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SALAH EL-DIN'S FORT ON RAS EL-GINDI IN SINAI⁽¹⁾

(WITH 8 PLATES)

BY

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OF THE GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF EGYPT.

INTRODUCTION.

The object of this short communication is to place on record a monument from a part of the world which has figured much in ancient and mediæval history, yet with very few remains to record its various incidents. Hardly one of the great world conquerors, from the days of Ancient Egypt to this day, has not at one time or other crossed Sinai either one way or another. Yet very few of them ever left their marks. Another point that makes our little monument worthy of note, is that it belongs to that period of history when all the aspirations and activities of all the civilized world, Mohamedan and Christian, were centred round the Near East as a whole and Egypt and Palestine in particular. Anything that may throw light on that period of the world's history, should be very welcome to its students.

I do not, however, claim to have undertaken a complete archæological research, nor to give here a full and comprehensive description of the place; this I leave to specialists and others interested, that may have the time and the means to do it.

The following remarks are based on notes obtained hurriedly during two short visits of not more than an hour each.

⁽¹⁾ Communication faite à l'Institut d'Égypte dans sa séance du 12 juin 1920.

GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION.

Ras el-Gindi (راس الجندی) is a little hill about 2150 feet above sea-level and standing some 500 feet above the surrounding flat plain. Its peculiar shape and commanding position make it well distinguished some 30 kilometres away, and it serves as an important land-mark to those travelling in that corner of the desert. It is really an isolated spur which at some remote period was part of the great limestone plateau of Gebel Raha (جبل راحا) which forms such a forbidding barrier between the central part of North Sinai and the Gulf of Suez (see map of North Sinai, pl. 1).

Ras el-Gindi stands at the head of Wadi el-Bruk (وادی البروك) one of the main branches of Wadi el-Arish (وادی العريش) which occupies a wide plain extending over all the central portion of North Sinai. To the south runs Wadi Sudr (وادی صدر) which breaches the Raha Range and opens an access on to the coastal plain of the Gulf of Suez. In Wadi Sudr and only five kilometres away from the fort is Ain Sudr (عين صدر), a natural spring of good water which is by far the best and most prolific water-source in the whole district. The old pilgrim's road *Darb-el-Haj* which runs from Suez via Nekhl to Aqaba runs less than 20 kilometres from the fort and with the exception of a rather rugged track down Wadi Sudr, it is the only road leading from the Gulf of Suez into North Sinai and Arabia.

Thus from its proximity to the greatest source of water in North Sinai, and its command of the only routes, this little hill is in a most favourable position from a soldier's point of view.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION.

Let us now approach closer to Ras el-Gindi. We find it indeed imposing; conical, with a flat top and very steep cliffs on all sides. The main part of the hill, like the rest of Gebel Raha is made up of chalk, certainly unscalable on its east, south and west sides; whilst on the north and north-west the slope is less and may be climbed, though with difficulty. The capping layer of limestone, weathering along vertical joints, adds to the advantages of the defenders; and remembering the primitive methods of

warfare followed in mediæval times, we can imagine how impregnable that little fort must have been (see photograph pl. II).

Following a narrow zigzagging track, possibly in parts the remnant of the old track, up the north and north-west slope we get near the top to a wall 2 or 3 metres thick of dry masonry (that is, without mortar) which with a moat behind it 5 to 6 metres wide, surround the top on the north and north-west sides adding an extra protection and thus making up for the lost advantage in slope (see plan of Fort, pl. III).

Crossing the moat, we climb up a mass of tumbled down masonry instead of the flight of steps which once existed and of which only a small part remains intact. A ten-metre climb takes us to the main wall and the door. Let us pause here for a bit, for though the door from its ruined state does not give a safe access to the interior, yet its flat arch is interesting and bears an important inscription (see illustration of inscription, pl. IV).

