

## References

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FRANK FÖRSTER. *Der Abu Ballas-Weg. Eine pharaonische Karawanenroute durch die Libysche Wüste* (Africa Praehistorica 28). 2015. 620 pages, 376 colour and b&w illustrations, 23 tables. Köln: Heinrich Barth Institute; 978-3-927688-42-1 hardback €78.



Roads are a source of endless fascination and obsession for many of us, from Route 66 and the Pacific Coast Highway,

to the Ridgeway and the Via Appia. Roads can also define and mould us—my first eight years were framed by the Coast Road stretching between Newcastle upon Tyne and Whitley Bay, passing by pit heaps, pubs, a famous cigarette factory and the Battle Hill housing estate (sadly not named after a battle), *en route* between the city and the sea. The Abu Ballas caravan route passes through 400km of somewhat less hospitable terrain in the Eastern Sahara, from the Dakhla Oasis in the north to the Gilf Kebir in the south (and probably beyond that, towards the water source at Gebel Uweinat). Frank Förster's dense and rewarding monograph presents us with an account not only of the route itself but also of its ancient travellers and more recent explorers. The route is characterised by some of the earliest significant archaeological traces of trans-Saharan traffic so far surveyed or excavated, including indications of groups both from the Nile Valley and of 'local' Bedouin and others from the desert oases.

Back in 2003, in a very brief article about the site of Abu Ballas ('father of jars'), and its depot

of more than 100 intact pottery vessels, Förster, and his colleague Rudolph Kuper, noted that: "The purpose(s) and destination of this ancient pharaonic road, provisionally labelled the 'Abu Ballas Trail', still remain obscure and will require further research" (Förster & Kuper 2003: 167). Twelve years later we have Förster's definitive volume, documenting what appears to be every grain of sand and donkey dropping along the trail. Many of the staging posts or depots that form a chain, at predictable intervals along the trail, were first discovered by such illustrious figures as the Hungarian explorer László Almásy (the inspiration for Michael Ondaatje's 'English Patient'), John Ball (the intrepid British geologist and mining engineer who rediscovered Abu Ballas itself in 1918) and Carlo Bergmann (a German explorer still actively surveying the eastern Sahara).

The book is divided into three main parts. The first outlines the basic components of the road and the kinds of material that define it (primarily rock art, pottery, lithics, botanical and faunal remains); the second explores the various roles probably played by the route; and the third examines the changing function and significance of the road in historical context, from the late third millennium BC through to the early Islamic period (although the vast bulk of the Pharaonic-period artefacts date from the Old Kingdom through to the Ramessid period, c. 2800–1000 BC).

Given that the camel (specifically the dromedary) does not appear to have been present in Egypt's deserts until around the ninth century BC (although there is some debate on this), one of the other fascinating aspects of Förster's study of the Abu Ballas trail is the clear indication that the ancient Egyptians plying this route were using donkeys. Förster provides photographic evidence of well-preserved and relatively straight donkey tracks (figs 64–67), contrasted with an example of a meandering camel track along the main route between the Dakhla Oasis and the Nile Valley (fig. 68). There is contemporary ethnographic evidence for the existence of donkey caravans much farther south, in northern Sudan, where large groups of donkeys (some load-bearing) are still sometimes led over a distance of 900km, from the Debba Bend of the Nile to El-Fasher in Darfur. The presence of donkeys along the Abu Ballas trail is also indicated by the survival of excrement (pp. 281–82, fig. 246), one instance of which is among a small group of organic materials that have been radiocarbon-dated; others include late Old Kingdom charcoal

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(2210±50 cal BC) through to a date-stone from around the time of Ramesses X (1060±60 cal BC). Finally, there are Ramessid storage jars (c. 1300–1000 BC) bearing pot-marks in the form of charming incised sketches of donkeys.

The 30 or so discrete archaeological sites that make up the main points along the trail are above all characterised by the survival of pottery vessels of various dates, including the so-called Sheikh Muftah ceramics used by nomadic pastoralists roughly contemporary with the late Old Kingdom Egyptians. The Egyptian vessels are mostly quite large closed forms, presumably for water storage, and it is notable that the most frequent types of container are, chronologically, also among the earliest, that is, Sixth Dynasty and First Intermediate Period (c. 2200–2100 BC). Not surprisingly, the latter are strikingly similar to those excavated by a French team at the major Old Kingdom town of Ayn Asil, in the Dakhla Oasis. The use of large groups of pottery vessels as ‘water depots’ substituting for wells or springs, in order to allow the crossing of barren desert regions, is mentioned by Herodotus (Book III, 6–7), and it seems that the Abu Ballas trail is perhaps our best archaeologically attested instance of such a strategy. There are also some sporadically surviving unusual artefacts (pp. 286–310) that provide invaluable insights into the day-to-day operation of the Abu Ballas donkey caravans, including substantial fragments of a pack-bag woven from plant materials, fragments of leather and a sandstone *Senet* gaming board found near a cave entrance at Abu Ballas itself. The fact that the latter was identified and photographed in October 2000, but then subsequently mysteriously removed, is just one of many indications of the increasing vulnerability of the sites along the Abu Ballas trail.

The current severe dip in Egyptian tourism, although disastrous economically and socially, has at least significantly reduced the frequency of desert safari trips, which seem to have been responsible for a great deal of the looting of sites that were previously protected primarily by their remote locations. Desert routes such as the Abu Ballas trail are very fragile resources, making the work of dedicated desert archaeologists such as Förster all the more crucial.

## Reference

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GILBERT J. GORSKI & JAMES E. PACKER. *The Roman Forum: a reconstruction and architectural guide*. 2015. xxii+437 pages, 247 colour and 60 b&w illustrations. New York: Cambridge University Press; 978-0-521-19244-6 hardback £150.



With this volume—a type of guide-book—Gilbert Gorski and James Packer set out to treat the Roman Forum as an architectural entity, detailing the relationships between its many monuments

and buildings. The result is a lavish volume, packed full of colour illustrations; it is also large, weighing almost three kilograms. Production quality is thus to the fore, even if it comes at a premium in terms of price.

Rather than a conventional archaeological guidebook, the focus is primarily on the provision of architectural reconstruction drawings. This format links to the tradition of architectural drawing and reconstruction that lay at the heart of the work of the *Prix de Rome* scholars from the seventeenth century onwards, and the production, in the nineteenth century, of the lavish volumes by Luigi Canina (e.g. 1851). The latter’s work included images, both of the standing remains and their architectural reconstruction. By the end of that century, however, the veracity of his reconstruction drawings had come into question. Murray’s (1888) *Handbook of Rome and its environs* stated categorically: “the imaginative archaeology of Canina [...] can do nothing but mislead the student” (p. 21). In the process, the very practice of reconstruction itself had been brought into question; as Flint (2000: 2–3, 139–66) points out, the unseen proved to be problematic because you cannot know what you cannot see.

Although this book seeks to show the architectural relationships within the Forum, it only goes some way to addressing this issue. The authors define the Forum in terms of its component monuments, providing a section on each; for example, the various