

“Dialog between sustainability and archaeology A case study of the Ottoman Quseir fort, Egypt”

Dr. Ahmed Yehia Rashed¹
Dr. Mohamed Esmat ElAttar²

Abstract:

Historically, fortress played a distinguished role to protect villages, towns and cities. The size, complexity and architecture of those forts were reflected the time-technology, materials and the weapon tools used in war activities. Nowadays, the function of those forts for protection is completely lost. The buildings themselves ranged between ruins to archaeology remains. For many of those buildings the only option for sustainability besides being kept as archaeological sites after conservation works, could be the adaptive reuse as museums or visitor centres.

A restoration project for Quseir Ottoman fort, Egypt aims at transforming the Fort into visitors centre. The fort was constructed during the period of Arab/Ottoman government with some Pharaonic references. Originally, the Fort had two towers but one of them has been torn down. The inner yard has some remaining walls and the ground of the yard has large openings that form an interesting basement structure. The building is constructed of stone masonry and the vaults are made of brick.

For sustainability, the fort designed to attract visitors to experience the fort itself, the centre provides historical and cultural information related to the region. This includes the history and architecture of the fort, maritime trade, overland trade, Bedouin life, the monasteries, and the mining activities in the region. These exhibits were possible only after archaeology, survey, photography, and architectural consolidation had been done.

This paper will discuss the experiment and the role of public participation in the project and how forts transferred its role from past protecting into future persevering of values and identity.

1- Introduction:

The role of history is simply to understand the past in order to vision the future. In some places history could be documented through different resources; archaeology remains, historical buildings, literature (poems and books), artifacts, and so, these material facts supported the written history, when it might not be the true history or have been changed through time according to the point of views, and desires. In some other places there could be evidence about historical importance but without real written history. In our case, Quseir city is an example for such places with historical environments (facts), and missing written history (theory). Many archeology remains and historical buildings, but again without written history. Only through the people memorization and their inherited traditions and customs one can find a kind of history, the history which differed according to individual experiences and characteristics. In contrary, the runes and archeology remains giving a source of reality. Therefore, Quseir has a great chance for history documentation through architectural and archeological understanding of its old buildings. Among those buildings, Quseir fort could be considered as a real source, standing to be the most important element for such approach. In general forts or citadels used to be known as a fortified military post where troops are stationed; also it used to be considered as a fortified defensive structure. So the role of defence was the main operation for such structures.

¹ - Department of Architecture, Mansoura University, EGYPT.

² - Department of Architecture, Mansoura University, EGYPT

This paper highlighted the role of this Fort in understanding and documenting the history of Quseir, also the paper aimed to discuss the dialogue between sustainability and archaeology for Quseir future options. The actions taken were actually a proposal for restoration project funded by the USAID¹ to transfer the fort to be a visitor centre. The visitors' centre will be installed following excavation, consolidation and some limited reconstruction at the fort. Its purpose will be to offer the usual facilities for visitors, including a presentation on the history of the region and the fort itself. But to what extent is the reliability of the process, how and who were involved in the project. What was the community opportunity to participate in it, and what options are offered for Quseir?



(Figure 1) Photos showing the fort before the restoration project

2- Quseir Fort and the project liaison

In 1997 when the researcher³ first involved with a team work in the restoration project funded by the American Research Centre in Egypt, one of the suggested options by the local officials for utilizing the fort site was to completely demolish it and replace the site with municipality housing project. That was the resulted conclusion after a failure restoration project for the Fort happened on 1995 under the supervision of the Antiquities and with one million L.E. budget. The local contractor from Quseir was not qualified and made a lot of destructions and mistakes. Therefore, Quseir Fort Visitor Centre was made under the aim for Promotion of Sustainable Tourism Cultural Activities. One of the main issues explained in the scope of work for the restoration and conservation of the fort, that there is an essential need to enlist the services of an Egyptian who will be able to represent the Project to all the different level of people at Quseir. Furthermore, the Egyptian liaison will be chosen to ensure the involvement of local community of Quseir in the motivation for, and philosophy behind the