In the centre of the upper half is the inscription slab and on either side of it are depicted in relief the sword and shield of Saladin. I do not know whether Mahomedan Sultans had always been in the habit of adopting such coats-of-arms or whether this is a new departure of Saladin's after his various encounters with the crusaders. The lower part has on its central block a relief of the six-sided star which seems to have been a favourite sign of Saladin, as it is seen on many of his coins, and no doubt, on other buildings of his period. The rest are limestone slabs well-shaped and interlocked in the fashion that is so familiar in most old Arab buildings and even used at the present day. The inscription was so roughly cut, and the stone so covered with dust and lichen that I could not decipher the whole of it in the time at my disposal. What I got, however, is enough, in as much as it gives the name of the owner and the date it was completed. It runs as follows :

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ وَصَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ اللَّهُ

In the name of GOD the Merciful and Compassionate and God's prayers on Mohamed (His Prophet?).

ملك مولانا الملك الناصر السلطان بن السلطان الاسلام والمسلمين

Belongs to our Lord the King Strong in Aid (missing word) the Sultan son of Sultan of El-Islam and Moslems.

Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte, t. II.

صلاح الدين يوسف بن ايوب خليل امير المؤمنين

Salah el-Din Youssif son of Ayub friend of the Commander of the Faithful.

(Three lines follow but not legible.)

في جمادى الاخير سنة ثلاث وثمانين وخمسمائة

In Gamad el-Akher, the year five hundred and eighty three A. H.

Thus the name of the Sultan owner is that of the famous Saladin and the date 1187 A. D.

Climbing to a high point amongst the ruins of the old wall we see an elongated structure extending in a north-east to south-west direction with its south-western end practically half a hexagon, while in the north it goes to a mere point. It measures about 150 to 200 metres in length and is only 100 metres in its widest part. It is surrounded by a well built wall 2 metres thick of which only the lower half is still standing. The corners are strengthened by buttresses sometimes square and sometimes rounded, and no doubt each buttress supported a tower in the usual style.

All round the walls are little cells which must have served as living rooms for the garrison, whilst some of them were fitted as baths with stone troughs and others as kitchens. In the northern end, I noticed an arched break in the wall which suggests the presence of another door, but that part of the wall was so broken down that this could not be verified.

In the centre are various buildings both above and below ground which are mostly broken down and some are only a heap of masonry. Five places are, however, in a tolerable state of preservation and merit consideration :

1 ⁽¹⁾. An underground hall 5 metres \times 6 metres and 5 metres deep. It has two pointed arches which supported the roof, which is now all broken down. The entrance is not clearly seen and the place may have either served as store-room for provisions or as a winter meeting-hall (see photo pl. V).

⁽¹⁾ See plan of Fort (pl. III).

2. A roofless mosque with a *qibla* in its eastern end to mark direction of prayer. This *qibla* was ornamented in plaster and bears the *Bismillah el-Rahman el-Rahim*.

3. An underground *Sahrig* or water reservoir consisting of a chamber 6 metres \times 10 metres and is sunk into the ground to a depth of 5 or 6 metres. Its walls, roof and floor are coated with a layer of good plaster. It has two openings: a square opening at the eastern end leading into a narrow trough ending in a spout through which the water was lead into the reservoir. On either side of the trough is a flight of narrow steps leading to the bottom; obviously for the purpose of cleaning. The other opening is a narrow rounded one in the roof and was obviously used for drawing out the water. Above the first opening was an inscription slab of which I could only distinguish the «Bismillah» as well as the word *sahrig* and the name of «Salah el-Dunya wa el-Din». The style of this inscription was identical with that already referred to at the gateway.

4. The next is the best preserved structure in the whole place. It is a combined mosque on the top and a *sahrig* below; an excellent arrangement as the mosque would always be kept clean and so avoids any contamination getting to the water. It has also the advantage of sheltering the water and keeping it cool (a very important consideration in the heat of summer). The reservoir is the exact copy of the one just described but is in better preservation and does not possess an inscription.

The mosque above, measures about 12 metres \times 6 metres, and has a door in the west end approached by two or three steps. The *qibla* in the east is well ornamented with pink coloured plaster with a «Bismillah» in decorative style (see photograph pl. VI).

The mosque has two windows on the north side and one on the south. The south-west corner was evidently occupied by a small minaret, as evidenced by a small square foundation on the outside with two or three steps leading up to it.

On the right side of the *qibla* are signs showing the previous existence of a few steps leading up to a small platform which served as a *minbar* or pulpit. In the wall next to the *minbar* is a wall cupboard where the *Imam* stored his copy of the Koran and his prayer books.

