

AKORIS: An Archaeology of the Chora in Ptolemaic Egypt

Yoshiyuki SUTO

Successive investigations at Akoris and nearby quarry in Middle Egypt have yielded archaeological data of great value regarding the changing rural condition under the Ptolemaic rule. The excavations at the northernmost area in the late 1990s made it clear that this politically insignificant settlement had close economic relationship with the metropolis of Alexandria through the shipment of local architectural limestone blocks. Furthermore, the investigations at a huge limestone quarry near New Minya, formerly called Zawiet Sultan, have provided important insights into the organization of the quarrying activities as well as the identity of the workmen.

Introduction

It has often been observed that the fundamental structure of the ancient Egyptian society was so durable in nature that any sudden political change such as the Macedonian takeover at the end of the fourth century B.C. did not cause profound effects on the life of the inhabitants in the countryside, and that the structural changes of local community took place only gradually under the Ptolemaic rule.¹ But in spite of the great progress of the study based on the contemporary documents such as Greek papyri and ostraka,² the archaeological evidence on the material culture of the local communities located far from the political centers such as Alexandria or Ptolemais has not attracted enough attention in the course of reconstructing the history of Ptolemaic Egypt. In this light, the results of our archaeological investigations at Akoris, which occupied only an inconspicuous place in the political history, will contribute to our understanding on the diachronic change of life in a local community of Hellenistic Egypt.

Excavations at Akoris

The archaeological site of Akoris is situated about 230 km south of Cairo, on the eastern side of the Nile.³ The major archaeological sites in the Greco-roman period around this site

- 1 This paper was read at the symposium titled “The Archaeology of the Hellenistic Period in Egypt: Current Trends and Future Prospects” held at the department of classics at Yale University on October 13, 2011. I am deeply grateful to Joe Manning and other participants in the symposium, amongst others Mark Depauw and Sue Alcock, for fruitful discussion.
- 2 R. S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri. Writing Ancient History*, London, 1995.
- 3 The Paleological Association of Japan, Inc. Egyptian Committee, *Akoris: Report of the Excavations at Akoris in Middle Egypt 1981–1992*, Kyoto, 1995. Now the original toponym, or the personal name which gave its name to the place, seems to have been Hakoris rather than Akoris, though I will retain the name Akoris which is so well known among the academics. For Hakoris, see W. Clarysse, Hakoris, an Egyptian Nobleman and his family, *Ancient Society* 22, 1991, 235–43.

include *el-Ashmunein*, ancient Hermopolis, about 45 km to the south and *el-Bahnasa*, ancient Oxyrhynchos, 40 km to the north. But perhaps the most famous site in the vicinity of Akoris is Beni Hassan with its beautiful wall paintings of the Middle Kingdom date.

A conspicuous rock to the south of the modern village of *Tehneh el-Gabel* serves as a good landmark of this site (Pl. 1), and the vast ruins of the ancient city, which measures about 600 m north-south and 300 m east-west, spread on a flat plateau below it. Although the earliest levels have not yet been fully confirmed due to the deep accumulation of debris, it seems fairly certain that this settlement area had been inhabited from the Old Kingdom to the Coptic Period.⁴ Recent excavations at the southern slope of this rock show that this particular area was densely used for habitation from the Third Intermediate Period to the Late Period.⁵ Numerous rock-cut tombs of various periods open their mouths on the lower slope of the rock and surrounding cliff, testifying the long occupation of this strategic point in ancient times. Recently a series of large quarries have been discovered to the north and south of the site area on the craggy range of the Eastern Desert.⁶

The identification of this site with ancient Akoris, which appears also in *Geography* of Ptolemy, depends on the assumption that the modern name of the nearby village, *Tehneh*, descends from the toponym *Tenis* in the Mochites toparchy of the Hermopolite nome. Through the papyrological documents concerning the activity Dionysios, son of Kephalas, we know that this village was also called Akoris in Greek (but always in genitive form *Akoreos* or *Akorios*) in the late second century B.C.⁷

