

4

Living in the desert: mess kits from Mons Porphyrites, Egypt

by Roberta Tomber¹

Like many others, I first met Don through lamps: in this case a group from Carthage that I took to him in 1982. It was much later, probably by ten years, when my path crossed with Catherine's, over work on the National Roman Fabric Reference Collection that took place in the Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities. Our friendship, however, really dates from Mons Porphyrites, where the three of us shared a work tent each season between 1994 and 1998. Since that time I have relied on both Don and Kaye for information, ideas and inspiration on any number of archaeological issues, and I have always been freshly impressed by their range and depth of knowledge and generosity in sharing it. It is therefore with great pleasure that I offer this paper on Bradford Village to them: the choice of topic seems appropriate since not only did we make our first walk up to the village together, when we sherded the site, but Don and Kaye drew the pottery that we collected. I have no doubt that had I been able to discuss this paper with them, it would have been immeasurably improved.

The Imperial porphyry quarries at Mons Porphyrites in the Gebel Dokhan of Egypt (Fig. 1) are spectacular. As the only source of purple porphyry in the ancient world, the achievement of the Romans in locating and exploiting this material between the 1st century AD and the early 5th century AD is immediately obvious from its rough and inaccessible terrain. The site comprises a fort and related building complex in Wadi Abu Ma'amel, which provided the focal point for five quarry complexes and their adjacent settlements that facilitated the quarries and housed the workers (see Maxfield & Peacock 2001).

Of these five quarries and settlements, the preservation was most exceptional at Bradford Quarry Village, named after our team member Nick Bradford, who discovered the site in 1995 (Fig. 2). The condition of the finds (including one complete cooking pot and many vessels one-quarter to one-half complete) suggested it had been essen-

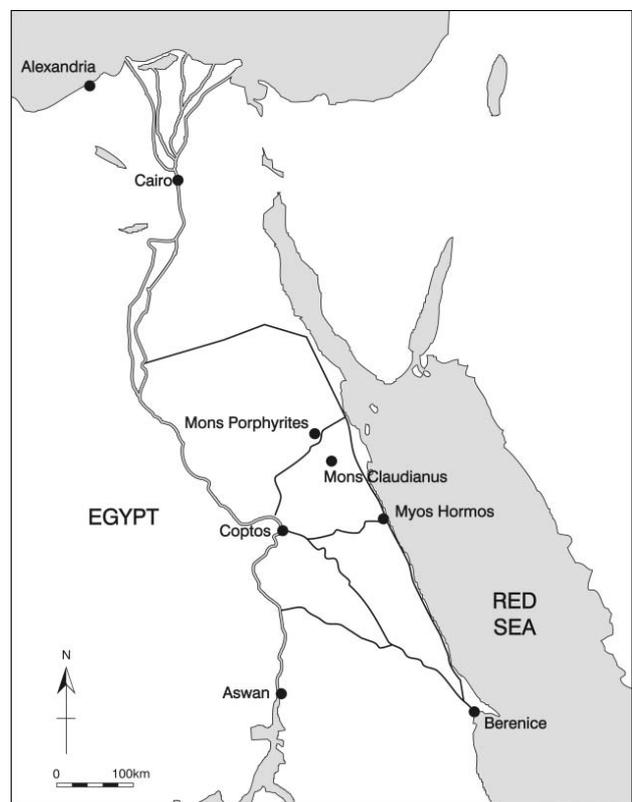


Fig. 1 — Location map, including sites mentioned in the text.

tially untouched since the Roman period. That the site was generally undisturbed is underlined by the lack of sherd joins between huts, the single one being between Huts 4 and 5 (Fig. 3, D). Certainly no other modern expeditions had recorded the village, although the quarries were known (Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 58).

The most northerly of all the quarries, and a source for black porphyry, Bradford Village comprises seven extant

¹ robertatomber@hotmail.com

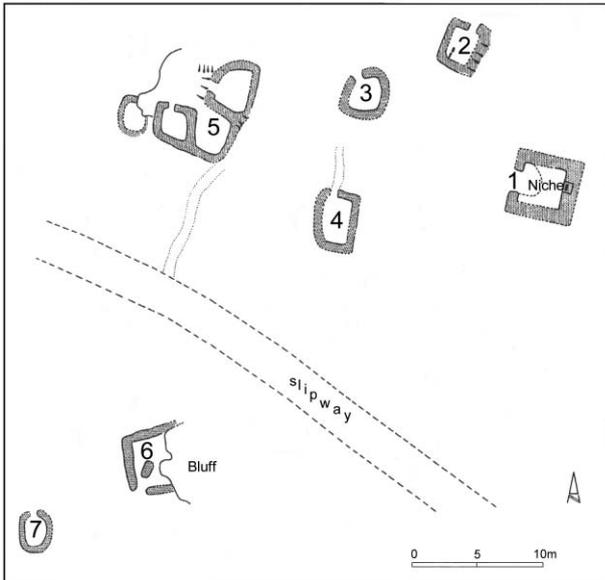


Fig. 2 — Plan of Bradford Village (Maxfield & Peacock fig. 3.2).