Above the door on the outside was a tablet with an inscription of which I could read the following :

بناء استعمله الملك الناصر صلاح الدنيا والدين الملك العادل سيف الدين

Building used by the King, strong in aid, the honour of the world and religion, King Adel Seif el-Din.

في ذى القعدة سنة ثمان وتسعين وخمماية

In Zul Quada the year 598 A. H.

This shows that this addition was made fifteen years later than the rest of the building and was used by the then ruling Sultan El-Adil Seif-el-Din or « Saphadin » of the crusaders.

5. A large underground hall some 15 metres square with a compound roof of four vaulted arches. The nature of this structure remains a mystery to me, as its dilapidated condition did not allow me to descend and examine it. It may have acted as a refectory for the garrison (see pl. VII).

Amongst the debris the whole place is littered with glazed and unglazed pottery. Some pieces of broken hand-mills like those used by the local Arabs for grinding corn were also found. A limestone mortar and the stone troughs mentioned before as seen in the baths complete the furniture observed. There is, however, no reason why more systematic search should not lead to the discover of more valuable remains like coins, arms, etc.

WATER SUPPLY.

As you well know, the most important problem that confronts all workers in desert regions, is the water question; more so in the case of a general of an army who has to find supplies for a large number of men and animals. Ain Sudr which is only five kilometres away and which no doubt yielded then, as it yields at present, enough to supply an unlimited number of camels and men, had, no doubt, greatly simplified the problem. Those in charge, however, were anxious to get some source nearer at hand. They must have been greatly impressed by the amount of rain water

that came down at times during the winter causing big *seils* in many of the *wadis*. They therefore set about to preserve as much of this as they could; and selecting a deep *wadi* running close to the fort on its north side, they erected a dam across it. This is about 20 metres long and 10 metres in height. Its thickness ranges from one metre at the top to 5 or 6 at the base. It is strengthened at the middle by two conical buttresses. The fact that it stands to-day almost intact in spite of the many *seils* that have rushed down that *wadi* is in itself good enough testimony to its durability. The *wadi* behind the dam is now silted up to the top with the material brought down by the stream (see photograph pl. VIII).

Small buildings scattered round the dam must have been used as houses by the guards.

The water from Ain Sudr or from the dam had to be carried on camels or horses to the foot of the cliff and thence carried by men up to the top where it was stored in the reservoirs «*sahrigs*» — a wearisome job that must have been more tedious to the garrison than even warfare itself.

HISTORICAL.

We may well ask ourselves now why did Salah el-Din undertake the building of such a fort miles away into the heart of the desert, and why did his brother El-Adil add to it and come and visit it himself fifteen years later? To help me to answer these questions I shall quote an incident recorded by most of the historians of the time, «Ibn el-Athir» and others. I give it from Stanley Lane Poole's book entitled *Saladin*.

Reginald of Châtillon Lord of *Karak* (a fort on the southern end of the Dead Sea) was one of Saladin's worst enemies among the crusaders. He conceived the project of invading Arabia to destroy the tomb of the Prophet at Medina and raze to the ground the holy *Kaaba* at Mekka. To attain his end, he bribed the Bedouins of Sinai, and with their treacherous aid, transported his ships in sections from Karak to the Gulf of Aqaba. This fleet he sent to sack the port of *Aydhab* on the African shore of the Red Sea opposite Jedda, while with two vessels he blocked Eyla (the present Aqaba). The Egyptian fleet was soon in hot pursuit and the admiral Lulu after easily relieving the blockade of Eyla, came up with the body of the

enemy's fleet near El-Haura, a small port on the Red Sea whence they intended to march on Medina. The sight of the Egyptian squadron drove them hurriedly on shore; and they made for the mountains.

Lulu mounted his sailors on the horses of the Badawis and catching up the enemy in a narrow gorge cut them to pieces — Reginald escaping but most of his men were killed. The Spanish Arab Ibn Jubeir was at Alexandria in May 1183 when some of the prisoners taken were brought in, lashed on camels with their faces to the tails, amid the beating of the drums and the cheering of the populace. Never, he says, had there been such consternation as when the news of the raid reached Egypt. People told each other, trembling, how the accursed lord of Karak had bribed the Bedawis to carry his ships across the desert to the Red Sea; how he had burnt sixteen Arab vessels, seized a pilgrim ship off Jedda, landed at Aydhab and captured a caravan that had journeyed from Qos on the Nile, every soul of which was massacred; and how after making prizes of two ships from Yemen, laden with stores for the holy cities, he had crossed over to Arabia with the fell design of sacking Medina and dragging the blessed Prophet out of his grave. Never was such appalling news! Allah be praised, Lulu, the captain of the fleet, caught the miscreants with his swift vessels and the catastrophe was averted.