³ - Dr. Ahmed Rashed "Community Liaison at the Quseir Fort Subproject". Dr. Mohamed Esmat participated in later stages of the project.

work, and the progress that the work will follow. The duties for the liaison were defined before starting of the mission as follows:

1. To arrange meetings with the important community leaders of Quseir and to discuss the Quseir Fort Project with them. Explain to them the stages that the work will follow; archaeological excavations, survey, reconstruction, conservation, and creation of the visitors centre displays.
2. Establish who in Quseir has particular responsibility or interest in the Fort.
3. Collect some of the local lore and traditions about the town and the fort, including plausible, historical, and fantastic accounts.
4. Find out availability of local labours and wages for workmen and foremen.

3- Investigating Quseir through its people:

When you work within a foreigner team in any developmental or community project it is important to understand that you as an Egyptian expert played the main role as a bridge between different cultures, experiences and levels of thinking. The sustainability of the project based on realistic dialogue between parties, the question is who those parties are? The project involved USAID officials, ARCE as a counter-part, consultant (Mallinson Architects), Egyptian Antiquities, Red Sea Governorate, the Quseir officials, community leaders and different individuals from Quseir people.

The first question came to mind by Quseir's people was why Quseir fort. For them the conservation or restoration of heritage site is not in their priorities. Drinking water, enough food, suitable clothing, shelters, health facilities, jobs options, education, basic needs services and so on are examples of their agenda. For a high percentage of them Quseir fort is runes and stones not more than that.

The value of Quseir fort and the awareness of possible future options varied from party to party. The officials (the head of municipality) supported the project as it will not require any financial support and it could open options for tourism. Also meeting with the City Council Committee members, where they are the representatives from all the different departments of the City (education, health, electricity, security ..). By discussions the meeting was very important to understand the urban constrains for Quseir future development as a city and sub-region and the conditions of the Fort as a heritage site.

After meeting with officials, it was important to communicate with different people from different levels and interests to draw an image about the city, these included: taxi drivers, hotel labours, shop owners, supermarkets, employees in the Phosphate Company, ordinary people in the street and the souk (market), and so on. One of the Arab Bedouin members showed his interest to the project and the future of the place, he insisted that Quseir is a historical place and the only place in the Red Sea area which has real history. In summery, the people of Quseir are by nature friendly with visitors and tourists. Tourism for most of the people is the desirable future for the city, but others see no future of tourism comparing to Hurghada and Marsa-Alam. In addition some of them expressed the disagreement with tourism for its negative impacts and expensive living conditions it might created.

The most remarkable issue in Quseir was that people considered Mr. Hamam⁴ as the local reference for Quseir History. Mr. Kamal Hussin Abdel-Rahim (Hamam) the historian who lived most of his life in the yellow house opposite to the Fort. He was the most respected person in Quseir, no argument between two in Quseir about that, he was about eighty years old, and wrote three books about Quseir, the most famous one named; "Ponabart and Quseir"

⁴ - This paper dictated to Mr. Hamam who died in 1999.

