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Steven E. Sidebotham

Ship Graffiti from Mons Porphyrites.

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SHIP GRAFFITI FROM MONS PORPHYRITES

Visits to the Roman imperial porphyry quarries at Mons Porphyrites (Gebel Dukhan) in the Eastern Desert of Egypt (see map) in January 1986, June 1987 and January 1989 identified and recorded graffiti depicting four sailing ships. James Burton visited the region mentioning several of these graffiti and sketching one in his unpublished diary in May 1823 [1]. The graffiti are located on three of five free-standing square/rectangular pilasters made of stones mortared together and plastered over. The pilasters stand on the western side of a well/cistern in the Wadi Ma'amal (cf. p. 341). This hydraulic installation is *c.* 170 m west-north-west of the Roman castellum (fort) and probably supplied water for the garrison stationed there. The well/cistern is marked « Saqiya » on Kraus' map [2]. The pilasters also preserve an Aramaic/Hebrew inscription, a graffito left by the Armenian land surveyor Hekekyan Bey in the mid-nineteenth century and other graffiti [3].

It seems strange that depictions of ships should appear in this locale *c.* 40 km west of the nearest point on the Red Sea coast and *c.* 140 km from the Nile at Kainopolis (Qena). Initially, several of these graffiti appeared to be modern sailing ships and the presence of bowsprits confirms a post-ancient date for these drawings (number 1 and 2) [4]. Comparison with representations of ships from ancient and modern times led to the conclusion that graffiti number 3 and 4 could date to any period from antiquity to the present day [5]. There was little or no Ptolemaic (late fourth century — late first

1. British Museum James Burton Collection, *Collectiones Aegyptiaca*, Add. Mss. 25,625 : 41 verso and 42 verso; L.A. Tregenza, *The Red Sea Mountains of Egypt*, 1955, p. 137 noted two of these graffiti.

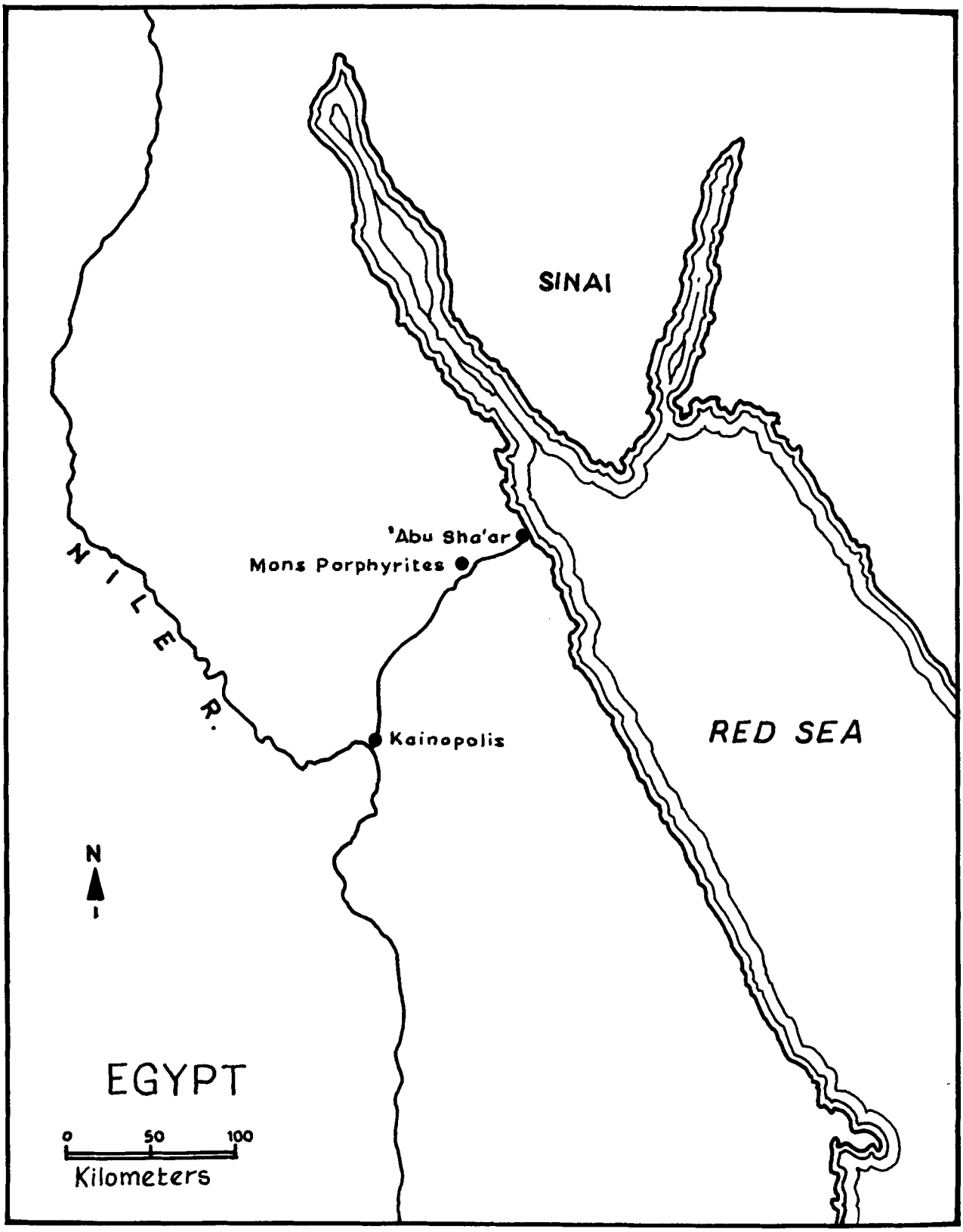
2. T. Kraus *et al.*, « Mons Claudianus-Mons Porphyrites Bericht über die zweite Forschungsreise 1964 », *MDAIK* 22, 1967, p. 164, Abb. 15; cf. p. 183-184 for discussion, plates LIX-LX.

