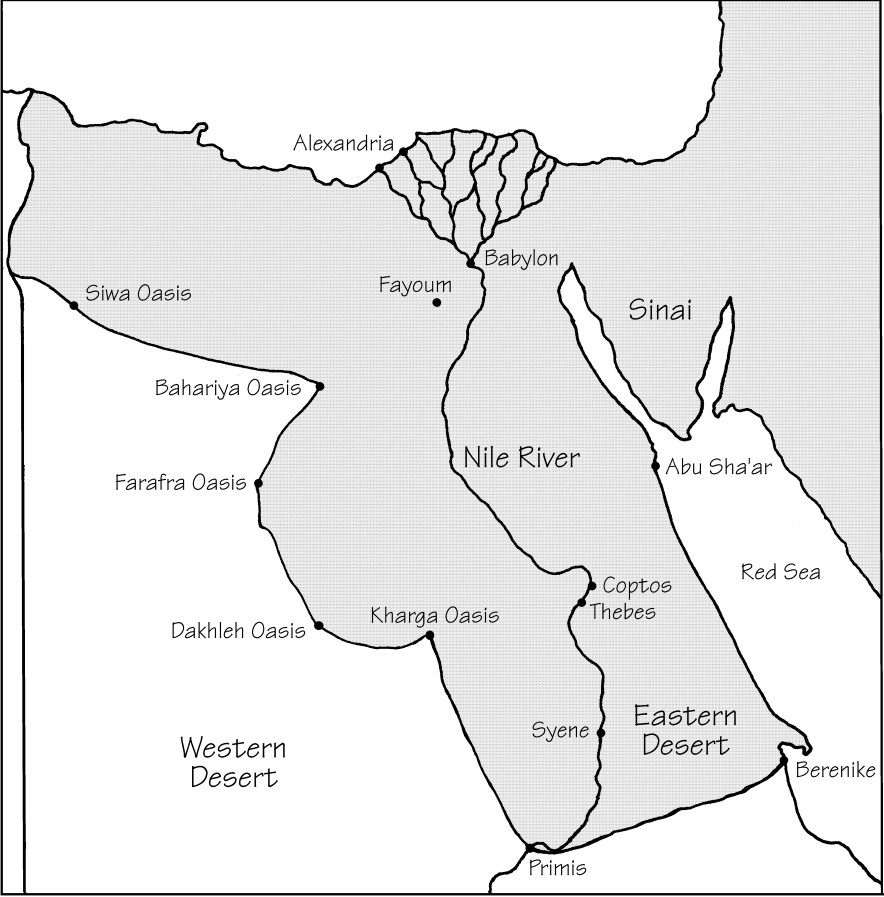
## P R E F A C E

decades hence. Thus, until that work is written, I offer this book to the reader in the hope that it informs with accuracy and increases public interest in this important period of Egyptian history. To the degree it succeeds at these tasks and to the extent it encourages the continued study and heightened protection of these sites, then I shall have accomplished the goal for which I undertook this adventure.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**F**or their encouragement and assistance throughout the long gestation of this volume, I wish to thank James Harrell, Robert “Chip” Vincent, Michael Jones, Arita Baaijens, Willemina Wendrich, Agnès Honigmann, Jason Thompson, and Evan and Susan Bloom. I extend special thanks to my companions with whom I shared so many desert adventures: Carlo Bergmann, Hatim El-Gammal, Patrick Godeau, Barry Iverson, Norbert Schiller, and Michael Sissons. Finally, I acknowledge a gratitude beyond words to my wife, Sarah, whose unflagging encouragement, patience, and guidance saw me through periods of great uncertainty and truly made the completion of this book possible.



Map 1

## INTRODUCTION

**F**or more than five thousand years Egypt has enchanted humankind. In antiquity Mediterranean peoples were fascinated by Egyptian manners and customs, and the mysterious, fabled land inspired countless myths. The Greek historian Herodotus visited Egypt in the fifth century B.C., and his famous description of the land and its people influenced Europeans' opinions about the country for centuries:

Not only is the climate different from that of the rest of the world, and the rivers unlike any other rivers, but the people also, in most of their manners and customs, exactly reverse the common practice of mankind. The women attend the markets and trade, while the men sit at home at the loom; and here, while the rest of the world works the woof up the warp, the Egyptians work it down; the women likewise carry burthens upon their shoulders, while the men carry them upon their heads. They eat their food out of doors

in the streets, but retire for private purposes to their houses, giving as a reason that what is unseemly, but necessary, ought to be done in secret, but what has nothing unseemly about it should be done openly. A woman cannot serve the priestly office, either for god or goddess, but men are priests to both; sons need not support their parents unless they choose, but daughters must, whether they choose or no.<sup>1</sup>

