

A Byzantine gold-mining town in the eastern desert of Egypt: Bir Umm Fawakhir, 1992-93

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The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago carried out two seasons of archaeological survey in the Eastern Desert of Egypt at Bir Umm Fawakhir in January 1992 and January 1993 (colour figs.A-D). Bir Umm Fawakhir can now be identified as a 5th-6th c. Byzantine gold-mining town (perhaps surviving into the 7th c.). Half of the main settlement (105 buildings) has been mapped and studied in detail and the immediate vicinity has been investigated by walking surveys. Systematic collection of surface pottery has been initiated and a corpus of pottery has been drawn and studied. Studies of the epigraphic material, the geology of the area, and an estimate of the ancient population size have been undertaken.

The site lies half way between the Nile and the Red Sea coast, about 5 km NE of the Wadi Hammamat, famous for its stone quarries and graffiti (fig. 1). Bir Umm Fawakhir is usually discussed along with the other ruins on the Quft (Coptos) to Quseir road, the most striking being a series of fortified way stations (also called *hydreumata*) and intervisible watch-towers marking the 1st-2nd c. Roman route. Depending on how one counts and dates the stations, Bir Umm Fawakhir is about the sixth in line after Matula, Laqeita (ancient Phoenicon), Qasr Banat, Wadi Mweh, and Bir Hammamat. Although the Roman route has been surveyed and the *hydreumata* planned,¹ none of them, apart from work at Wekalat Zarka just begun, has ever been excavated. No systematic archaeological survey or excavation had been undertaken at Bir Umm Fawakhir prior to 1992.²

The modern settlement at Bir Umm Fawakhir (some 12 buildings, including a tea house for the refreshment of Nile to Red Sea travelers) lies in a fairly wide, flat, sandy area (c.7.5 km²) surrounded by jagged mountains dissected by numerous wadis or dry canyons. The western end of the open area is sharply defined by a ridge of mountains; the main road passes through a natural gap here (fig. 2). In the mountainside are a number of ancient gold mines and at its foot are wells, all important in a hyper-arid desert. The mountains close in again as the road continues SE towards Quseir and the Red Sea. The old Roman road took a more northeasterly route; the two join again about 15 km further east. The main group of ancient ruins lies in a long narrow wadi hidden from the road by a spur of hills (colour fig.A). Other, smaller clusters of ruins lie closer to the modern settlement, along the Roman road, in bays leading off the modern road, and probably in other places nearby that have not yet been investigated.

* This article draws upon the reports of my collaborators L. Heidorn, T. Wilfong, W. Kaegi, and M. B. D. Omar, which will be published in full elsewhere.

1 D. Meredith, "The Roman remains in the Eastern Desert of Egypt," *JEA* 39 (1953) 95-106; M. Reddé and J.-C. Golvin, "Du Nil à la Mer Rouge: documents anciens et nouveaux sur les routes du désert oriental d'Égypte," *Karthago* 21 (1987) 5-64; R. E. Zitterkopf and S. E. Sidebotham, "Stations and towers on the Quseir-Nile Road," *JEA* 75 (1989) 155-89.

2 The 1992 and 1993 staff consisted of Dr. Carol Meyer, field director; Dr. Lisa Heidorn, archaeologist; Mohamed Badr el-Din Omar, geologist; Dr. Terry Wilfong, Egyptologist; Abdel Regal A. Mohammed, Inspector 1992; Ahmed Gaber, Inspector 1993; Henry Cowherd, photographer 1992; Dr. Stephen Cole, photographer 1993; and Abdu Suleiman, driver. Many thanks are also due to Paul Bartko, Christina DiCerbo, Kathryn Dorman, Dr. Peter Dorman, Mark Easton, Dr. Abdel Aziz el-Hussein, Amira Khattab, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Laws, Mr. and Mrs. Henry I. Meyer, Catherine Novotny-Brehm, Dr. Henri Riad, Elinor Smith, Dr. Robert K. Smither, Dr. William Sumner, Dr. Mohammed Sughair, the American Research Center in Egypt, Chicago House, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Pennzoil Corp., and the Society of Woman Geographers.