3. Cf. Hekekyan Bey, « Notes on the Eastern Desert of Egypt, from Gebel Afrit, by the Ancient Porphyry Quarries of Gebel Dukhan, Near to the Old Station of Gebel Gir; with a Brief Account of the Ruins at Gebel Dukhan », *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 17 / II, 1848, p. 584-587.

4. Communication from L. Casson to the author of August 31, 1989.

5. Communication from L. Casson to the author of August 31, 1989.

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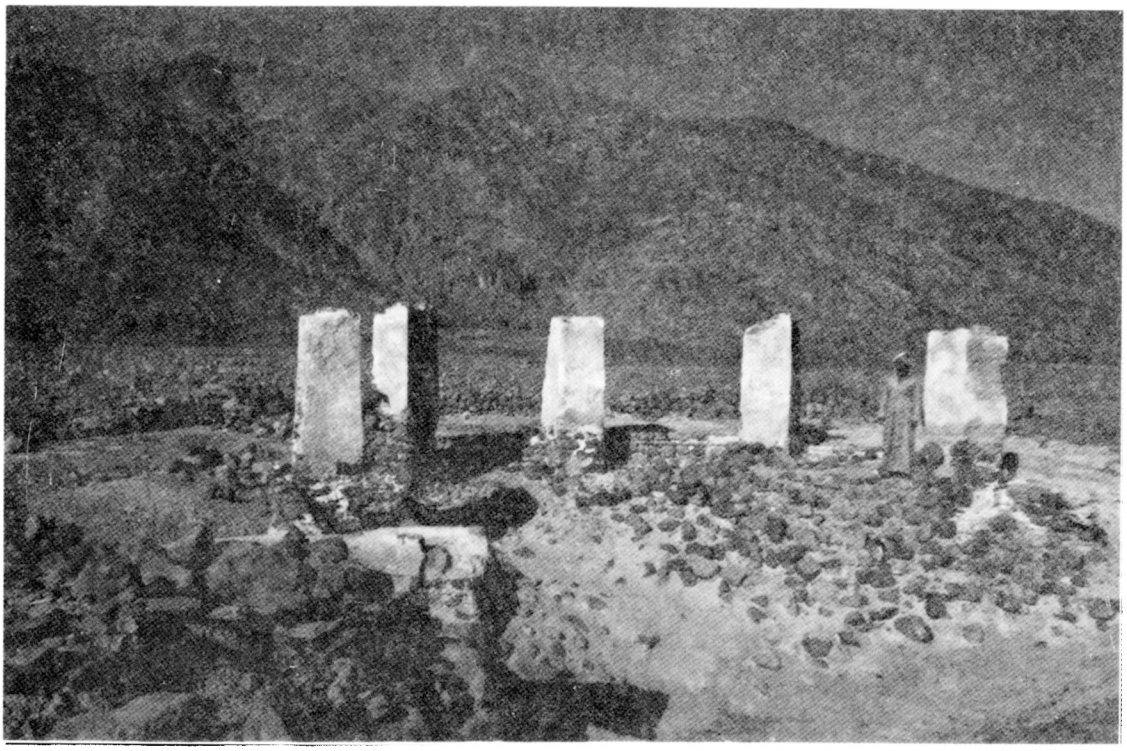
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century B.C.) activity at these quarries [6] and the quarries themselves seem to have operated and fallen out of use primarily in the Roman period between the first and fourth centuries A.D. They were not reworked again until the 1930s [7]. There were, undoubtedly, numerous medieval and modern visits to the site both recorded/published and, presumably, unrecorded. It seems to have been during one of the putative unrecorded visits that the graffiti were drawn. They were sailing vessels, perhaps merchantmen and certainly not warships. They may represent craft that plied the Egyptian Red Sea coast or trade routes between the various Egyptian Red Sea ports and other regions of the Red Sea Indian Ocean littoral. They might also represent ships which sailed the Nile.