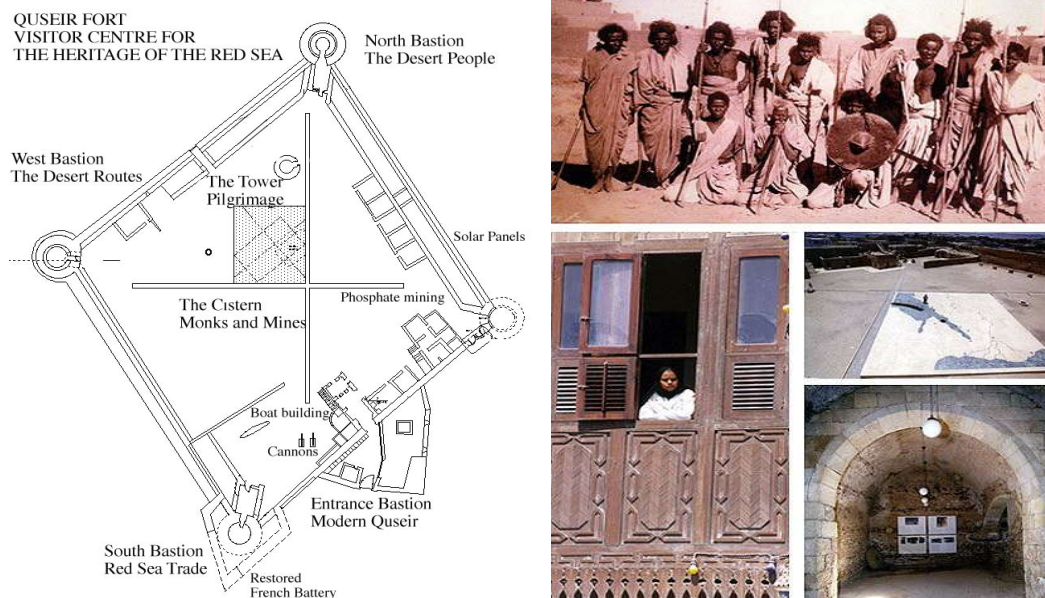
which he verified in it that the French invasion reached Quseir. He summarized the city and its fort as following;

Quseir has a long and distinguished history. Some nine kilometres north of the city lay the remains of Quseir al-Qadim (Old Quseir), an archaeological Roman site of major international importance. The port fell into disuse in the mid third century AD, but rose again in the Mamluk period, acting as both a trade and a pilgrim harbour before being abandoned sometime before the foundation of modern Quseir. The fundamental importance of Quseir, that it was the port of embarkation for the Upper Egyptian wheat that kept the Holy Cities alive.

The Ottoman Citadel that dominates its centre was constructed in 1517 by Sultan Selim the Grim. The strategic importance of the city throughout history is highlighted by repeated attempts of the French navy to take the citadel in 1798. Too strong to be taken by sea, the citadel was eventually overcome by a land invasion and served as a French stronghold during the battles between the French and the British for effective control of Egypt. Unfortunately, famine and the disruption of the grain trade resulted in a decline of the city's fortunes, until the arrival of the phosphate company in the early twentieth century.

The community of the city is divided into two main groups the fisheries (city residents) and the Bedouin. The total population is about 50.000 persons livid in about 20 km2. The city was known as a trading centre between Egypt and Saudi Arabian where Egypt imported Camels and Wood, and exported wets, cereals, and cotton. In addition it was the main Hajj port for Upper Egypt².

The main food is what called "Saiadiah" and for the Bedouin Assidah". There in no significant dress for the citizen but the Bedouin has their own type of dress. The main crafts they have are sea fabrication but it has been controlled by law. There is no agriculture. The main industrial activity is related to the phosphate company. In addition there is a mining activity in the area.



(Figure 2)The project proposal and understanding Quseir through its people

4- Quseir Fort and the Archaeology for history³

While it is clear that Quseir Fort was designed primarily as a military installation, its role in protecting pilgrims and the traffic of goods associated with their passage was essential. It is the latter which the foundation fireman emphasises in describing Quseir as being the port

from which the annual provision for the servants (officials) of the Holy Places is sent by vessels to Jeddah and Yanbu.

When the French arrived in 1799, according to Kamaledin Hussein's book⁴ *Bonaparte and Qosseir*, the fortress had a bastion at each corner and limestone walls 26 and 30cms thick. The castle held only a small number of rooms, and the water in its well was brackish. At a distance of 100 feet from the southwest main entrance lay a cistern which could hold up to 45 cubic metres of water, and linked to this were several natural water sources from outlying hills which made it a natural reservoir in the rainy season.