Among the most remarkable features of Egypt was the river Nile, which the Egyptians revered as a deity for millennia. Indeed, in a desert land nearly devoid of rain, the Nile played the central role in the magnificent flowering of Egyptian civilization that began in 3100 B.C. with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under King Narmer. Flowing north from then unknown sources deep in eastern and central Africa, the mighty river bequeathed to Egypt two life-giving essences, water and sediment. The river's flow was constant, but every year during the late summer months the water level rose as the result of heavy monsoon rains falling nearly 6,000 kilometers to the south. By September the river reached its highest level, inundating agricultural lands in the Nile Valley and Delta. As the waters receded, they left in their wake the precious gift of rich, black silt that enabled the Egyptians to plant two crops per year. The annual inundations, however, were never predictable in their intensity, and in years in which the central African rains were light, the resultant lower-than-average rise in the water level endangered the livelihood of Egyptians. On the other hand, in years of heavy rains, the river thundered through the cataracts of the Sudan and Upper Egypt, overflowing its banks and irrigation ditches along the Nile Valley, destroying dams and villages, and drowning crops and livestock. The Egyptians, however, were masters of agricultural planning, organization, and engineering, and generally the disasters brought on by low or high inundations were infrequent enough to permit them to reap an abundance of grain and produce and to build and maintain a civilization that was among the grandest, most prosperous, and longest-lived in antiquity.

Framing this verdant river valley are the unforgiving deserts that today constitute over 95 percent of Egypt's land area and that in ancient times were often referred to as the Land of Fire. Between the Nile and the Red Sea is the Eastern Desert—rugged, mountainous, and forbidding but nevertheless penetrated since ancient times by narrow trails carved out for conducting commerce and accessing the numerous quarries and mines that for more than three thousand years enriched Egypt's pharaohs and foreign sovereigns. To the west of the Nile lies the vast immensity of sand that constitutes the Western Desert. Here, permanent human habitation is possible only in the remote oases of Kharga, Dakhleh, Farafra, Bahariya, and Siwa. Yet it was the very inhospitability of these two great

deserts that helped protect successive dynasties from external invasions and preserve the peace and security of Egyptian civilization.

Despite the protection afforded by its deserts, Egypt's prosperity made it an attractive target for determined invaders. The first successful incursion was made by the Hyksos, a collection of Semitic peoples from Syria and Palestine who swept into Egypt in 1700 B.C. and ruled until their expulsion by the Egyptians in 1575 B.C. From this time onward, Egyptian history was heavily influenced by new groups of people attempting to assert their control over eastern Mediterranean regions: the Hittites, Akkadians, Sumerians, Amorites, Mitannians, and Assyrians. Eventually, even the vast Assyrian empire, which included Egypt, was defeated by Persians in the sixth century B.C. Under successive kings—Cyrus the Great, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes—the Persians created an empire that stretched from India to Egypt to Asia Minor before the combined armies of Greek states halted their expansion at the battles of Salamis, Plataea, and Samos. Despite the grand blossoming of Greek classical culture that followed these victories, however, the Greek states were weakened by generations of political disputes and were collectively defeated by Philip II of Macedonia in 338 B.C. Although it was Philip who decided to expand further, attacking the Persians and liberating all the regions under their control, his assassination in 336 B.C. left the challenge of that grand campaign to his extraordinary twenty-year-old son, Alexander III.

In a series of spectacular victories, young Alexander defeated the Persians in battle after battle, securing all the major port cities along the coast of Asia Minor and those of Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre in 333 B.C. From there he continued into Egypt, where, after founding the city of Alexandria, he visited the famous oracle of Siwa Oasis deep in the Libyan desert. He went on to become one of the greatest generals in history, founding approximately seventy cities and a multinational empire that encouraged commerce and introduced Hellenic civilization into some of the most remote regions of central Asia. His incandescent career, however, ended abruptly when he died at age thirty-three of a fever—compounded perhaps by a heavy bout of drinking—in Babylon in 323 B.C. There being no royal heir to the Macedonian throne, conspiracies and civil wars characterized the years immediately following Alexander's death as his ambitious officers fought for control of the empire. Ultimately, the Hellenistic world was divided into three regions ruled by Alexander's generals: Ptolemy I, Seleucus I, and Antigonus I.

