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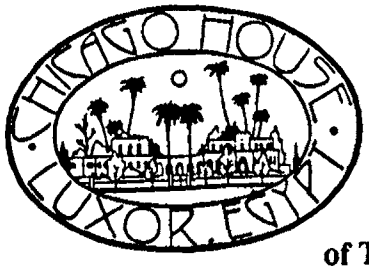

CHICAGO HOUSE BULLETIN

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CHICAGO HOUSE: REBUILDING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

By Peter Dorman, Field Director

Since 1931, when the new headquarters of the Epigraphic Survey was completed on the east bank of the Nile, replacing the older building behind the Colossi of Memnon, Chicago House has seen very little physical change. One of the great charms of the building has been its preservation of a style of architecture that suits both the environment and the function it was intended to serve. Chicago House was indeed planned and executed with great foresight, and for over six decades it has admirably served the needs of the Survey.

As the 21st century approaches, however, the present house has grown inadequate to the needs of the staff and the expanding possibilities introduced by technology. Electrical power--or rather, the lack of it, caused by constant power outages that number as many as five or six a day--has a debilitating effect on our work and our comfort; the library shelves are overcrowded, and some are difficult of access; lighting is hopelessly inadequate. Although well maintained for years, all buildings presently require structural renovation.

Last fall, we invited four architectural firms in Cairo to submit proposals for the renovation of Chicago House, and after careful consideration we awarded the design contract to Bechtel Egypt. In order to keep the work from disrupting the months of our field season, construction will take place during the summer whenever possible. Our major design concern has been the preservation of the present architectural style and the riverfront facade.

In addition to purely decorative improvements--retiling, new plaster, and new paint, the electrical problem will be remedied by a new transformer, linking Chicago House to the main grid supplied from the Aswan Dam. In a nod to technology, passive solar collectors will provide hot water for each building, and our obsolete kitchen will be updated with modern stoves, sinks, stainless steel counters, and a heavy-duty dishwasher.

The library will see some of the greatest changes: a new library hall, virtually identical to the old, will be built into the small courtyard to the east. Floor space and shelf space will be almost doubled, providing room for another sixty years of book acquisitions. The library will have vastly improved lighting, new readers' tables, new map and folio cases, underground electrical circuits to provide outlets for reading lights and personal computers, and a fire alarm system. The administrative areas will be linked by computer network to the epigraphers' offices, the artists' studios, the library catalogue, and the photo archives.

The residence suites in back of the library will be converted into badly needed office space. The northern wing will serve as the photographic archive, containing separate storage for

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THE BIR UMM FAWAKHIR PROJECT, 1992: A GOLD MINING CAMP IN THE EASTERN DESERT

By Carol Meyer, Staff Artist and BUF Director

Real at last. The inspectors were still waiting for us, after a delay of a mere hour caused by the car ferry deciding not to run that morning. Squeezing inspectors Ahmed and Abdu in with Henry, Terry, Lisa, Mohammed, myself, and the driver, we could at last set out past Coptos and into the Eastern Desert, on to the Wadi Hammamat and our archaeological site just beyond, at Bir Umm Fawakhir(BUF).

There are two reactions to seeing Bir Umm Fawakhir for the first time, depending on whether or not you are an archaeologist. The site lies almost an hour into the desert by paved road, almost exactly half way between the Nile and the Red Sea. The two unprepossessing tea houses, guard post, and equal number of houses constitute one of the few settlements on the whole desert road. Non-archaeologists climb out of the vehicle and say, "This is the end of the world." Not quite. Those raw red and gray granite mountains all around may look something like a moonscape, but they are Precambrian, a solid 700 to 520 million years old and closer to the beginning of the world. Having stretched, gathered canteens, hats, and cameras, the party heads down the wadi and around an angle in the rock to the ruined settlement. Then for half a kilometer it is possible to wander down the ancient main street (the sandy wadi bottom) and into houses provided with niches and benches. Some of the walls still stand as much as a meter and a half high. The pottery lies on the trash heaps outside each house or scattered up the cliff slopes behind. The best views, however, are those from the high cliffs enclosing the site. Archaeologists' responses are usually a variation on "Wow."