The site was found in the early 19th century and was investigated by French scholars in the beginning of the 20th century.⁸ After a long interval, a Japanese mission sent by the Paleological Association of Japan in Kyoto conducted the first series of systematic excavations from 1981 to 1992 in order to elucidate the history of this settlement. The excavations were centered mainly on the area in front of the large Middle Kingdom rock-cut tombs reused as Roman temples at the southwestern edge of the settlement area, and the so-called Sarapeion located at the center of the site. But the material evidences recovered from these excavations were limited mostly to that of the Roman and Coptic times. Actually Hellenistic artifacts, including a typical stamped handle of a Rhodian amphora, had been found from the bottom of the deep trench to the east of the Sarapeion dug in 1982⁹, but the historical significance of them did not attract attention at that time.

It was thus our great excitement to find a substantial Hellenistic deposit during the excavation of large unfinished limestone blocks at the north edge of the city area of Akoris in 1997 (Pl. 2), when the Akoris Archaeological Project resumed the investigation of the site in

4 The surface of the settlement area is largely covered with shards of pottery of Coptic date. Recently S. Tsujimura excavated a number of shaft tombs of Old Kingdom period at the western area of the site. Preliminary Report Akoris 2007, 14–18; Preliminary Report Akoris 2008, 13–16.

5 Preliminary Report Akoris 2010, 4–12 and earlier reports.

6 Preliminary Report Akoris 2003, 20, Fig. 16.

7 E. Boswinkel et P. W. Pestman, *Les archives privées de Dionysios, fils de Kephalas (P. L. Bat. 22): textes grecs et démotiques*, Leiden, 1982.

8 For the earlier explorations, see É. Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques et latines d'Akoris*, Caire, 1988, ix–xx.

9 Preliminary Report Akoris 1982, 12, Fig. 11.

present organization. A large amount of Hellenistic pottery, both domestic and imported, was recovered in the burnt soil layer, which filled the area adjacent to the lower part of the stone blocks.¹⁰ There were also lamps and terracotta figurines in Greek style, which suggest that daily life of the inhabitants of Ptolemaic Akoris shared the contemporary cultural milieu of the Eastern Mediterranean world.

For the first time we succeeded in detecting the significant traces of the activities in Hellenistic times in Akoris. Soon it became obvious that these limestone blocks had nothing to do with bridge or gate, as we had supposed at the outset of excavation, but were unfinished stones being worked on this spot for the shipment. The Ptolemaic date of these stones seemed unambiguous. First, they were directly filled with the burnt soil containing purely Hellenistic materials. Secondly, a Late Period circuit wall was discovered under the stones. But it was not until the completion of the analysis of the stamps on the handles of imported Rhodian amphorae that we could date this Hellenistic deposit more precisely.

Amphora Stamps from Akoris

Actually the most unexpected and exciting finds from this Hellenistic fill were vast number of stamped amphora handles of Mediterranean origins (Pl. 3). As I have reported elsewhere, the total of 351 stamped amphora handles, including the two large fragments with both handles, were found at the northernmost area of the ancient settlement of Akoris during the five successive field seasons from 1997 to 2001.¹¹ The sheer number of handles is worth special attention. Although the number of the excavated stamped amphora handles from the construction fill for the Middle Stoa in Athens or the famous Pergamon Complex far exceeds that of Akoris (1498 and 882, respectively), many other sites in the East Mediterranean do not yield so many handles derived from a single context. The stamped handles of Rhodian amphorae, which constitute almost eighty percent of the total, are most valuable to gain the overview of the chronological position of the whole material.

As is well known, the chronology of Rhodian amphorae has been established by V. Grace and revised by G. Finkielsztejn through the examinations of the following four aspects of the jars and their stamps; (1) eponym-fabricant name connections, (2) archaeological context of closed deposits, (3) secondary stamps, (4) shape and dimension of whole jars.¹² The chronological distribution of eponym stamps from Akoris clearly indicates that the increase and decrease of the eponym stamps from Akoris follows the typical pattern of normal distribution (Fig. 1). They reveal a steep increase in the number of such handles for the period after *c.* 175, with a maximum in the 150. This is followed by an equally steep decline from *c.* 146 through the 120s.