structures divided by a slipway, described in full by Peacock (Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 58-60). One of the structures, Hut 1, was distinguished by its regular shape and wall niche, and it was here that an inscribed stele, lying face down, was recovered. This stele has been transcribed and translated in full elsewhere (van Rengen 1995; 2001, 60-2). To summarise, it is dominated by an image of Pan-Min, the ithyphallic god of the Eastern Desert. A Greek text to the right of this figure describes one Caius Cominius Leugas who discovered a number of stones (including black porphyry) on the 29th day of the fourth year of Tiberius. Thus we have a record of the discovery of Mons Porphyrites on the 29 July AD 18. The stele allows Hut 1 to be identified as a Paneion.

Equally remarkable on the site was the distribution of pottery, clustered in the structures and on the slipways down to the wadi and the quarry faces. The significance of this distribution was not recognised on first locating the site, and seven vessels were collected without reference to structures. Nevertheless, subsequent systematic collection of all indicator sherds (rims, bases and handles) and diagnostic body sherds (excluding undiagnostic ones in Nile silt) revealed an interesting pattern that is presented here.

Of the seven structures (Fig. 2), pottery was recorded from each except the Paneion (Hut 1). Of the remaining six huts, three (Huts 3-5) contained between four and eight vessels, while the other three (Huts 2, 6-7) contained one or two vessels. An additional 21 vessels were recovered from the main slipway and the quarry slope. Putting

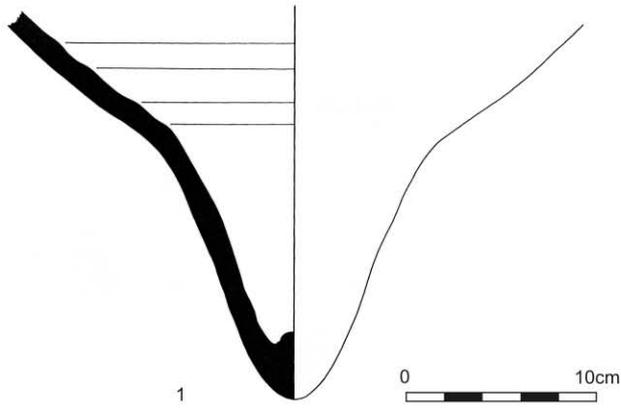
aside for the moment the seven vessels collected without noting provenance, the following observations can be made. Concentrating on Hut 4 (Fig. 3, C) and Hut 5 (Fig. 4), the two with the largest assemblages, each contains a minimum of a flagon (for storing and/or pouring liquids), several bowls and cooking pots and a single amphora. Hut 5, the only multi-celled structure (Fig. 2), was sherded and analysed on a room-to-room basis and pottery was retrieved from two of the four cells, on the east side of the building. Most of the vessels came from the north-east room (Room a), the remainder from the south-east room (Room b). The individual rooms may represent separate living units, although there were no diagnostic sherds from the two remaining rooms shown on Fig. 2.

The range of vessel types represented in these two huts meets the basic needs for eating and drinking: thus the occupants of each hut were equipped for self-sufficiency and survival. The rarity of amphorae is immediately apparent, for elsewhere in the Eastern Desert amphorae dominate in ceramic assemblages. In the Eastern Desert amphorae were commonly reused for water (see for example *O. Claud. II* 280). The explanation here must be that the huts were regularly refurbished with water, rather than needing to store it in amphorae⁷ for extended periods. Other means for water storage, such as tanks, are absent from Bradford Village. Presumably water came from the wadi, although neither of the two wells within the fort area can be dated as early as Bradford Village on the basis of finds. Nevertheless, as Maxfield notes (Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 42-56, esp. 56 and fig. 1.3) the citing of the North Well, close to Bradford Village, would make it the most logical source for water.