Now, is it possible that a man like Saladin was going to let such an incident pass unheeded? Would he not take measures to guard against its repetition? Both Franks and Bedouins had to be punished and watched; to deal with Reginald he attacked him at his fort; but to watch the Arabs he would have to have a strong-hold in their own desert. Now if orders were issued in 1183 or 1184 such a structure would need at least three or four years to complete and its completion in 1187 would thus agree with the date in the doorway inscription.

At that time Saladin had already moved his seat of rule from Cairo to Damascus but had charged his brother Adil with the affairs of Egypt. It is quite conceivable, therefore, that when Saladin gave orders as to the measures to be carried out in Sinai, it fell to the lot of Adil to carry them out. Adil then takes a personal interest in Sinai and the fort, and so when 15 years later he is himself Sultan after the death of Saladin (1193) he still maintains his garrison there, and wishing to perpetuate his name in a place

in which he took so much interest he orders the building of a mosque and *sahrig* which he visits himself in 1203.

CONCLUSIONS.

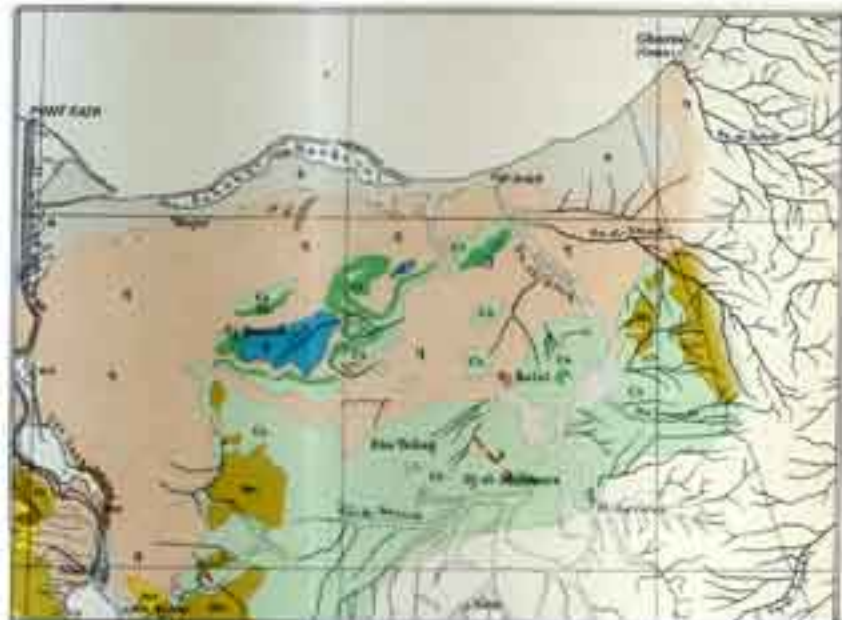
I think that enough has now been brought to light which should excite the curiosity of specialists in Arab antiquities to urge the authorities to send an expedition to the place with a view of undertaking a systematic study of the fort, and rescue at least the inscriptions from the certain decay that would otherwise befall them.

HASSAN SADEK.