The Fort was under investigation by the archaeologist from the consultant team. The archaeology task was excavating the ancient Fort site, and has uncovered a wealth of information highlighting the importance of the area in antiquity. The archaeological work has opened a new page in the archaeology of the Egyptian Red Sea coast, the work of excavation found the following⁵:

- Links through various aspects of the material culture and architecture to other Red Sea sites and points beyond (Saudi Arabia and Yemen in particular).
- Around 50 letters dating largely to the late 18th century, many of which relate to the transport of wheat to the Hejaz.
- It provides a continuation, almost to the present, of the archaeological sequence at Quseir el-Qadim, 5 km to the north, which ends in the early 16th century.
- Remains of material (pottery, metalwork, glass, clay pipes) previously unstudied in the region. The metalwork includes a range of ordnance including a mid-18th century Swedish cannon and late 18th century British and French cannon. The glass is dominated by wine bottles, apparently left behind by the French and British troops during the Napoleonic campaigns.

At the fortress, fragments of 18th-century printed texts in French were found, too small to identify, and fragments of what were probably dark blue military uniforms as well as large quantities of wine and brandy. A vital component of the excavation is: it is not acceptable for archaeologists to benefit intellectually from another society's heritage without that society able to benefit equally. The Visitor Centre project aims to involve the local community at every stage of the research process, from planning and excavation, through to public presentation.

Interviews with the people of Quseir continued to ascertain local folklore and its relationship to local archaeology. If approved, the visitor centre in Quseir will bring important benefits for both local people and a wider group of visitors. From a local and regional perspective, the visitor Centre will function as a central point for educational programmes throughout the region. Furthermore, it will attract an interest in the town and its heritage that will have positive financial and cultural implications for the development of Quseir.

5- Installation of a Visitors' Centre at Quseir Fort

After completion of archaeology, survey, photography, and architectural consolidation, a visitors' center at Quseir Fort was completed in 1999 to provide historical and cultural information on the history of the fort and its environs. The protection and display of the fort – the largest standing cultural monument on the Red Sea coast – demonstrate the importance of preserving cultural heritage in the region.

The aim of the project is to present the past and to communicate the findings of the excavations at Quseir fort to the people of Quseir and tourists visiting the region. After meetings and discussions with local people it was clear that there is substantial interest in preserving the history of the town and developing heritage-sensitive tourism in the area. It was agreed that there is a need for a centre in Quseir that could function on three levels:

1. As an interactive learning centre for the younger people of Quseir
2. As a unique tourist attraction for people staying in the Red Sea area.
3. As a historical resource for the wider community



(Figure 3) Shots of the visitor center after the fort restoration with added items

The visitor Centre was designed to focus on local people whilst remaining attractive to tourists. Displays will appeal to all age groups and function at several different levels depending on the age of the audience and their cultural background. Four maritime themes could be highlighted including:

- The Roman trading port of Quseir
- The medieval port of Quseir
- The historic fishing village of Quseir, and
- Quseir as an ecological region.

The other major themes of interest are (Quseir as a centre of the phosphate industry, the development of the historic town of Quseir, eco-tourism in Quseir and how archaeology has contributed towards our understanding of the history of Quseir.

To achieve the suggested themes the researches carried out certain steps including; discussions with the authorities at the city council and the city for

- Returning cannons to the Fort, Including those in Hurghada, for inclusion in the Visitor Centre display. Mr. Hamam mentioned that there was a cannon transferred to Cairo, “to the Citadel”. The people of Quseir used to call it “the Crazy” (El-Magnon in Arabic) because when it was pumped all the city of Quseir was shaken. He said that it was French Cannon not a British one. About the other four cannons were founded in front of the city Council, and this gave highly chances to be shifted to the Fort.
- Appropriate landscaping of the area in front of the Fort once the cleaning and archaeological work is done. And this was already agreed by the City Council after a prepared proposal.
- The Possibility to obtain some tools as well as phosphate railway truck from among the disused trucks, we made photographic documentation to the phosphate company storage.
- Possibility of obtaining disused railway carriages from those currently abandoned at al-Hamrawain to use as covered seating in the Visitor Centre. These railway carriages at al-Hamrawain were sold to Quseir’s contactor, who after a long dialogue accepted to participate in the visitor centre by offering two of them. On the panel it was written that it was gift from him, furthermore it showed the participation of the community in the display of Quseir history. The idea was adaptive reuse of them as Cafeteria and Caravans for tourist in the visitor centre. Actually, what happened that the railway truck was not able to be transferred in the fort because its gate was smaller than it.
- Discuss with local boat builders the possibility for them making a model boat for the Visitor Center. **By searching the City** the old boat (named Gatira) was almost demolished from Quseir. It is only on the mind of people. Few years ago, The Head of the Municipality of Quseir ordered to burn those boats which were on the marina of Quseir. There were only two builders have the skills to build a new one. The first one was already an old man who could not any more do it. The second one we went to his home and he asked about the size of the Gatira we want for display. The idea was to have a half completed boat and the other half would show the different stages of the building. The main target was to educate people about such heritage not to be used practically in water. After negotiation with him about the budget and cost we agreed that it will be a 9 meters Gatira and wrote a contract with two main conditions, the first one to be build inside the Fort step by step and to be documented, the second condition the Mr. Hamam should agreed that it was a Gatira and it was probably built.



