In memoriam Joachim Werner (1939-94)

The Tetrarchic fort at Nag al-Hagar in the province of Thebais: preliminary report (2005-8)

Michael Mackensen

For decades, systematic archaeological research on Late Roman fortifications in the Upper Egyptian province of Thebais, as well as in the Lower province of Aegyptus, seemed to be largely neglected, even though the preservation of signal towers, forts, fortlets and fortresses, mostly of mudbrick, was in places exceptional. As background to the present report on the results of three seasons of fieldwork at the Late Roman fort at Nag al-Hagar near Aswan (Upper Egypt), previously (1984-89) uncovered in part and of special interest because of its residential palace, it seems useful to give a brief overview of current research at other Late Roman military sites in Egypt (fig. 1).

The Diocletianic fort of Dionysius/Qasr Qarun1 at the W fringe of the Fayum was almost completely excavated in 1948-50 by a French-Swiss team.2 It provided the ground-plan of the fortification and various interior buildings used by the garrison aliqua Praetorium (Not. Dig. Or. 28.34). Further fieldwork on Late Roman military sites in Egypt mostly depended on the efforts of a few individuals.3 In this context belongs the work of P. Grossmann on Late Roman structures in the courtyard of the Ptolemaic-Roman temple of Chnum on the island of Elephantine.4 A series of multi-phase, two-storeyed buildings excavated in the early 20th c. be presumed to be the barracks of a small fort;5 built early in the second quarter of the 5th c.6 for the cohors prima felix Theodosiana (according to Not. Dig. Or 31.64, this unit was garrisoned apud Elephantinum).

The situation improved from the 1980s due to research on the Tetrarchic fortress of legio tertia Diocletiana built at Thebais/Luxor: (Not. Dig. Or. 31.8)7 within the temenos of the monumental temple of Amun erected by Amenhotep III and Ramses II. It was published by J.-C. Golvin, M. Reddé and G. Wagner.8 In Lower Egypt, architectural documentation of the S and E gates of the high standing curtain wall and gate towers of the fortress of legio tetradecima Gemina at Babilons/Old Curro (Not. Dig. Or. 28.15) was conducted by Grossmann between 1990 and 1994.9 Based on typological criteria (in particular, the ground-plan of the projecting U-shaped towers of the S gate, together with its posterns and its ward-like inner courtyard), he assumed a construction in the context of the Diocletianic re-organisation of

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1 In the text the spelling of the Egyptian or Jordanian site names corresponds to those mostly employed in the relevant archaeological literature, although I am well aware that these simplified transcriptions are not correct from an Arabist's point of view.
2 Schwartz 1969.
4 Grossmann 1980, 9-75, especially 21-29 pi. 26 id. 2732, 337 l. fig. 186.
5 But see the criticism by Arnold 2003, 20 f. and 44 f. who suggested a purely civil character for the standardised multi-storeyed houses in the courtyard of the Chnum temple (Grossmann 1980, 21-28).
6 Grossmann 2002, 357 n. 717 gives a different interpretation. It should be observed that there is neither a recognizable headquarters-building (principia) nor a residence (praetorium) for the commander (praefectus) nor characteristic storerooms (horrea) for the unit's food supplies.
7 Grossmann 1980, 26-29. For the revised dating of the papyrus Leiden Z, the letter of Appion, bishop of Syene, asking Theodosius I and Valentinian II for military support against the incursions of the Blemmyes, and for an earlier dating of the fort (which was probably built in the late 4th c.), cf. Arnold 2003, 89.
8 At Dionysios Monu in or around the temple of Amun-Re at nearby Karnak there might have been installed a second fort for the equites sagittarii indigentes (Not. Dig. Or. 31.27).
9 El-Saghir et al. 1986; Golvin and Reddé 1986.