CARTE GÉOLOGIQUE DU SINAI SEPTENTRIONAL



D'APRÈS LA CARTE GÉOLOGIQUE INTERNATIONALE DE L'AFRIQUE



D'APRÈS LES DERNIÈRES RECHERCHES

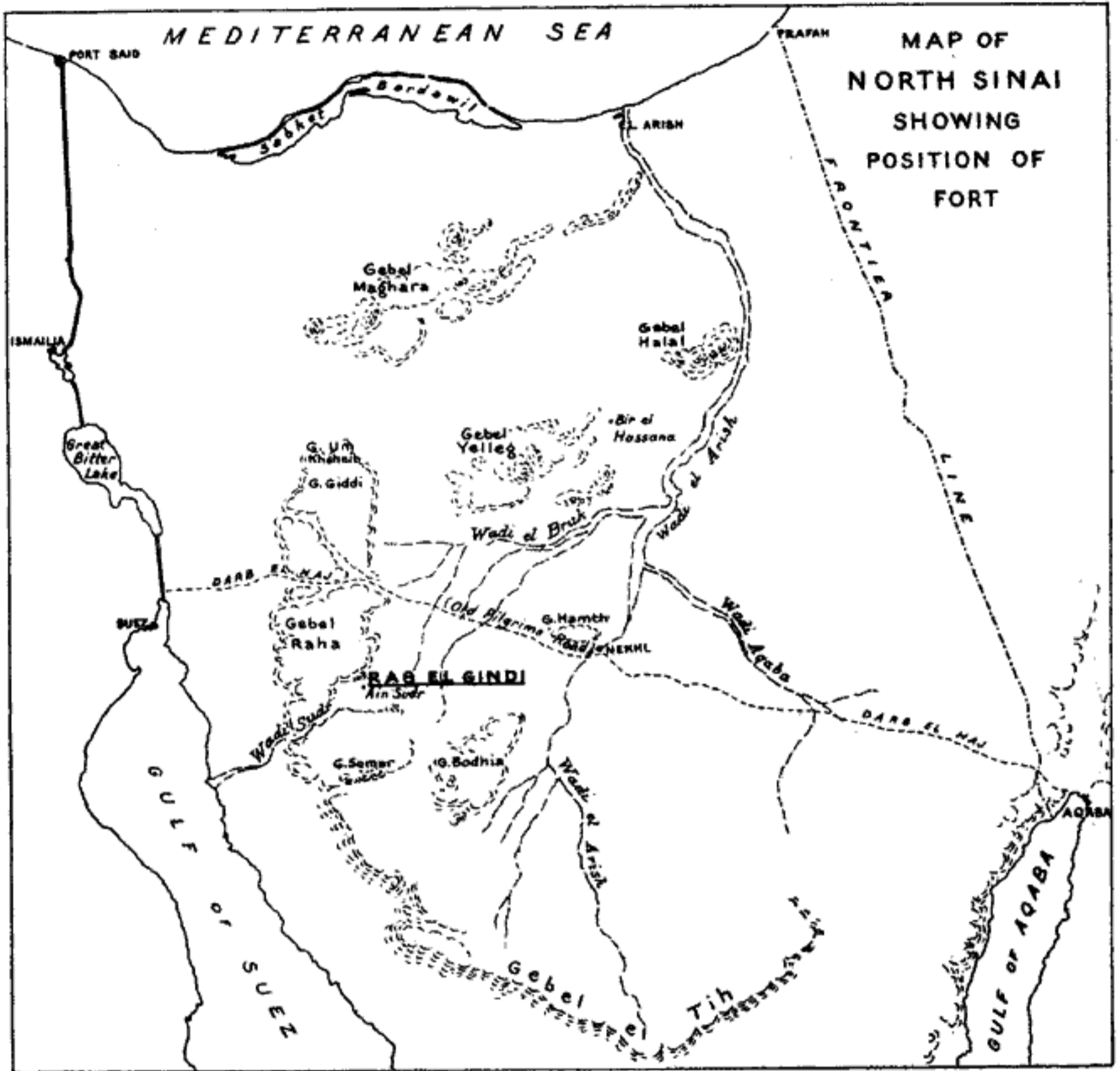
ÉCHELLE 1 : 150000

GAMME DES COULEURS

	<i>Moderne</i>
	<i>Quaternaire</i>
	<i>Pliocène</i>
	<i>Miocène</i>
	<i>Oligocène</i>

	<i>Eocène</i>
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	<i>Crétacé supérieur</i>
	<i>Crétacé inférieur</i>
	<i>Jurassique</i>
	<i>Rochers basaltiques</i>
	<i>Rochers granitiques</i>