Ptolemy I laid claim to Egypt and founded the thirty-first Egyptian dynasty, the Ptolemies. Under the autocratic rule of the Ptolemies, Greek culture entrenched itself even more deeply in Egyptian society. Alexandria became the largest and most influential city of the Hellenistic world as its great library promoted learning and scholarship in many fields and as its harbors and markets became the economic

locus of the Mediterranean. The dynasty reached its economic and political height during the reigns of Ptolemy II (285–246 B.C.) and Ptolemy III (246–221 B.C.), inspiring one ancient writer to extol Egypt's virtues: "In Egypt, there is everything that exists anywhere in the world: wealth, gymnasia, power, peace, fame, sights, philosophers, gold, young men, the shrine of the Sibling Gods, a good king, the Museum, wine—all the good things one could want. And women—more of them, I swear by the daughters of Hades than heaven boasts stars—and their looks; like the goddesses who once induced Paris to judge their beauty!"<sup>2</sup>

The administrative structure established by the Ptolemaic kings dominated Egypt for the next three centuries and created the economic foundation the Romans would later exploit and expand. The Ptolemies divided the country into approximately forty administrative units called *nomes*, within which they officially encouraged Greeks to settle. As payment, soldiers (and select civilians) were given parcels of land known as *kleroi* in the Delta and Nile Valley. This policy served to further entrench Greek culture and language in Egypt. Many Greeks eventually intermarried with Egyptians, thus softening the ethnic distinction between Greek and Egyptian. Indeed, even during the period of Roman domination of Egypt, Greek remained the *lingua franca* of Egyptian civil administration, Latin being reserved primarily for use in the Roman military.

Along with remolding the Egyptian political structure, the Ptolemies undertook major economic development projects. Most notably, they constructed ambitious irrigation systems that expanded the amount of arable land in the Fayoum (Arsinoite) (see map 4) and the Nile Delta. They also introduced new crops to better suit their needs and tastes, replacing, for example, the traditional emmer wheat with durum wheat and expanding the cultivation of wine in lieu of the traditional Egyptian barley beer. Their most influential economic change, however, was the introduction of currency for use in nearly all commercial exchange. Previously, Egyptians had used a barter system rather than coins for domestic commerce. Although the Ptolemies continued to collect certain taxes, such as those on grain, in kind, levies on other agricultural products required currency. Given the complexities of currency-based economies, the Ptolemies' introduction of gold, silver, and bronze coins had a dramatic effect on the whole of Egyptian society. Political strife, economic problems, and occasional civil wars began to weaken the Ptolemaic dynasty by the second century B.C. Egypt fell increasingly under the influence of Rome, which was fast becoming the major political power in the Mediterranean. Ptolemaic rulers began seeking Roman support to reduce the possibility of an outright Roman invasion and to protect their authority from hostile factions within Alexandria.

It was during this last, turbulent phase of Ptolemaic power that the most famous ruler of that dynasty, perhaps the most celebrated queen of antiquity, acceded to the throne: Cleopatra VII. The reign of this remarkable woman was characterized by her attempts to earn Egypt's independence by engaging in intimate personal and political relationships with powerful Romans: first with Julius Caesar, then Marc Antony. She gave Antony military support for his campaign against the Parthians when Octavian reneged on his promise to send troops to Antony's aid. Her attempts to retain a modicum of Egyptian independence and her success in gaining from Antony nominal control over important regions beyond Egypt contributed to her popularity among her subjects. Ultimately, however, Cleopatra became a client queen of Rome and, as such, could not halt the forces that opposed the man upon whom she depended for her authority. The resultant civil war between Octavian and Marc Antony concluded with Antony and Cleopatra fleeing to Alexandria after their defeat at the sea battle of Actium, guaranteeing that neither Cleopatra nor her Roman overlord and lover could retain the throne of Egypt. Famously entrenched in the royal palace in Alexandria, they awaited their inevitable destruction. Octavian captured Alexandria on August 3, 30 B.C. Antony died that same day, and Cleopatra was asked to help organize his elaborate funeral. After making at least one unsuccessful attempt to starve herself to death, she pleaded with Octavian to permit her children to ascend the throne of Egypt. But such an arrangement was unacceptable to Octavian, who ordered the execution of young Caesarion, Cleopatra's son by Julius Caesar. Although the historical record is imprecise about Octavian's plans for Cleopatra, it is clear that her personal charms and political wiles had little effect on Rome's first emperor. Perhaps Shakespeare's dark version of her future is indeed plausible—a forced return to Rome and inevitable public humiliation:

Now, *Iras*, what think'st thou?  
 Thou, an *Egyptian* puppet, shall be shown  
 In Rome as well as I. *Mechanic* slaves  
 With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers shall  
 Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths,  
 Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded,  
 And forc'd to drink their vapor.  
 . . . and I shall see  
 Some squeaking *Cleopatra* boy my greatness  
 I' th' posture of a whore.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than endure such a fate, Cleopatra VII committed suicide on August 12, 30 B.C. and left the throne of Egypt to Octavian.<sup>4</sup>