During the whole century, in which Rhodian and other Mediterranean amphorae were

10 H. Kawanishi and Y. Suto, *Akoris I: Amphora Stamps*, Kyoto, 2005, 11–22.

11 *Ibid.* 23–208.

12 V. Grace & M. Savvatiyanou-Petropoulakou, Les timbres amphorique grecs, in P. Bruneau (ed.) *L'ilot de la Maison des Comédiens*, Delos XIII, Paris, 1970, 277–382; G. Finkielsztejn, *Chronologie détaillée et révisée des éponymes amphoriques rhodiens, de 270 à 108 av. J.-C. environ*, BAR International Series 990, 2001.

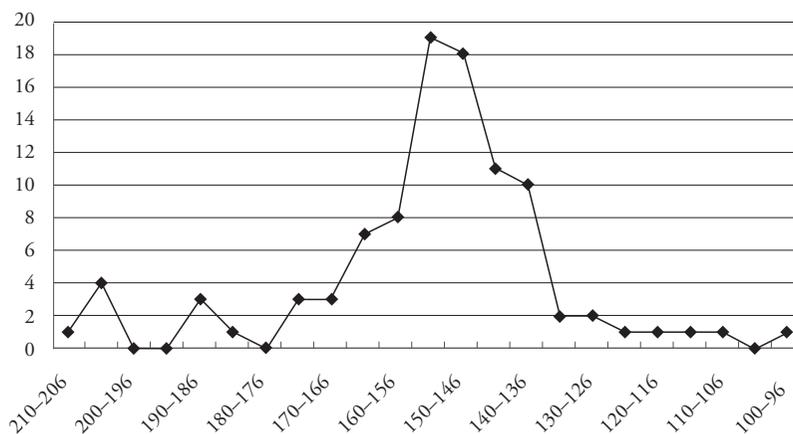


Fig. 1 Chronological distribution of Rhodian eponym stamps from Akoris

transported to Akoris, the Ptolemaic regime was gradually destabilized through recurrent civil wars and external threats. The first serious event was the great uprising of Upper Egypt from 206 to 186. The chronological distribution of Rhodian amphorae in the Hellenistic deposit at Akoris eloquently indicates that the close economic as well as cultural relationship between Akoris and Alexandria had been strengthened just after the termination of the Great Uprising in the South. The presence of extremely large unfinished limestone blocks at the site suggests that the export of such stones from Akoris was decisive in generating such close contact of the local inhabitants with the Greek cultural milieu imported via Alexandria. The size of these blocks, one of which measures more than fourteen meters, indicates that they were intended not to be used locally but to be shipped out to the most prosperous city of the contemporary world, Alexandria. The Mediterranean amphorae must have been carried into the site by the ships returning from Alexandria, which were primarily used for the shipping of the stones produced at Akoris. Although we don't have any documentary evidence for the shipment of stones from Akoris in the Hellenistic times, an *ex-voto* inscription for Zeus at the time of Roman Emperor Domitianus (Pl. 4), found in the Akoris North Quarry, explicitly notes that the stones from the quarry were used for the pavement of Alexandria.¹³ The result of our investigations thus demonstrated that the main industry of Hellenistic Akoris was the mining of the nearby limestone quarries and the dressing of the large blocks from them for shipping in the vicinity of the port of the village. It was on this observation that we launched on the next major project, the investigation of the nearby quarries.