MAP OF
NORTH SINAI
SHOWING
POSITION OF
FORT

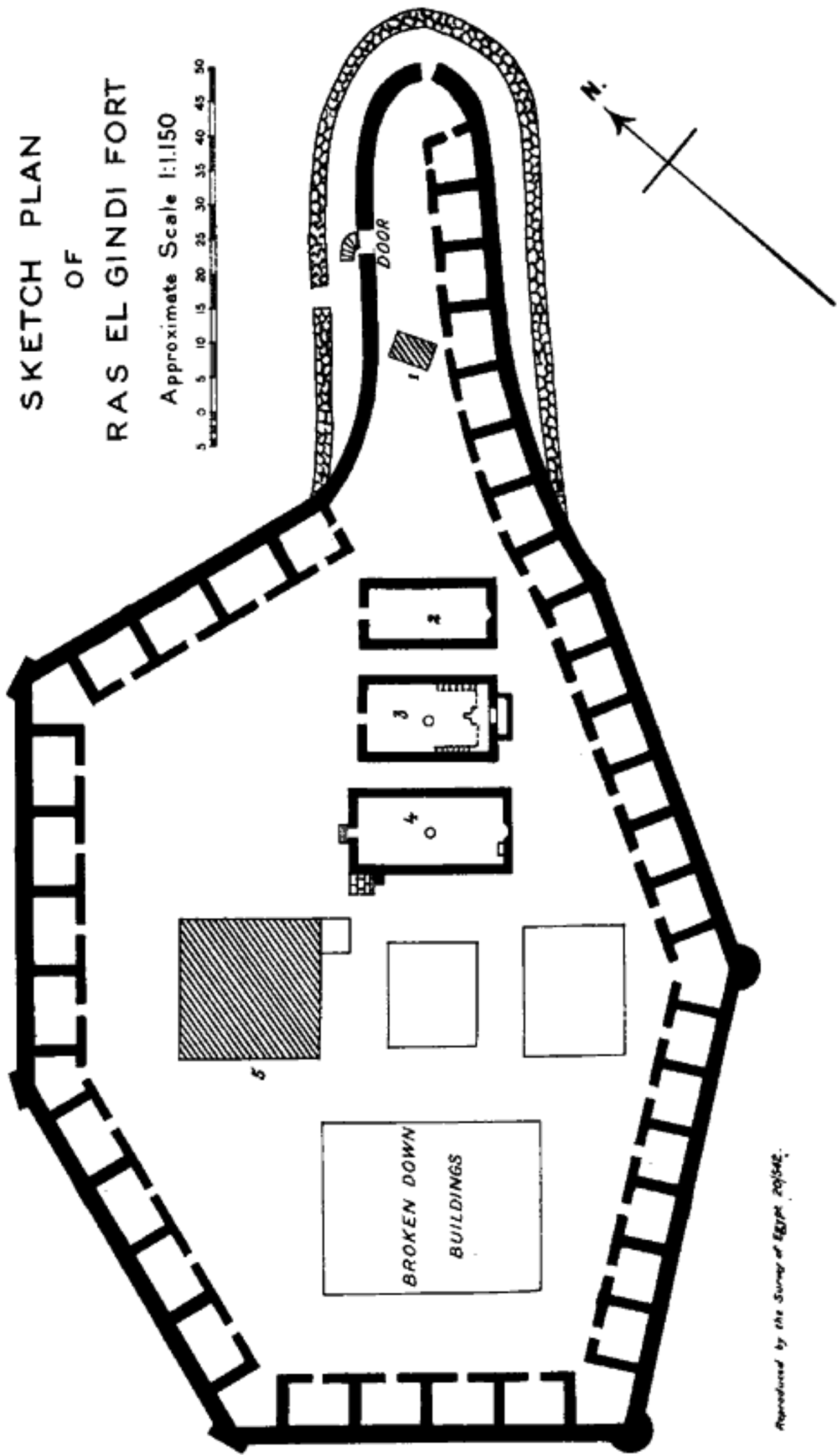
Reproduced by the Survey of Egypt 20/542.