I have known about Bir Umm Fawakhir for some twelve years now and have stopped there from time to time when passing through on the Red Sea road. The problem with the site was that the more I tried to find out about it the less sense it made, a widening discrepancy between what I could see and the literature on the site, which consists almost wholly of travelers' accounts. First of all, the site is usually called Roman, but the pottery looked nothing like the 1st and 2nd century A.D. material we excavated at Quseir al-Qadim on the Red Sea coast. The houses strung out along the wadi have none of the formal architectural layout characteristic of a Roman site. They are carefully built but are entirely dry stone masonry without any cut stone; there are certainly no monumental buildings. The only Roman period remains so far seem to be the watchtower perched high above the western approach to Bir Umm Fawakhir, some graffiti in a cave behind the modern tea houses, perhaps a line of stones near the new mosque, and about sixty 2nd century ostraca found long ago by "prospectors." The ostraca pertain to Roman military activity in the desert.

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CH Renovation *(continued from p. 1)*

prints and negatives. The southern wing will contain a public-access computer center and a multipurpose drafting room, to be used for joining drawings and for conservation projects.

Because of the conversion of the library wings, a new residence building will rise on the site of our small guest house at the back of the property. The new structure will be a U-shaped building, two stories high, containing seven bedroom-bathroom suites and surrounded on three sides by open arcades.

Now that our photographic equipment has been recently updated through generous gifts from the Amoco Foundation and the J. Paul Getty Grant Program, the photographic studio will be overhauled: seamless stainless steel sinks will replace the old lead-lined sinks, and all electrical circuits will be double-wired with 220/110V power, for maximum use of our equipment. Added safety precautions include a dilution pit for chemical waste disposal and the improvement of air ventilation in both processing areas. We will also achieve better water purification and distillation systems for chemical mixing.

As for the garden areas around the residence and library, all exterior courts and garden footpaths will be retiled; those of you who have stumbled along at night on our old walks will be glad to hear that footpath lighting will be added. For garden and sports lovers, new landscaping and the repaving of the original tennis and badminton courts will provide a final touch. The rear gate, sealed for years, will be reopened to allow a secondary access for expedition vehicles.

Scheduled for completion by October 1, 1993, the renovation of Chicago House will be made possible through the funds received through our Egyptian currency endowment, enacted into law by Congress and administered by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. Periodic updates on our progress will certainly appear in future issues of this Bulletin! **END**

Bir Umm Fawakhir *(continued from p. 1)*

Turn of the century accounts note a Ptolemaic temple near the modern settlement, and one of the reports even provides a copy of the hieroglyphs. The temple is said to have been totally destroyed by modern gold mining activity, but might not a few blocks survive somewhere?

A recent survey of the watering stations and towers in the Eastern Desert dates the Bir Umm Fawakhir pottery as 5th-7th century A.D. This seems to fit, but most of the older literature on Egypt in the Coptic or Byzantine period concludes that it was too feeble economically and militarily to maintain a presence in the Eastern Desert, which is said to have been abandoned to nomads. Again, recent research is modifying this picture. There is a Byzantine fort at Abu Sha'ar near Hurgada, a few small sites in the desert, and a mostly unexplored Byzantine town at Berenice, the Red Sea port almost due east of Aswan.

Finally, what was Byzantine Bir Umm Fawakhir doing there? Was it a military post, a commercial station on the Red Sea road, a gold mine, or a granite quarry?

Apart from these puzzles, the immediate push for an archaeological survey at this site is that it is being looted. Twelve years ago it was pristine; now at least half the buildings have been grubbed into, sometimes with bare fingers only, sometimes down to bedrock. This is enough to undermine the dry stone walls and to confuse a rather special archaeological record.

A map of the existing structures and a study of the surface artifacts could at least preserve a record of what now survives. It is a chance to study an entire ancient community, house for house, with or without excavation.