Quarry and Graffiti

Traces of ancient quarrying activities are ubiquitous in Egypt, where large stone buildings

¹³ Y. Suto, *Text and Quarry in Greco-Roman Egypt: Reading a Dedicatory Inscription Rediscovered at Akoris* (IGRR I, 1138), *SITES: Journal of Studies for the Integrated Text Science*, 3–1, 2005, 1–14.

were continuously built from the Old Kingdom. The most celebrated quarries of Greco-Roman times are that of Mons Claudianus and Mons Porphyrites in the desert between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. The former was famous for its grey granite, while the latter was the source of the purple stone, which was highly prized by the Romans as imperial porphyry. But the most numerous and extensively exploited quarries are that of ordinary limestone, which are concentrated in the relatively small area of the Nile Valley between modern Minya and Sohag in Middle Egypt.¹⁴

It is usually not easy to detect the major industry of local communities when there are no written documents referring to it. But the discovery of the work area for the processing of large limestone blocks threw new light on the hitherto neglected significance of the quarry fields around the site as the possible source for the economic prosperity of Hellenistic Akoris. The documents from the Arsinoite nome regarding the mission of Kleon the architect in the middle of the third century are most illuminative in this respect. Clearly one of his duties was the administration of quarries and the transportation of quarried stones (*P. Petr.* 2.4). It is, therefore, tempting to suggest that the consumers of precious wine imported from abroad were primarily the resident Greeks of eminence who had particular duties at Akoris.

There are extensive traces of ancient quarries on the high barren plateau along the eastern edge of the Nile valley in the vicinity of Akoris. The long valley at New Minya near Zawiet Sultan is one of the most impressive ancient quarries ever discovered in this area.¹⁵

The most spectacular monument here is undoubtedly a huge unfinished limestone block for a colossus of a standing king located at the top of the valley. Contrary to the original identification of R. and D. Klemm that the block was intended to be used for a statue of Amenhotep III, our recent investigations have made it clear that it was ordered by a Ptolemaic ruler, since many Greek and demotic graffiti were found on the ceiling of the hewn gallery under the huge block. Furthermore, a number of Greek and Demotic graffiti were also found in the quarry to the south of the colossus.

Today a deep straight valley of about 700 m extends from below the site of colossus toward the southeast until it reaches the fringe of the flat plain of the Nile (Pl. 5). This conspicuous terrain however is not a natural one but is the end product of successive quarrying activities from antiquity to the present. In spite of the effect of heavy weathering almost entire quarry faces still retain astonishingly clear marks of the chisels used by ancient quarrymen.

More or less continuous vertical steep quarry faces dominate the southwestern side of the valley, while the formation of the faces of northeastern side is more complicated especially in the middle part of the valley. On both sides the ancient miners seem to have carefully avoided extracting deteriorated rocks containing natural fissures. As a result, such prominent rocks are left at several points and now interrupt the course of the successive quarried faces. It is largely on these interruptions that we divided the quarry into a number of sections to register the

14 B. G. Aston et al., *Stones*, in P. T. Nicholson and I. Shaw (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge, 2000, 5–77.

15 R. Klemm & D. Klemm, *Steine und Steinbrüche im alten Ägypten*, Berlin, 1992, 92–100; Y. Suto, *Text and Context of the Greek Graffiti at the Ptolemaic Quarry of Zawiet Sultan in Middle Egypt*, *SITES: Journal for the Integrated Text Science*, 4–1, 2006, 1–18.

graffiti.

The Greek and demotic graffiti found in the valley are not evenly distributed but are concentrated in several sections. This situation of preservation may have largely been caused by post-depositional process, since even on the southwestern side, where very few legible graffiti are left on the vertical walls, abundant graffiti are still preserved in excellent condition on the ceilings of the horizontal galleries deeply hewn into the vertical walls. This may be the reason why so many graffiti are observable in the lowest sections of the quarry in general. They are always painted in characteristic red color with a small brush for the Greek ones and a comparatively wide brush for the demotic ones.

I have already reported the notable feature of these graffiti in 2010 at Geneva,¹⁶ but I would like to reiterate the points briefly. Here is an example of characteristic bilingual graffiti of Section L (Pl. 6), which is located on the east side of the quarry and apparently used for procuring large flat blocks. It is preserved exceptionally in good condition (L11+12, L9). Both demotic and Greek versions provide three sets of information: 1) date, 2) personal name, and 3) tripartite numerals. But the texts are sometimes not exactly identical.