The pilasters on which the graffiti appear are described from south to north. All graffiti are very crudely drawn.

6. M.J. Klein, *Untersuchungen zu den kaiserlichen Steinbrüchen an Mons Porphyrites und Mons Claudianus in der östlichen Wüste Ägyptens*, Bonn, 1988, p. 96.

7. Kraus, p. 190, 191; Klein, *ibid. o.c.*, p. 107-113; S.E. Sidebotham, R.E. Zitterkopf, J.A. Riley, « Survey of the 'Abu Sha'ar-Nile Road », forthcoming : in the 1930s an Egyptian-Italian venture briefly carried out operations in the region.



(Cl. Sierra Club / Legal Defense Fund).

Hydraulic installation in Wadi Ma'amal.

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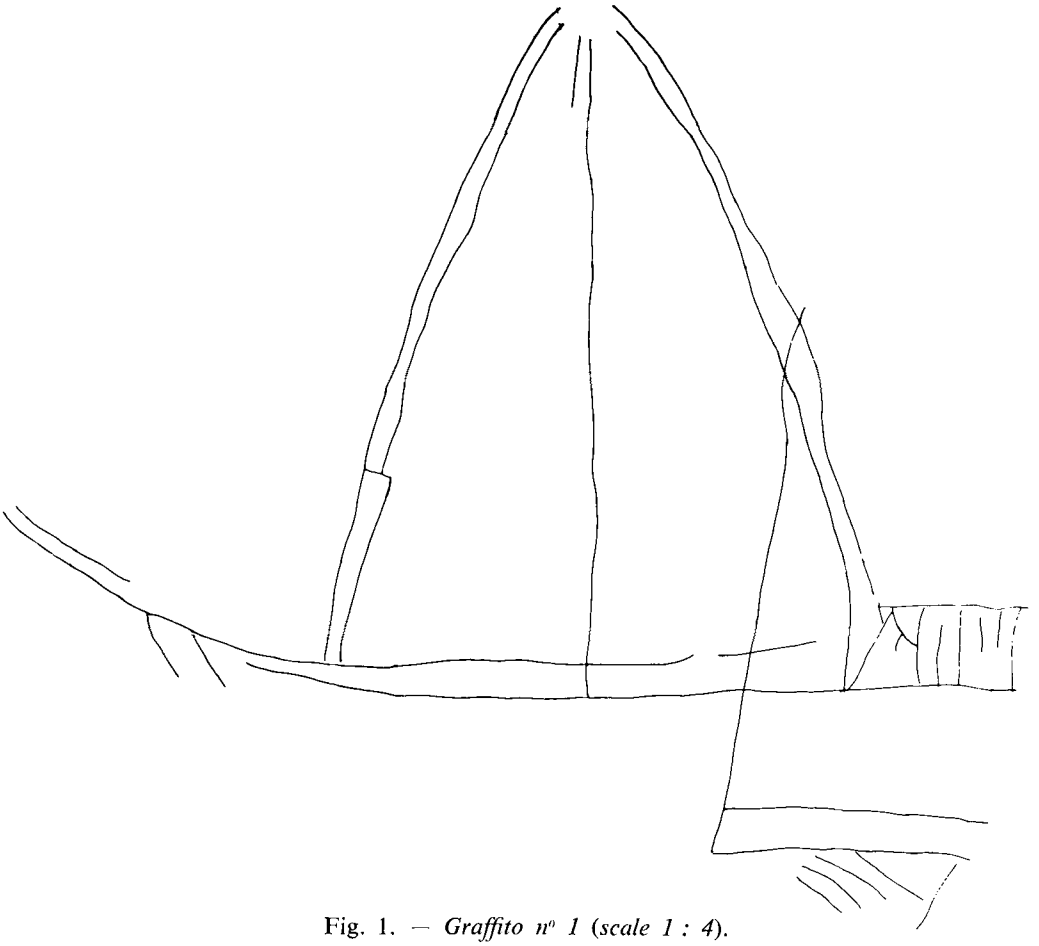