(Figure 4) The old boat (Gatira) on Sea and Fort

- Investigate whether a local stone carver lives in Quseir who could carve the place names on stone map in Arabic. Actually, no one could handle such task in Quseir, but the possibility for such carver was in Qaft or Luxor.
- Translate into Arabic the texts on panels and display labels for the Visitor Center. The format of the display panels were a minimum of text (approx. 150 words per panel) and a maximum of illustrative material.
- Record Conversations with Mr. Kamal el-Din Hussin Abd el-Rahim and others about Quseir history. In particular concerning the following: the phosphate industry, Quseir

Port before the 1960s, the modern history of the Fort, communications before the roads were built, water supplies to the town of Quseir, trade commodities that passed through Quseir. This task was the most important efforts done within the Visitor Center project. It was not easy to convince Mr. Hamam to record his memories through Video documentation. Mr. Kamal el-Din Hussin (Hamam) again was the history, the memory and the encyclopedia not only for Quseir but also the RED SEA region. The history that is not written anywhere and the efforts the man did all his life, books he wrote and the experience he had. What the man said was belonging not to this generation but for sure to coming generations to learn about their identity and story. The documentation included the following: Interviews with Mr. Hamdan, the Vice Mayor and head of engineering dept., Shots about Quseir, A Bedouin wedding, An Interview with the head of Cultural Center at Quseir. He gave a lot of valuable idea for the visitor center concerning public arts which includes (Cloths, tools, type of dances folklore and music), Recording Mr. Hamam Expiation which includes the history of Quseir, Recording some of domestic houses which have a special character, Interviews with groups of people from Quseir (different ages and backgrounds). Recording one of the Railway trucks and part of canon on the street on these sites before transferred to Visitor Centre, Quseir Cornish and police station, Mr. Hamam and his memories about the phosphate industry, Quseir Port before the 1960s, the modern history of the Fort, we walked together around the city went to the Sock, the police station, quarantine, old houses.

- Through the video recording and meeting with important community leaders as well as ordinary people of Quseir to discuss with them the contents of the visitor center displays of Quseir Fort, they gave ideas which were not considered by the consultants. Most of them would like to see part or section about Mr. Hamam. Both expiation and publications⁶ (library), they mentioned that he is the symbolic of Quseir. Also, there were many local games (*like ElTaf*) where they used to play in the past (50 years ago when the all city was divided into two teams), in addition to the show of the wedding tradition, the ceremony itself, and local songs and public arts.
- There was the issue of Student awareness of the project activities and they were oriented by summary of the Fort and actions of the projects.

Finally, the fortress has been largely restored, and became the home of a museum containing displays on local history, Red Sea mining, monasteries and trade. Cannons are once again pointing seawards from their original gun ports. The viewing platform was also restored with the help of illustrations from the *Déscription de l'Égypte* that had been commissioned by Napoleon. The fortress now houses the new Visitor Center containing displays on local history, archaeology and culture of the surrounding region.