[L 11+12] The Greek one reads:

Year 35, Epeiph, 21st
of free (quarryman) ? Thoteus
5 1/2 by 5 1/2 by 1.

[L9] The Demotic one reads:

The fourth month of 'winter', the first month of 'summer', the second month of 'summer',
Djehuty-iu,
5 1/2 by 5 1/2 by 1.

The demotic text of this section lacks reference to regnal year, but elsewhere there are demotic texts with regnal years, and in such cases the equivalent regnal years are denoted in Egyptian Year, while the regnal year of Greek texts are always counted in financial or fiscal year. It seems to have been customary in the upper part of the valley to put demotic counterparts always for the Greek texts. The date usually noted by a certain day in Greek, but often by successive months in demotic as this example shows; the named person seems to be in charge of the quarrying; the tripartite numerals are most likely to show the volume of stone extracted in three dimensions. As our colleague of architectural history has made it clear, the three figures always represent width, depth, and height of the removed rock respectively. The last figure is almost usually 1, and it has been also made clear that it represents the basic unit of measurement, about 53.7 cm, which roughly corresponds to the royal cubit in dynastic Egypt.

16 Y. Suto and R. Takahashi, *Bilingual Graffiti from the Ptolemaic Quarries in Akoris and Zawiet Sultan*, 26th International Congress of Papyrology, August 16–21, 2010, University of Geneva.

Changing Style and Language of the Graffiti

The sequence of the regnal years observed in the upper part of the valley shows that this regnal year, 35, is that of Ptolemy II, and these sections were quarried under the last years of Ptolemy II and the beginnings of the reign of his successor Ptolemy III. So, this part of the quarry was operated in the 240s.

The situation is somewhat different in the lowest level of the valley (Pl. 7). It also provides number of graffiti, but conspicuously they are now written only in Greek. Here too the sequence of regnal years affords a valuable clue to conjecture the date of them. At section Q, which is located on the lowest corner of the valley, there are series of regnal years from 23 to 25 and 2. It seems certain that quarrying activities progressed here in the last years of certain king whose reign terminated in 25th or 26th year and in the first years of the next one. The strong candidate for the former is obviously Ptolemy III, who died in the course of his 26th regnal year.

The two above-mentioned sets of sequence of regnal years found at the upper and bottom of the valley doubtlessly suggest that the exploitation at New Minya quarry was under operation in the second half of the third century B.C. It is highly remarkable that the manner of writing graffiti shows distinct change even during this short period of time. The once so ubiquitous demotic graffiti completely disappeared and substituted with Greek ones. The oldest graffito attested in the valley is a long three-line demotic text left on the fallen block bearing the regnal year 32. Since it is difficult to assume that a text of this length accompanied any Greek counterpart, I am of opinion that graffiti were generally written only in demotic until this year. The custom of attaching Greek translation seems to have been introduced sometime between the year 32 and 34 to amend the demotic graffiti. That the graffiti on the ceiling of Section J still don't have their Greek counterparts are not fortuitous. Then the habit of putting Greek translation to demotic ones was established leaving vast number of bilingual graffiti. But by 220s demotic seems to have lost its importance in recording quarrying process, and written language of administration at the quarry had changed from Greek and Egyptian bilingual to Greek monolingual.

Our survey shows that the practice of recording quarrying process in both demotic and Greek was not confined to New Minya. Akoris South Quarry is located on the plateau just to the south of the settlement site of Akoris. Although this quarry seems to have been exploited mainly in Roman times, there are a few remnants of Ptolemaic quarry faces left untouched until today. Three small horizontal galleries are cut below the conspicuous projection in the midst of the quarry field. Even though the outer face of the rock is heavily eroded and damaged by later activities, Greek and demotic graffiti on the ceilings are preserved in extremely good condition. At least sixteen graffiti including five pairs of bilingual ones are left on the surface of one of the galleries (AS-1). They are represented in exactly the same tripartite system as are the case with those graffiti of New Minya (Fig. 2). The regnal years explicitly show that these graffiti were recorded in the fourth and fifth year of a certain king. Although there is no sequential evidence, it seems highly probable that they are contemporary with the standard bilingual graffiti at New Minya; hence the king in question is Ptolemy III.