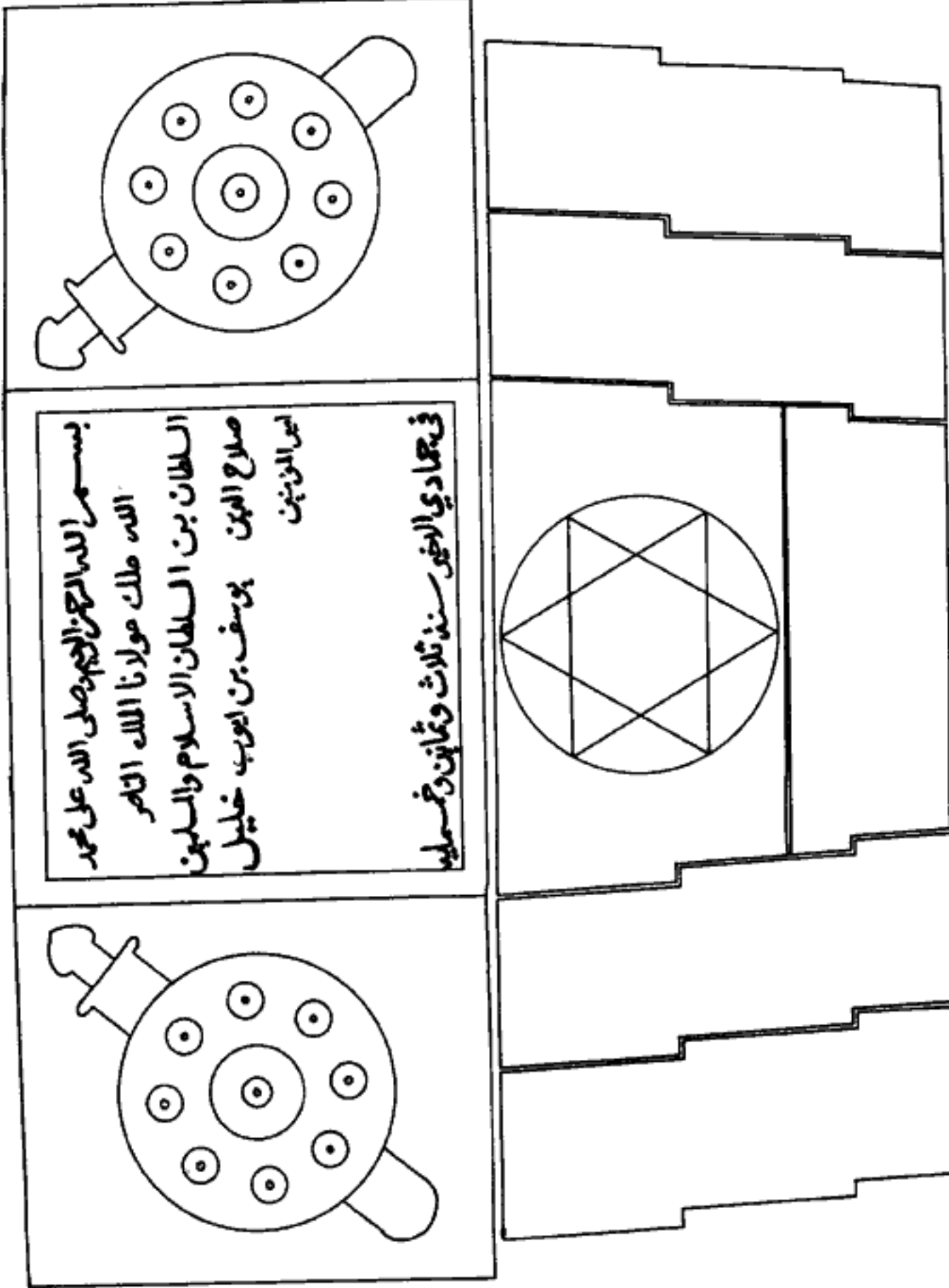
SCALE 1:2,000,000

Kilometres 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 110 Kilometres



View of Ras-el-Gindi seen from the east.