With the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian, now Caesar Augustus, absorbed Egypt directly into the Roman Empire. In light of its importance, Augustus assigned a Roman governor to administer the territory and sent a large contingent of the newly formed Roman Imperial soldiers to defend it from internal and external enemies. The army of Rome consisted of two main components: the Italian legionary troops who formed the infantry and the auxiliary troops composed primarily of non-Roman citizens taken from other Roman provinces. Augustus also assigned three Roman legions, each consisting of 5,600 men, to occupy the country. By A.D. 23, this presence was reduced to two legions, and by the second century A.D. it was further reduced to one.<sup>5</sup> Although their primary task was defensive, the soldiers also engaged in numerous public works, such as building bridges, roads, and canals, guarding trade routes, and serving as administrators in the mines and quarries of the Eastern Desert.

With Egypt now firmly under its control, Rome commenced expanding and exploiting the province's valuable assets. Of highest importance was the grain produced in the Delta, in the Nile Valley, and in the large western oases; the annual output constituted roughly one-third of Rome's total grain consumption. Additionally, Egypt boasted a myriad of other resources originating not in the Nile Valley, but in the Eastern and Western Deserts, including fine ornamental stone from the eastern quarries and gold, silver, and turquoise from its mines. But even such abundance as Egypt offered was insufficient for Imperial Rome, and Augustus expanded his financial ambitions to include the establishment of seaborne trade with Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This commercial enterprise proved astoundingly lucrative as Egypt became the conduit through which the riches of India and East Africa entered the Roman world. Camel caravans set out from ports on the Red Sea laden with spices, incense, tortoise shell, and pepper. Together with additional commodities such as ivory and rare animals that the Romans obtained from Egypt's southern border with the Sudan and the olive oil and grain produced in the five major oases of the Western Desert, the Egyptian frontier zones constituted an enormously valuable source of wealth for Rome. Because of the area's economic importance, Augustus risked the possible usurpation of the province by an ambitious Roman senator. Consequently, he appointed governors of Egypt from the equestrian ranks of Roman society and issued strict orders that no senator or equestrian could visit Egypt without the emperor's approval.

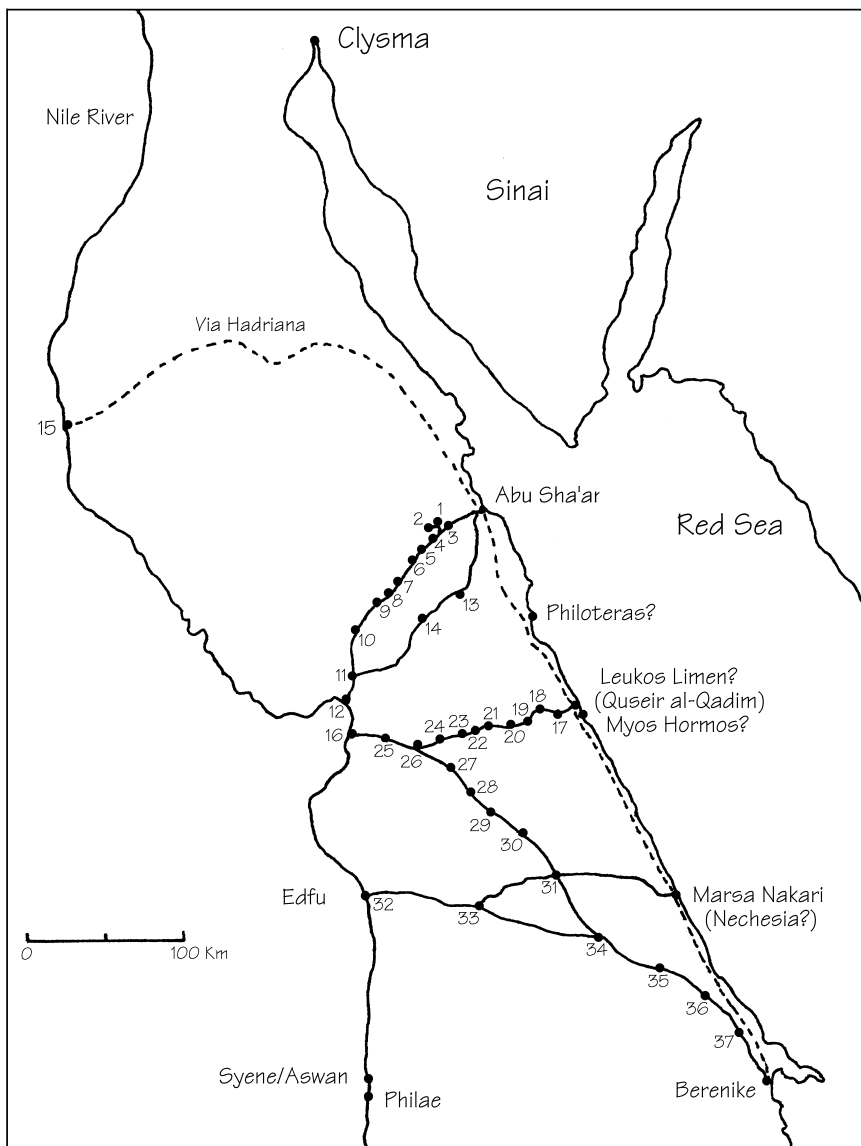
Unlike the Ptolemies, the Romans did not encourage emigration to Egypt, although they did permit landownership by Romans. Most of the Roman-sounding names that survive in the historical record, however, are Egyptian residents who