With the critical backing of both the Oriental Institute and Chicago House, I could start through a maze of paperwork,

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STAFF ARTIST SUE OSGOOD EXHIBITS ART WORK AT THE AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTERS IN CAIRO AND ALEXANDRIA

In April the American Cultural Centers in Cairo and Alexandria hosted exhibitions of Staff Artist Sue Osgood's recent art work. The show consisted of 25 oil paintings, charcoal drawings, water color sketches done over the past year, and three monoprints from the time her initial interest in archaeology began, fourteen years ago. The collection was shown in Cairo on April 12 and in Alexandria on April 26.

Full of color and light, her work is inspired by travels, experiences, and history. It evokes the passage of time and movement. She says of her work, "Painting and drawing for me are a means of travel and a way of discovering unknown places. My impetus to work in Egypt followed inspirations which came from poring through Egyptological and archaeological volumes while in art school, imagining excavations, and painting the colors and light. The process was an excavation and discovery in itself."

When at last she had the opportunity to work as an archaeological illustrator in the Egyptian Delta, she says, "I found I was amazed not so much by the work as by the exoticness of the daily life going on all around us: the sounds, the light, and the richness of this culture which was almost totally foreign to me. What I had imagined about archaeological excavations was much more interesting than the actual dig itself. I think it was at that point that my art work evolved into abstractions of my experiences."

Over the twenty years Sue has been working as an artist, she has worked for seven seasons in Egypt, five as a staff artist with the Epigraphic Survey. Both exhibitions also included slide presentations by the artist of her work with the Epigraphic Survey in Luxor Temple.

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Bir Umm Fawakhir *(continued from p. 2)*

proposals, applications, budgets, letters, security forms, photos, faxes, maps, and other documents that occupied a large part of the succeeding months. Timing became tight. The team was to fly from the States January 3, the survey was to start January 11, and clearance from the Egyptian government did not come until December 30.

Still, the pieces were falling into place. The team arrived on schedule, the tripod, theodolite, and equipment came through, and permissions were in hand. We were based at Chicago House, which by diggers' standards is bliss. It meant a long commute each way, but for a two week pilot project it was preferable to setting up camp in the desert. In January it was chilly enough for a sweater at 7 A.M., but by the time we hauled the equipment to the end of the site at 9 we were down to shirt sleeves. Surveying began at the far end of the main settlement because this is the best preserved and clearest part and because the end of the site is defined by a high felsite ridge with a natural gate in it. Three of us, Lisa Heidorn, a veteran of many digs in Egypt and elsewhere; Terry Wilfong, an advanced graduate student at the Oriental Institute; and myself, quickly settled into a routine. One of us sketched a building, the second person held the prism pole and marked points shot on another sketch, and the third made the shots from the instrument. We were most fortunate in borrowing from the Oriental Institute a Lietz Set 3 Total Instrument Station, a beautiful piece of equipment. Inadequately described as a laser theodolite, it measures distances, elevations, slope distances, angles, and more; it does all the calculations you used to have to do by hand. It gives the north and east coordinates for each point so they can be plotted directly, and this permitted us to put the lists of numbers in the instrument man's notebook together with the sketches in the field notebooks every evening and so generate a map of the day's work. Henry Cowherd, an experienced archaeological photographer, followed the plotted buildings and began the photographic record for the site, each house, outbuilding, and special features such as niches. Mohammed Omar, a trained field geologist from the Egyptian Geological Survey, was fully employed whacking off chunks of rock, writing out notes on landforms and rock structure, dykes and veins and minerals.

The geological setting of Bir Umm Fawakhir explains a great deal about the layout and even the existence of the site. No less than three major faults split the approach to Bir Umm Fawakhir, and three different bodies of rocks meet there, the diorites to the south, the ultramafics to the west, and the granites to the northeast. It is the granites that are economically valuable because of the gold quartz veins, the stone quarries, and even the aquifer that supplies the wells.

