

## Upper and Lower Guard Posts

A number of ostraka from Upper Egypt contain lists of various sorts of guards, listed by daily turns of duty and within those by « upper » and « lower » (ἄνω and κάτω) (1). Revel Coles, in publishing the Barns ostraka, remarked « No explanation of the 'upper'/'lower' classification is offered [sc. by me in *O. Amst.* or in *JARCE* 14 (1977) 69 ff.], nor do the present fragments help our understanding in this respect » (2). Indeed, the ostraka themselves do not give much help, taken in isolation from the terrain, and since the place to which the ostraka refer is unknown, the case may seem hopeless.

In editing and commenting on these ostraka, I argued that they pertained to the Roman military occupation of the Eastern Desert and of the roads through it which were used for caravan trade between the Nile and the ports of the Red Sea (3). Since that time, an expedition from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago has worked in Quseir al-Qadim, the ancient port of Leukos Limen, and at various points in its hinterland (4). My role as Greek (and Latin) epigraphist and papyrologist for this expedition made it possible for me to visit the site of Quseir al-Qadim in March, 1980, seeing the Koptos to Quseir road on the way and a number of the stations along that road (5). It was immediately obvious to me that the solution to « upper » and « lower » was visible at hand.

The Roman protection of the road rested on two types of installation : (1) square forts along the roads, capable of holding both a garrison and visiting caravans (both animals and people), and called *hydreumata* (6) ; and (2) small solid watchtowers on the lower slopes or hills of the

(1) See *O. Amst.* 8, 13, 15, and Coles' publication of the Barns ostraka in *ZPE* 39 (1980) 126-31.

(2) *ZPE* 39 (1980) 130.

(3) See *JARCE* 14 (1977) 67-86 and the introduction to *O. Florida*.

(4) See *Quseir al-Qadim 1978 : Preliminary Report*, ed. Donald S. Whitcomb and Janet H. Johnson (Cairo 1979).

(5) I am grateful to Janet Johnson and Donald Whitcomb for their invitation to assist with the excavation and for taking me to Quseir, and to the American Philosophical Society for the Grant-in-Aid which paid the expenses of my trip.

(6) Cf. A.-J. Reinach, *BSAA* 13 (1910) 115-117, cited in A. Bernand, *De Koptos à Kosseir* (Leiden 1972) 33-34.

mountains along the wadi system. These latter are described as follows by Steven E. Sidebotham, a member of the Quseir staff (1) :

*Hydreumata* along the Coptos-Leukos Limen route were in visual contact with one another through a series of watch towers spaced at uneven intervals atop the mountains flanking the road. One tower was always in sight of one or two others. These towers were fairly uniform in construction ; square, solidly built with no interior space, approximately 2-2 1/2 m. in height. They were built, like the *hydreumata*, of local field stones. Presumably soldiers sent out in rotation from the garrisons of the *hydreumata* stood watch by these towers, ascending them only when a signal had to be sent.

The plates show a typical example both from close up and in topographical perspective (2).

It is in connection with these towers, these *skopeloi*, that I believe we are to take the upper and lower guards. The upper post is certainly that at the foot of the tower on the hill or mountain ; the lower one logically must be on the valley floor. What were their actual functions? Sidebotham suggests that « their function was to signal the nearby *hydreumata* of approaching caravans or marauding nomads so that they could prepare reception or defence » (3). In part this is no doubt so, and the suggestion of Whitcomb and Johnson (cited by Sidebotham), that « the purpose of these towers was to signal Coptos when the merchant ships arrived at Leukos Limen » may also have part of the truth, as the intervisibility of the towers suggests.

From the point of view of local policing work, however, another possibility fits better with the presence on most days in the lists of a « lower » guard too : signalling back and forth from tower to valley floor about small security problems. The guard on the hill could see farther along the wadi floor than a guard on that floor, and small-scale banditry or marauding would be visible from on high before it was down below. But the guard on the hill, apart from whatever obligation he had to stay put to receive and transmit signals, could not easily descend to

(1) *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa, 30 B.C. - A.D. 217* (Diss. Ann Arbor 1981) 109. I am grateful to Professor Sidebotham for letting me see a copy of his dissertation.

(2) See also A. Bernand (p. 125, n. 6), pl. 12, fig. 1.

(3) Loc. cit.

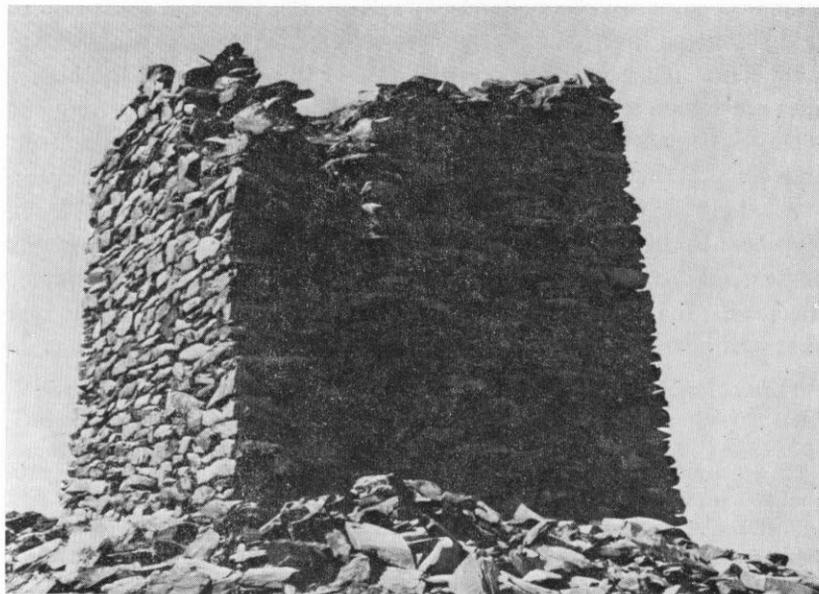


PLATE 1. — Watchtower above Wadi Hammamat, close-up.



PLATE 2. — View of Wadi Hammamat floor from watchtower.

take on a suspicious character below. Even the lowest of these towers is high enough that it takes, by my own experience, at least a quarter-hour climb (none too easy) to get down to the valley, and the higher ones must take a lot longer. Nor should we despise the police value of a single Roman soldier, who was often the sole security force in an area <sup>(1)</sup>.

All along the route, therefore — and no doubt along these wadi roads elsewhere in the Eastern Desert — upper and lower stations for guards make good sense from the point of view of routine detailed security of the road. The texts and topography thus, as so often, illuminate one another.

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(1) See my remarks in *JARCE* (supra, n. 3). Sidebotham, 138 n. 101, suggests a minimum force of four men. We do find in some of the Amsterdam ostraka lists with stations labelled I, II, III, IV (*O. Amst.* 8 and 9), which may reflect such larger detachments. The « upper »/« lower » ostraka, however, involve two men only on any given day, although in *O. Barns* 6 there are some days where both men seem assigned to one or the other station, if this is not just a scribal slip; cf. *ZPE* 39 (1980) 130 no. 6.5-8 n.