Fig. 1. — *Graffito n° 1 (scale 1 : 4).*

GRAFFITO # 1 (figure no. 1).

On the west face of the southernmost pilaster to the top left is an Aramaic/Hebrew inscription which is, most likely, not associated/contemporary with the ship graffito. The height of the ship graffito is 27.0 cm, its length is 36.6 cm. The stern is damaged and partially missing. The ship has a centre mast with rigging (forestay and backstay) extending from the top of the mast down to the deck on two sides. The prow (projecting cutwater/bowsprit) is rather long and, according to L. Casson, is never found on ancient ships. The ship thus represented, seems to be a post-ancient vessel, perhaps seventeenth century Islamic based on comparison with graffiti from that period from Oman[8]. There may be a cabin at the back on the deck. There may be an oar; water is schematically depicted beneath towards the stern.

8. Communications from L. Casson to the author of August 31 and September 13, 1989 : D. Nicolle, « Shipping in Islamic Art : Seventh Through Sixteenth Century AD », *The American Neptune* XLIX /3, summer 1989, p. 187, n^{os} 63 & 193, n° 63 c-d though these comparanda have two masts.

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GRAFFITO # 2 (figure no. 2).

On the northwest face of the pilaster northwest of the one on which graffito number 1 appears. This is the best preserved of the four ship graffiti. James Burton sketched it in May 1823 [9]. The height is 30.0 cm, its length is 45.0 cm. The ship is complete with a centre mast and rigging (forestay and backstay) extending from the top of the mast down to just above (but not touching) the deck on the left side and touching the deck on the right side. There are other miscellaneous lines on the right which may also be schematic representations of rigging. The prow (projecting cutwater/bowsprit) is rather long and prominent and extends at approximately a 45 degree angle; its presence suggests a post-ancient, possibly Islamic, date for the graffito (cf. graffito number 1). There is a cabin at the back of the ship. There may be a steering oar at the stern. Diagonal lines decorate the front half of the port side of the ship.