6- The Project between Sustainability and Community Involvement

The visitor centre at the fort is transferring the role of the fort as a protection and defence function to have a moral defence function for heritage and identity. Heritage centres function in society to educate and to inspire pride in local heritage, often reinforcing communities' sense of identity. This visitor centre is also an eco-friendly tourist attraction, generating jobs and income for a community with minimal detriment to the local environment. This will make Quseir a unique Red Sea attraction as other regional tourist centres rely on natural rather than cultural resources⁷.

Once well on the outskirts, now dominates the town centre. An old wooden door opens onto a large space with cannons dating from the era of occupation by the Turks, French and British, when the fort was a major target. On one side lies a small boat built in the typical

local way for fishermen, whose trade largely depends on *fesikh* and *molouha* (salted fish). Lying beside it is the rudder of a very old boat, huge compared with more modern ones?

At the centre of the castle lies a coastguard's watchtower. This has lost its original stairs and now sports a new metal spiral staircase which leads to a wonderful view of the whole town of Quseir. Below, laid out on the ground, is a huge map of Graeco-Roman Egypt which covers the cistern in the courtyard underneath. This had been a dumping area for years and was in a fragile condition. It needed to be safeguarded, and it was this that gave rise to the idea for the map which forms a protective roof. It was rumoured that in front of the main door of the fortress was a secret underground tunnel linking the castle to ancient Quseir, eight kilometres north of Quseir. But no evidence of this tunnel has been found

Now, it is the responsibility of Supreme Council of Antiquities for all aspects of maintenance in the Fort after the hand-over of the Visitor Centre, Including tickets, paying of electricity and persons in charge. Investigate who will have the overall responsibility for the Fort. Actually, the restoration project and the preparation for the fort to be a visitor centre has finished its first phase by 1999, but opened for use only by the beginning of 2004. It was closed for about 5 years and the next phases of the project were delayed. One of Quseir's personal workers at the antiquities office in Islamic section (Mr. Shathli Zin El-Din) took the responsibilities of the Fort.

The next phase of the visitor centre (if budget available) is to be transferred into a museum. The proposed museum would employ the latest multimedia techniques for presenting Quseir's heritage. The museum environment would be highly visual and displays would be dynamic and interactive. Potential displays include a large model of the ancient harbour, a virtual reality display of what life was like in ancient Quseir, a reconstructed house from medieval times, a model of an excavation trench, a video diary of the excavations, a selection of stories from local residents, a table of artefacts for handling and a selection of artefacts from the excavations.

There should be also a main section for Mr. Hamam's studies and works. This is the sustainability for local identity, the man for the people was like a local hero, and the museum of him and his work will save their memories for him and for future generations.

To conclude, the fruits of this project extended beyond the limited target for conservation, to be a sustainable education center for Quseir and Red Sea. It brings the attention for studies in different fields including: archeology, history, tourism, architecture conservation and others. Also the value of people involvement is the key option for sustainability and with them the project ensures reliability.

References:

¹- Salama, A. "**Proposed Action Plan for Old Quseir: A Tourism Demonstration City**". Washington DC: United States Agency for International Development. USAID Publications, 1997.

²- Salama, A. "**Quseir Survey: Analytical Urban Study**". Unpublished Report. Cairo: Promotion of Environmentally Sustainable Tourism, EST Project, Winrock International, 1996.

³- Le Quesne, C. (1998) "**Creating a future out of the Past: The Work of the Antiquities Development Project at Quseir**", The Newsletter of the American Research Centre in Egypt (winter).

⁴- Hussien, K., "**Bonaparte and Quseir**" ElAhras Press, Cairo, Egypt, 1996.

⁵ - - <http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research/QuseirDev/>, "**Community Archaeology Report 2000 - Displaying the results from Quseir al Qadim**", university of Southampton, UK 2000.

⁶ - Hussien, K., "**Quseir is Calling**" ElAhras Press, Cairo, Egypt, 1987.

⁷- Samir, Haitham, "**Revitalization of Historic Urban Coastal Environments, A Case Study of Quseir City, Egypt**", M.Sc. Cairo Univ., November 2000.