attained Roman citizenship by proclamation rather than by Roman birth. Throughout the Roman period, Alexandria was the major urban center of Egypt, and, at least initially, until a policy change around the beginning of the third century, only Alexandrine citizens were eligible for Roman citizenship. Egyptian society thus consisted of several distinct groups: Roman citizens, Alexandrine citizens, citizens of major Greek poleis, and the rest of the Egyptian population, referred to as *Aiguptioi*. Among the largest towns were Oxyrhynchus and Hermopolis, which had populations of roughly twenty-five thousand and forty thousand, respectively, while the smallest settlements supported fewer than a hundred residents.<sup>6</sup>

Although Egypt continued to develop and prosper well into the middle of the third century, when the rest of the Roman Empire experienced a series of political and economic crises, the province ultimately could not remain immune to the gradual decline in Roman stability. New taxation policies, changes to the administrative structure, and price inflation began to plague Egyptian society. Of profound importance, too, was the gradual Christianization of Egypt. The spread of this new faith affected virtually every aspect of Egyptian life from religious practices and institutions to individual attitudes regarding wealth and politics. Oases and desert populations grew as an unknown number of Christians retreated into Egypt's remote areas, either to escape the early persecutions under emperors Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian or to achieve spiritual cleansing. From these nascent communities emerged the earliest monastic movement in Christianity. Indeed, many of these early Christians left substantial records of their presence in the oases and remote caves of the Western and Eastern Deserts.

Numerous scholarly publications and several general books dealing with the Roman period in Egypt are available to interested readers. This book, however, focuses on issues relating to the remote desert regions of Roman Egypt. Today, archaeologists from nearly a dozen nations are at work in many of these desert areas, and every year they uncover additional evidence that sheds new light on old theories concerning the role of Rome's Egyptian frontier and the nature of its administration. While much has been done by this dedicated group of scholars, much more work remains in every corner of the frontier. Indeed, for those sites that are most remote, the need for excavation is acute—for it is only by intensive gathering and study of the material culture of these sites that their secrets can be saved from the ravages of weather, development, and theft.



- |                     |                               |                              |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Wadi Umm Sidri   | 14. Abu Zawal                 | 27. Didyme                   |
| 2. Mons Porphyrites | 15. Antinoopolis/Sheikh Ibada | 28. Afrodito                 |
| 3. Wadi Belih       | 16. Coptos/Qift               | 29. Compasi                  |
| 4. Badia            | 17. El-Iteima                 | 30. Jovis                    |
| 5. Umm Balad        | 18. Seyala                    | 31. Aristonis                |
| 6. Wadi al-Qattar   | 19. El-Hamrah                 | 32. Apollonopolis Magna/Edfu |
| 7. Deir al-Atrash   | 20. El-Zerkah                 | 33. El-Kanais                |
| 8. Bab el-Mukhenig  | 21. El-Fawakir                | 34. Falacro                  |
| 9. El-Saqqia        | 22. El-Hammamat               | 35. Apollomos                |
| 10. El-Heita        | 23. El-Muweih                 | 36. Cabalsi                  |
| 11. El-'Ara         | 24. Qaer el-Banat             | 37. Vetus Hydreuma           |
| 12. Qena            | 25. El-Matula                 |                              |
| 13. Mons Claudianus | 26. Phenicon/El-Lageita       |                              |

Map 2

PART ONE

THE EASTERN DESERT



# I

## THE HILLS OF SMOKE, GEBEL DOKHAN

*But here in the “Hills of Smoke” one thinks of these antiquities with a feeling bordering on veneration. If the workmanship tells of an art that is dead, how much louder does the material cry out the praises of an energy that is also dead?*<sup>1</sup>

From the summit of Gebel Dokhan (Mountain of Smoke) in the Eastern Desert, one can see the Red Sea to the east, the Sinai beyond, and all around the vast ruggedness of the Red Sea mountains. Here the air is pure and the silence complete. But these hills were not always peaceful. As the rising sun casts a golden veil over the peaks, one hears the wind whisper a story of long ago when, for nearly four hundred years, the Romans assaulted these mountains with iron and muscle.