9. British Museum Burton Collection, *o.c.*

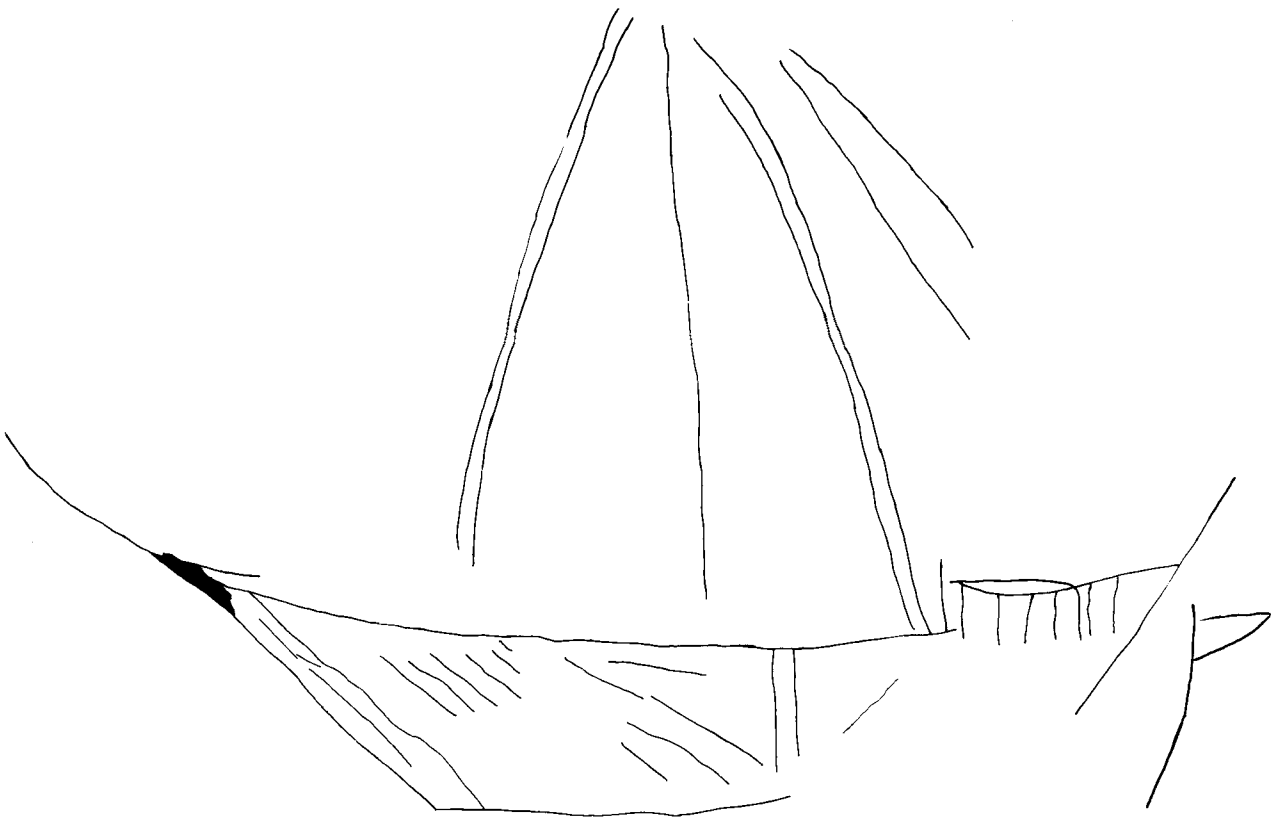


Fig. 2. — *Graffito n° 2 (scale 1 : 4).*

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GRAFFITO # 3 (figure no. 3).

On the southwest face of the same pilaster on which graffito number 2 appears. This graffito is near the left edge of the pilaster face. This is the smallest of the ship graffiti with a height of 11.8 cm and a length of *c.* 19.0 cm. The prow or stern (depending on which way the ship is to be seen as sailing) is missing. There is a great deal of doodling or rigging depicted in a rather confused manner. There may be a cabin centrally located on the deck at the point where the central mast should be located. This ship is similar to the earlier period depictions of Egyptian sickle-boats [10] or represents. According to L. Casson, any one of a number of craft of this general design was used on the Nile in all periods [11].

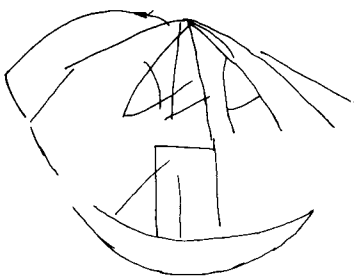


Fig. 3.

Graffito n° 3 (scale 1 : 4).

GRAFFITO # 4 (figure no. 4).

On the west face of the next pilaster north of the one on which graffiti number 2 and 3 appears. This is the most poorly preserved of the four ship graffiti. The height is *c.* 28.0 cm to the point of the triangle below, the length is *c.* 43.0 cm. Parts of what appears to be a mast perhaps with lateen sail, rigging (forestay), the prow (cutwater) and part of the deck are preserved. Lateen rigged vessels plied the Red Sea from antiquity until modern times [12].

All the ship graffiti seem to have only a single central mast; there is no evidence of a foremast and no yards are shown. This suggests that the ships depicted in graffiti number 1-3 are not sailing, but are in port with sails furled; they seem to be square-rigged though this is not a certainty. Graffito number 4 is, most likely a lateen-rigged sailing vessel.

10. H.A. Winkler, *Archaeological Survey of Egypt Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt I, Sir Robert Mond Desert Expedition, Season 1936-1937, Preliminary Report*, London, 1938, p. 35-39 & pl. XXXIII-XXXIV.

11 Communication from L. Casson to the author of August 31, 1989.

12. Communication from L. Casson to the author of August 31, 1989.

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Fig. 4. — *Graffito n° 4* (*scale 1 : 4*).

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