In spite of the accumulation of relevant data, there are many questions to be answered

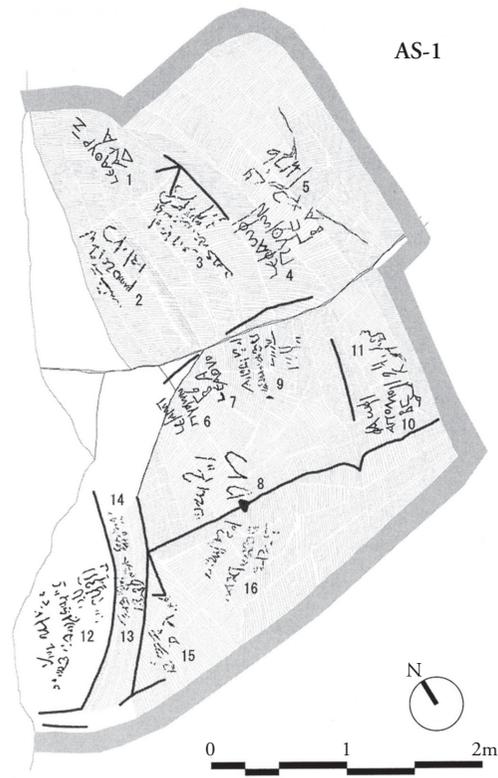


Fig. 2 Graffiti on the ceiling of Gallery 1 of Akoris South Quarry

about the function of the graffiti. Theoretically the graffiti on the ceiling close to the opening should be earlier than those of the interior of the gallery, though it is not always the case. For example, the bilingual graffiti AS1-1 (Greek) and AS1-2 (demotic), located near the opening, bear the date of the 7th *Hatyw* in the 5th year, while the bilingual graffiti on the inner ceiling AS1-4 (Greek) and AS1-4 (demotic) bear the date of previous month *Phaophi* of the same year. Moreover, two pairs of bilingual graffiti, AS1-7 (Greek) and AS1-8 (demotic), AS1-6 (Greek) and AS1-16 (demotic) are overlapping diagonally on the same surface, but the former show the date about half a year later than the latter. Surely there are many aspects to be elucidated about the function of these graffiti, but it seems now certain that they recorded not the detailed progress of the work but their inspection by official hands.

Conclusions

One of our prime concerns now is the identity of the people who worked at these quarries. An important clue is obviously the personal names contained in the graffiti. It has been observed that there seems to be a marked ethnic concentration of personal names in several sections. For example, all the 12 names attested in Section F are of Egyptian such as