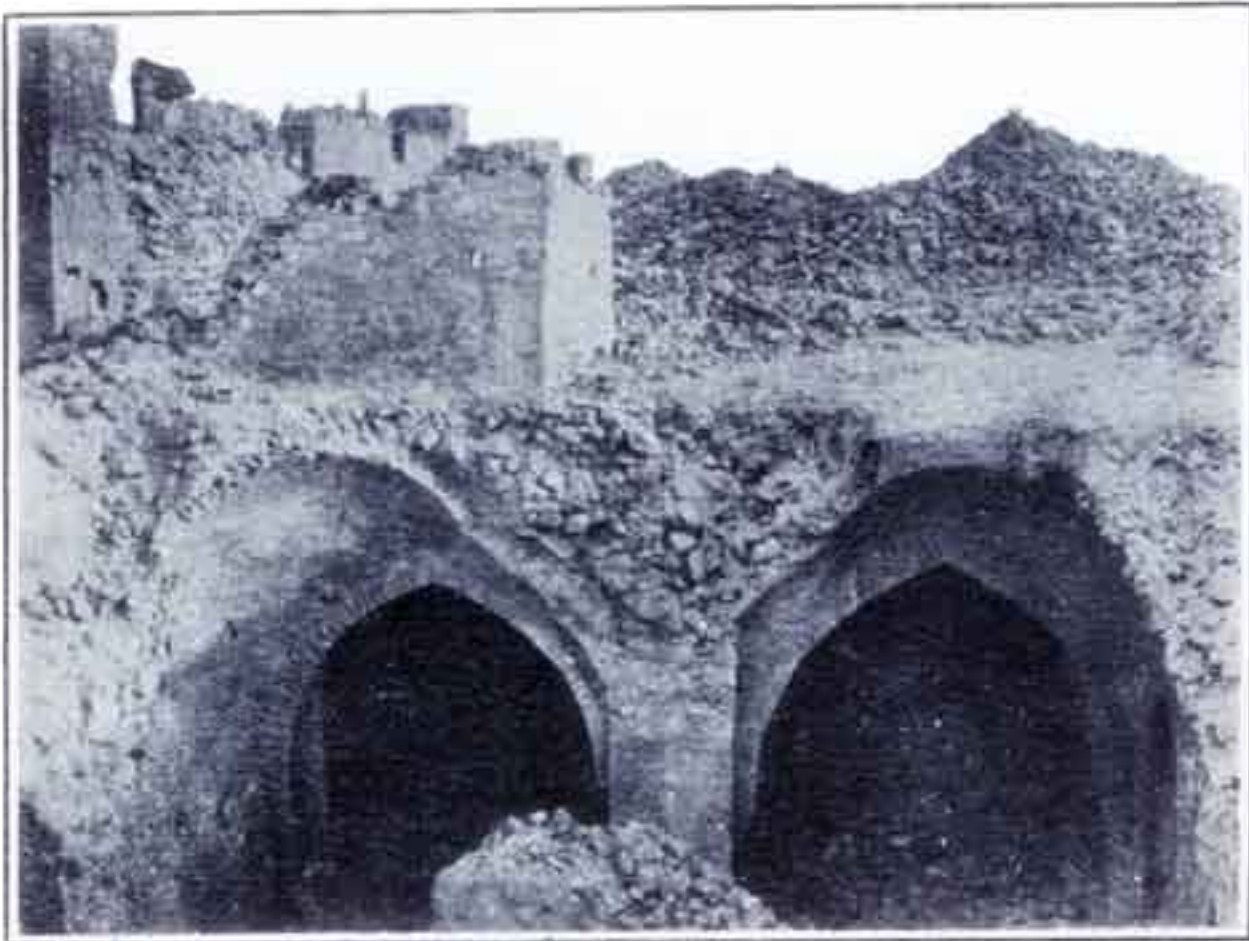




بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ
اللّٰهُ طَلَّكَ عَوْلَانَا اللّٰهُ التَّصَرُّ
السُّلْطَانِ بَيْنَ السُّلْطَانِ الْاِسْلَامِ وَالسُّلْطَانِ
صَلَّاحِ الْعَرَبِ یُوسُفَ بْنِ اَبِیْ یُوْسُفَ خَلِیْلِ
اِمْرِ الْوَزَنِیْنِ
فِي عَمَّادِي الْبُوْغُرِ سَنَةَ ثَلَاثٍ وَثَمَانِیْنَ وَخَمْسِ مِائَةٍ

Part of arch on top of main entrance to Fort.

Reproduced by the Survey of Egypt 2012.



Large underground hall near southern end; marked 5 on Plan (plate III).



Underground hall near entrance of Fort; marked 1 on Plan (plate III).



Qibla of mosque built by El-Adil; marked 4 on Plan (plate III).



Dam across wadi north-west of Fort.