The Romans came for porphyry—*porfido rosso antico*—a rare purple stone favored for statuary and used also as a veneer to decorate the walls and floors of palaces. There are three principal kinds of porphyry: one contains white feldspar crystals, a second contains rose-colored feldspar crystals, and a third is black. The so-called Imperial variety contains the white crystals. It is found nowhere else in the world but in the vicinity of Gebel Dokhan, and the Romans spared neither expense, effort, nor human life to extract it from these mountains.

Exactly when the purple treasure of Gebel Dokhan was discovered remains a mystery. A few small porphyry bowls dating from the Old Kingdom (2613–2181 B.C.) have been found, and the remains of an early dynastic hut are not far from the quarries, indicating that the ancient Egyptians sent workers into the area to extract small amounts of the stone. Clearly, however, they did not exploit porphyry to any significant degree. During the Ptolemaic period (323–30 B.C.), the only known evidence that porphyry was quarried and exported is found in the Old Testament. The Book of Esther has the following description of the gardens at the royal palace of Ahasuerus, king of Susa: “There were . . . couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones.”<sup>2</sup> Although scholars believe the Book of Esther was written during the Ptolemaic period (sometime between 350 and 125 B.C., the latter date being more likely), there is little evidence that porphyry was used during the reign of the Ptolemies. Instead, it was the Romans who first exploited the stone on a massive scale, and recent excavations by British archaeologists have identified exactly when the Romans came to Gebel Dokhan.

In March 1995, researchers discovered a black porphyry stele in a hut located in the small village of the Bradford quarry.<sup>3</sup> The stele measures 56 centimeters by 40 centimeters and depicts Pan-Min, the ithyphallic god of the Eastern Desert, standing beneath the winged sun disk and two cobras. The inscription to the right of the picture states, “Caius Cominius Leugas,<sup>4</sup> who discovered the quarries of the porphyry stone and knekites and black porphyry and also [found] multicolored stones, dedicated a sanctuary to Pan and Serapis very great gods for the well-being of his children. The 4th year of Tiberius Caesar Augustus Epeiph the 29th.”<sup>5</sup>

The date on this inscription corresponds with July 23, A.D. 18, and marks the likely beginning of the Roman exploitation of the vast complex of quarries known today as Mons Porphyrites (Mountain of Porphyry). So impressive is the site that some modern archaeologists consider it “one of the most remarkable manifestations of Roman activity anywhere in the Empire.”<sup>6</sup> This is hardly an exaggeration. The remote and hostile location of the quarries, the logistical difficulty of sustaining a large population of workers at the site, and the magnitude of the labor required to extract the stone and transport it to the Nile stagger the imagination.

## THE FORTRESS AND TEMPLES

Mons Porphyrites lies at the heart of the Red Sea mountains, 45 kilometers west of the Red Sea and 140 kilometers east of the Nile River (see map 2). It is dominated by Gebel Dokhan<sup>7</sup> and consists of four main quarrying areas located on the



1.1 The remains of the fortress at Mons Porphyrites as viewed from the south. The five standing granite columns that supported a roof for the cistern are visible amid the rubble.

upper slopes of both sides of a valley called Wadi Abu Ma'amel (Father of Workings), which runs from south to north. These principal quarries are the Northwest, the Lycabettos, the Southwest (Romulus), and the Lepsius. Such evidence as an inscription dated July 4, A.D. 29. (Tiberius) suggests that the Northwest quarry and its village date from the first to the third centuries A.D., while Lycabettos and its small villages date from the third to the fourth centuries A.D.<sup>8</sup>

The main fortified village, or *castellum*, at Mons Porphyrites stands 6 meters above the wadi floor on the eastern side. Due to the erosion of its rock foundation by water flowing down the wadi, it is slowly crumbling into the wadi itself. The fort is just over 600 meters above sea level, measures approximately 45 by 85 meters, and contains many rooms, a large cistern, and a bakery. While the fort is essentially in ruins (fig. 1.1), detailed architectural studies of the building have enabled researchers to speculate with some confidence about how it might have appeared when the Romans occupied it.

