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A life of luxury in the desert? The food and fodder supply to Mons Claudianus

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The site: its setting and inhabitants

Mons Claudianus, a quarry settlement known for its granodiorite which, as an imperial monopoly, was used for imperial building projects in Rome, lies in a remote part of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, some 500 km south of Cairo and 120 km east of the Nile, at an altitude of c.700 m in the heart of the Red Sea mountains (fig. 1). The site itself consists of a walled, defended settlement (or fort), animal lines (stables), a granary, wells, cisterns, a cemetery, temple, and bath-house, as well as substantial midden deposits (fig. 2). The archaeological remains are remarkably well preserved, and many buildings stand to roof height. The most intense occupation of the site occurred during the late 1st and 2nd c. A.D. Between 1987 and 1993 work was conducted under the auspices of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Cairo by kind permission of the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation. The work was directed by Prof. J. Bingen with H. Cuvigny as chef de chantier, supported by an international team of archaeologists and papyrologists.

There is no archaeological evidence for permanent settlement in the Eastern Desert with the exception of the Roman quarry-settlements and way-stations (see below), nor is there evidence that agriculture was practised. The area was, and is, sparsely inhabited by Bedouin (Hobbs 1989). Most of the Eastern Desert is classified as hyper-arid: mean annual rainfall is 5 mm, though this figure does not reflect recurrent rainfall but 'accidental' cloudbursts; indeed, some years see no rainfall (Zahran and Willis 1992). The present arid conditions have prevailed since c.3000 B.C. (Butzer 1961, 1976; Zahran and Willis 1992). This means that the settlement at Mons Claudianus must have been supplied with food from elsewhere, most probably from the Nile valley, a journey of some 5 days in antiquity.

We do not know exactly how many people lived at Mons Claudianus. The number will have varied over the years but the presence of 920 people on a particular day has been recorded (*O.Claud.* inv. 1538 + 2921: Maxfield 1997, 95). To this figure we can add those working at the way-stations (thought to be some 30 at each station: Maxfield 1996) and those accompanying the transport of stone and the food caravan. The supply of food for so many people and over such a distance was obviously a major undertaking. Despite references in Josephus (*Bell.* 6.418) that Jewish captives were being sent to mines in Egypt, and in Aelius Aristides (*Aeg.* 67.5.12) mentioning the use of convicts at Mons Porphyrites, there is no documentary or archaeological evidence from Mons Claudianus for the use of forced labour. The ostraca refer to 4 groups of people: soldiers and officials (the site was administered by the army); skilled, civilian workers; unskilled workers; and women and children (*O.Claud.* I; Bülow-Jacobsen 1996; Cuvigny 1996). The skilled workers and many of the soldiers came from villages in the Nile valley and it is clear from the ostraca that their families continued to live there (Bülow-Jacobsen in *O.Claud.* I; Cuvigny in *O.Claud.* I; Cuvigny 1996).

Analysis of the biological data recovered from midden deposits at the site has indicated that a vast range of foodstuffs was available. The biological data from Mons Claudianus rank very high in terms of quality of preservation and abundance. The same arid conditions that made (and make) agriculture impossible in the area are responsible for the remarkable preservation of the site — and more specifically of the foodstuffs thrown away by its inhabitants. In addition to 3 large middens located immediately outside the walls of the settlement, there are refuse deposits in many rooms inside the fort, often filling the rooms to the ceiling. These deposits are full of organic materials such as wood, charcoal, seeds, fruits, straw, chaff, fibres,