With so small a team, the routine was stretched when Lisa or I stopped sketching buildings to collect and draw potsherds. We were trying not to get buried in sherds--it would have been possible to do nothing else--so we took a limited sample from seven areas only, three by the modern settlement and possible location of the Roman site, and four from the Byzantine buildings and trash dumps. Another day Terry was released to copy the graffiti in a cave behind the tea houses. Most of the inscriptions are painted in red on the greenish rock, and close inspection reveals that four are Greek, one of which is definitely pre-Christian, one is South Arabic, one shows a lion, one a ship, and three are illegible. Our favorite runs, "Good luck, Dorko."

Evenings had another routine. Terry dumped the day's instrument readings into one of the Chicago House Macintoshes and made disk copies. These data will be used in Chicago to replot the map, presumably modifying our hand-made first version. All of us reviewed our notebooks for the day, Henry developed negatives or contact prints, Mohammed wrote up his day's observations, and Lisa, Terry, and I plotted the day's buildings on the growing site map.

We can now see the pattern of the ancient settlement, a series of houses of two or three rooms often agglomerated into bigger units of as much as nineteen or twenty rooms. Scattered around the dwellings are smaller one-room outbuildings or huts. We mapped 55 buildings (about one quarter of the main settlement) and it can now be seen that this actually represents twelve dwelling units and that the rest are outbuildings. When completed, the map should enable us to make a reasonable population estimate for the community. The houses are provided with a number of conveniences such as benches and wall niches for storage, though hearths are still surprisingly hard to detect. All the walls are dry stone masonry and as yet we have no evidence for plastering or roofing, though valuable wood would have been removed long ago. There is not a lot of evidence for rebuilding or additions, which suggests that the site was not inhabited for generations upon generations.

The major artifact category is sherds, a potentially massive corpus of sherds. We hope that a closer study of the corpus will help us narrow the rather broad 5th-7th century dating for the site. The next most abundant surface finds are the rotary querns and the slightly scooped out rectangular grinding stones, presumably used in ore crushing. The grinding stones found in the houses are reused for construction, but they should also provide information on Roman and Byzantine mining techniques.

We can now answer a few of the questions posed at the outset of the project, though as usual still more questions remain. We are now working with the idea that Byzantine Bir Umm Fawakhir was a gold mining camp. It does not seem to

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Bir Umm Fawakhir *(continued from p. 3)*

be military because there are no fortifications at all, which is a little surprising in a desert where defense was often an important consideration. As for a granite quarry, the marks on the granite blocks and workings look Roman, the Byzantine rulers are not known to have hunted out exotic stones as assiduously as the Romans, and the Bir Umm Fawakhir quarries are rather small anyway. Bir Umm Fawakhir might have served the commerce on the Red Sea road, though the route to Berenice is believed to have been much more important. If a gold mine, then we need to find out more about Byzantine gold extraction techniques. There are some huts by some of the ancient shafts, and at least one of them is associated with 6th century pottery. Mining camps tend to be short lived, and so far as we can now tell, Byzantine Bir Umm Fawakhir was not inhabited long. We would also expect some degree of government involvement, partly because private enterprise did not operate on such a large scale and partly because it seems unlikely that the Byzantine governors could stay away from something as potentially lucrative as a gold mine.

In two weeks we did not finish the site, though we did map 55 out of over 200 buildings in the main wadi settlement plus some of the steep topography delimiting it. We also have a very good idea of what it would take to complete the survey of the main site, two contemporary outliers, and the few remains near the modern settlement. At least two other, separate settlements have been spotted near Bir Umm Fawakhir and more exist farther into the desert. When the Oriental Institute started excavations at Quseir al-Qadim on the Red Sea coast in 1978, it was beyond the beyond. In 1980 the newly opened coast road said simply "Mines." Now, however, there is a sudden burst of archaeological activity in the Eastern Desert, not only at Quseir al-Qadim but also at Abu Sha'ar, Mons Claudianus, the Wadi Hammamat, and various surveys of the desert routes. It will be interesting to see how Bir Umm Fawakhir fits into this increasingly complex picture of ancient exploitation of the Eastern Desert.

END

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