Aside from the castellum, the village attached to the Northwest quarry, and numerous small villages adjacent to the other quarries, few buildings have survived at Mons Porphyrites. Indeed, the number of known buildings in the area seem insufficient to house the apparently large number of men who worked the quarries at any given time. Some scholars think that prisoners, conscripted laborers, and slaves might not have been housed in structures that were of sufficient quality to survive for fifteen centuries. It would have been far more practical and economical to house them in lightly constructed sheds or tents. In other quarry sites in the Eastern Desert, such as those at Bir Umm Fawakir in Wadi Hammamat, small crude huts can be found outside the main settlements. It is possible that such huts existed in the main wadi at Mons Porphyrites, but no trace of them survives.

Of course, one of the difficulties posed by the use of such lightly built structures is that if they housed prisoners, their flimsiness increased the possibility of escape. This raises the question of whether the prisoners were put in chains upon their return from the quarries. But another possibility is suggested by the ancient writer Aelius Aristides, who traveled in Egypt during the second century A.D. Referring to Mons Porphyrites, he stated that in “this renowned convict quarry of porphyry, the prisoners are not guarded by any military force, so destitute is the place of water.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the buildings that accommodated the residents of Mons Porphyrites, two major temples answered to their spiritual needs. The smaller temple, a few meters south of the fort, is dedicated to Isis. While little remains of the temple itself, the door lintel—now fallen and broken in two—contains an inscription that pinpoints the date and purpose of the structure: “In the time when Marcus Rutilius Lupus was the governor of Egypt, Marcus Papirius Celer, a decurion of the *Ala Vocontiorum*, erected the temple to the great goddess Isis, in the sixteenth year of Trajan’s reign.”<sup>10</sup>

Further south of the castellum are the remains of the second temple, this one to Serapis, the Sun God. The small but exquisitely crafted structure rests atop a rocky promontory that juts out into the wadi and is reached by a wide staircase (fig. 1.2). The temple had four columns in front, supporting an architrave and an entablature, but these have fallen forward onto the court (figs. 1.3, 1.4). Despite their age, the stones look as if they were recently cut, and a clear inscription dedicates “the temple and the area around the temple to Zeus Helios Great Serapis and gods who share the temple, by Epaphroditus, slave of Caesar, Sigerianus, when Rammius Martialis was Prefect of Egypt, when Marcus Ulpius Chresimus was *procurator metallorum*, and when Proculianus was Centurion.”<sup>11</sup> No date is