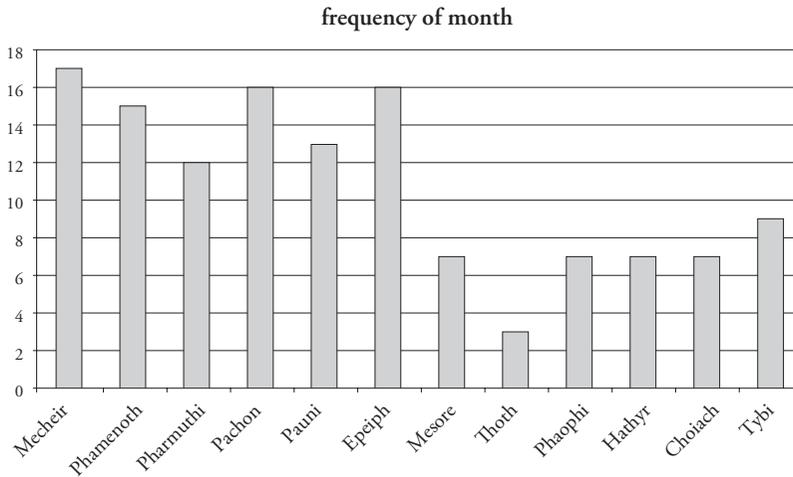


Fig. 3 Frequency of month name in the Greek graffiti from New Minya Quarry

Petesis or Stotoes. To the contrary, the graffiti of Section U, which we call for fun the gallery of the Macedonian aristocrats, contains such names as Philippos or Attalos. My colleague Dr. Takahashi has noted the presence of Jewish names in the graffiti found only under the unfinished colossus, which are totally absent in the nearby quarry valley. It is tempting to see some kind of units of workers organized on the ethnic groups.

Another evidence, which may be relevant to the identity of the workers, is the seasonal fluctuation of the number of month referred to in the Greek graffiti. A distinctive pattern is discernible in the frequency of month (Fig. 3). Although the quarry was in operation throughout the year, it seems to have been busier in the first half of the financial year. Certainly the latter half of the financial year was a slack season at least in this quarry. Similar pattern has been observed for the payment of Salt Tax.¹⁷ Here it is noted that about 70% of surviving receipts derive from the first six months of the financial year. The first day of Mecheir in the 38th year of Ptolemy II corresponds to the 23rd of March, and the first day of Mesore, the beginning of the slack season, corresponds to the 19th of September. The most logical explanation is that the quarry was busy toward the inundation of the Nile, which was convenient for the shipment of the stone extracted. My inclination is to say that some workers were not professional miners but farmers who lived in the nearby villages and were employed at the quarry only in the busy season. But this interpretation is open to challenge and critical comments are always welcome.

Our archaeological investigations in Akoris as well as in the limestone quarry at New Minya have yielded unexpectedly rich new information about the economic activities of the people in the chora of Hellenistic Egypt. It is my greatest pleasure if I could contribute to the progress of the Hellenistic Archaeology in Egypt through the frank exchange of comments on the data I presented here.

¹⁷ D. Thompson and W. Clarysse, *Counting the People in Hellenistic Egypt*, Vol. 2, 2006, 74–86.



Pl. 1 Akoris: Western Temple



Pl. 2 Large limestone blocks excavated at the north end of the settlement



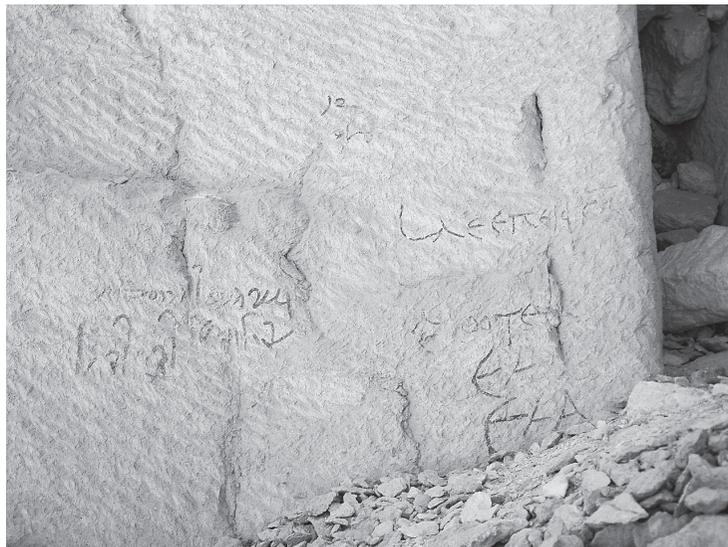
Pl. 3 An amphora Stamp from Akoris (eponym of Eukratidas)



Pl. 4 Roman ex-voto inscription found at Akoris North Quarry



Pl. 5 New Minya Quarry from the north



Pl. 6 Bilingual graffiti at Section L



Pl. 7 Upper and lower sections in New Minya Quarry