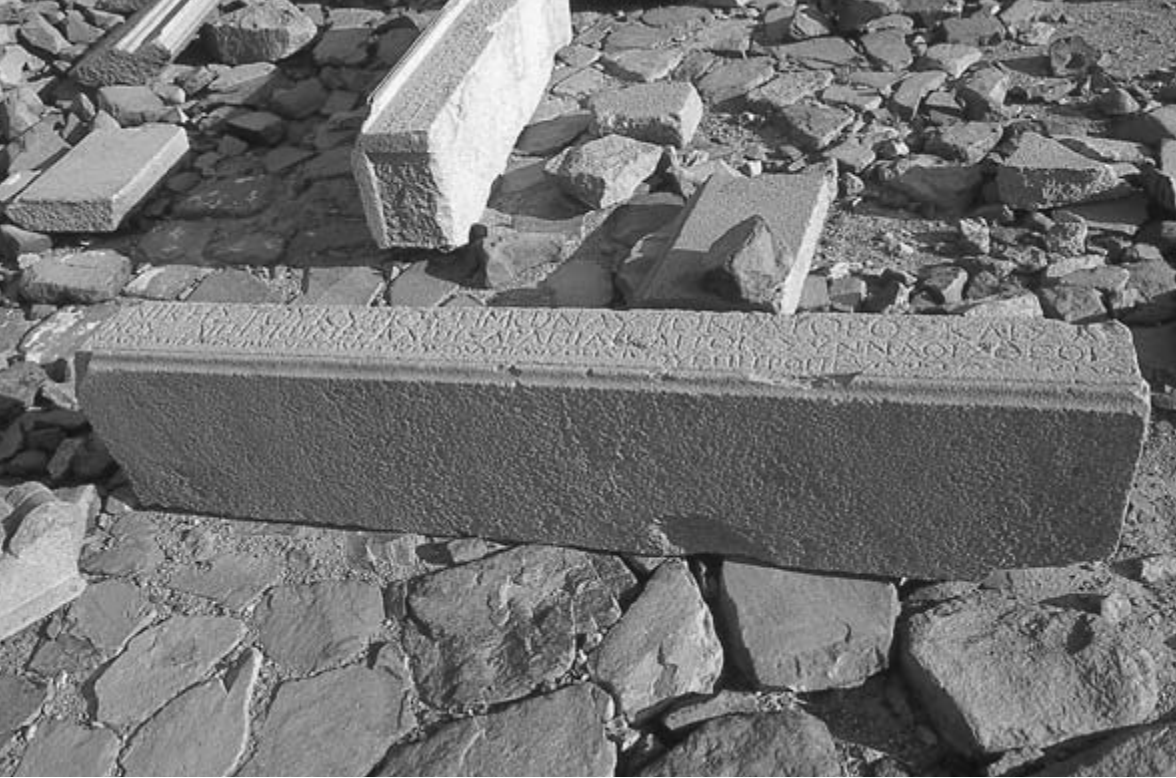




1.2 The stairway leading to the main temple at Mons Porphyrites.

1.3 Fallen columns and portions of the architrave lying in forecourt of the temple.





1.4 A portion of the dedicative inscription on temple lintel.

visible on the inscription, but Rammius Martialis was the governor of Egypt from A.D. 117 to 119, which gives us an approximate date for the building's construction. The omission of a date, an important element in Roman inscriptions, has led some scholars to speculate that the temple was never completed.<sup>12</sup> But given that the Romans exploited Mons Porphyrites until at least the mid-fourth century, it seems improbable they would have left the temple unfinished for two hundred years.

## THE QUARRY RAMPS

Most of the larger quarries in Mons Porphyrites are located near the summits of the mountains on either side of Wadi Abu Ma'amel. The heights of the quarries range from 1,200 meters to 1,600 meters, and the slopes leading to them are perilously steep and covered with loose stones. Access to the porphyry was made possible by narrow, well-constructed paths that zigzag up the slopes to the quarries and their attendant villages. More impressive than these paths, however, are the massive ramps or slipways the Romans built to enable them to lower the quarried stone into the wadi.

These ramps are remarkable feats of engineering and labor. Upon first beholding them, one is inclined to believe, as one early visitor wrote, that “the feats of skill and endurance performed by the workmen under Roman direction take on the character of a miracle tinged with mystery.”<sup>13</sup> Of all the slipways at Mons Porphyrites, that serving the Lycabettos quarry is the longest (two kilometers) and the most impressive (figs 1.5, 1.6). From its beginning at the 1,600-meter-high quarry, the ramp descends steeply down the mountain, passes the high quarry village, and then slopes gently down to the west side of Wadi Abu Ma’amel. At its base, approximately two kilometers from the main castellum, is a loading ramp from which the rock was transferred to carts for the continued journey down the wadi to the larger loading ramp at Wadi Umm Sidri. Nearby lie the remains of a small village where masons inspected and further worked the stone blocks that came down to them from the quarries above before sending them on their way.

Exactly how the stones were lowered to the valley remains one of the intriguing mysteries of the Roman presence at Mons Porphyrites. Although there is evidence, particularly at the Romulus quarry, that some porphyry blocks were simply tumbled over the edge to be retrieved by men working below, this could not have been the method employed for the bulk of the stone. Instead, it is certain that the ramps played a vital role in the difficult and dangerous process of bringing the stone to the valley floor.

One puzzling characteristic of the ramps is that they are punctuated on both sides by large cylindrical cairns of expertly packed stones. The cairns are all heavily damaged, but their remains average approximately 1.5 meters high and 3 meters across and are more frequent at those places where the angle of the ramp is steepest. These cairns are found only at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus; they are not at any other quarry in Egypt (fig. 1.7). They are of a larger diameter and more numerous at Mons Porphyrites because the quarry ramps here are much higher and longer than those at Mons Claudianus. It seems the cairns played a role in the lowering of the quarried stone, but scholars disagree on the exact nature of that role. Several archaeologists who have examined the cairns conjecture that they are piles of stones used in the maintenance and reparation of the ramps.<sup>14</sup> But this explanation seems implausible. The cairns are built with a slightly inward camber—hardly the kind of structure one would build simply to provide a convenient source of replacement stones.

One expert on Roman quarries in the Eastern Desert theorizes that a log might have been laid across the ramp on the uphill sides of a pair of cairns to act as a control barrier for sleds carrying the blocks of stone. This way the blocks could be



1.5 A portion of the two-kilometer ramp leading to the Lycabettos quarry as viewed from the mountains on the east side of Wadi Ma'amel.





1.6 The upper section of the ramp leading to the Lycabettos quarry located near the summit of the mountain. The human figure (barely visible approximately three-quarters of the way up the ramp) gives a sense of the enormous size of the structure.



1.7 Large cairns alongside the ramp leading to Lycabettos quarry.