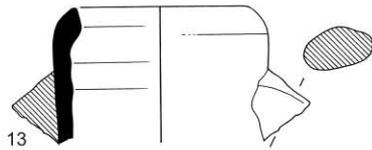
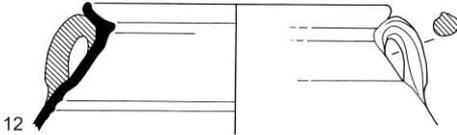
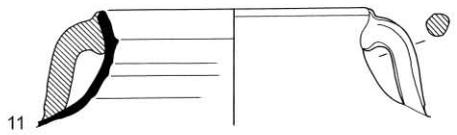
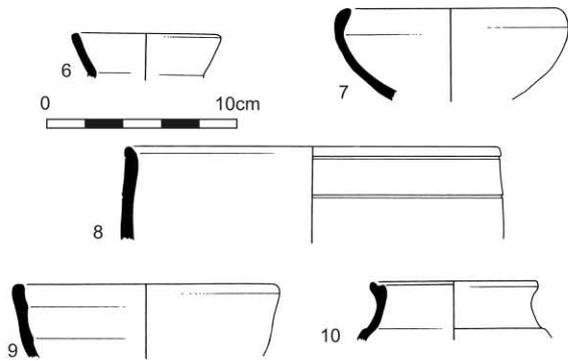
Turning to the remaining huts, Hut 3 (Fig. 3, B) has a minimum of four vessels, collected from inside the hut and slightly outside to the east. The assemblage includes two flagons, a cooking pot, an amphora and two unillustrated footring bases that may belong to either flagons or bowls. Although the vessels to the east of Hut 3 were closest to this structure, their dispersion is unrelated to the doorway and they may originate from another structure. The assemblage from Hut 6 (Fig. 3, E) comprises a bowl and cooking pot, and that from Hut 7 (Fig. 3, F) a cooking pot. Finally, Hut 2 is unique in having an imported Tripolitanian amphora base as its only diagnostic sherds (Fig. 3, A); Nile silt sherds were also noted on site.

Apart from this imported amphora, the individual hut assemblages are remarkable not only for their similar range of vessel forms, but for specific types within these forms. This feature is emphasised by the repetition seen from the slipway and unprovenanced vessels, where only a few additional types are represented (see Tomber 2001, figs 6.13-6.14 for a selection of vessels from the huts and elsewhere; nos. 2, 13 and 17 are forms restricted to the slipway). Flagons commonly have a double lip (n° 14)²

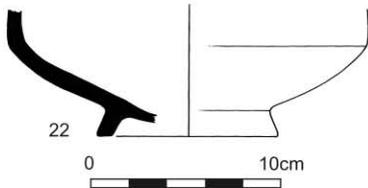
² Numbers are those used in the catalogue.



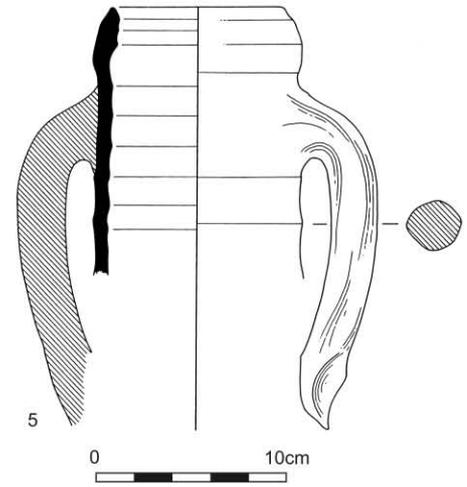
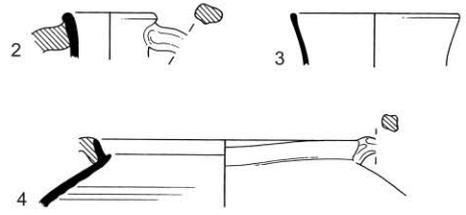
A.



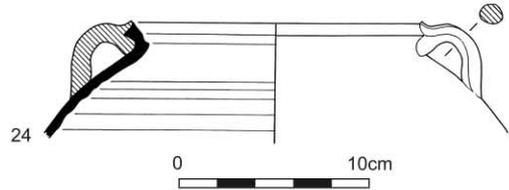
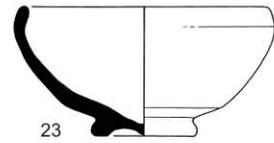
C.



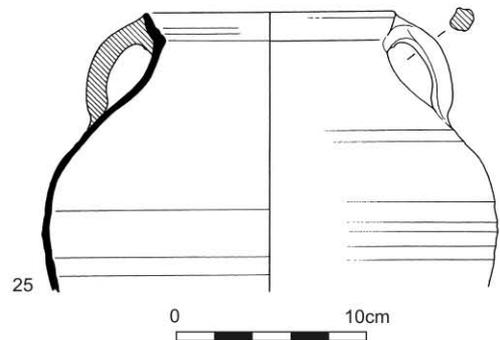
D.



B.



E.



F.

Fig. 3 — Bradford Village pottery. A... from Hut 2; B... from Hut 3; C... from Hut 4; D... from Huts 4/5; E... from Hut 6; F... from Hut 7.

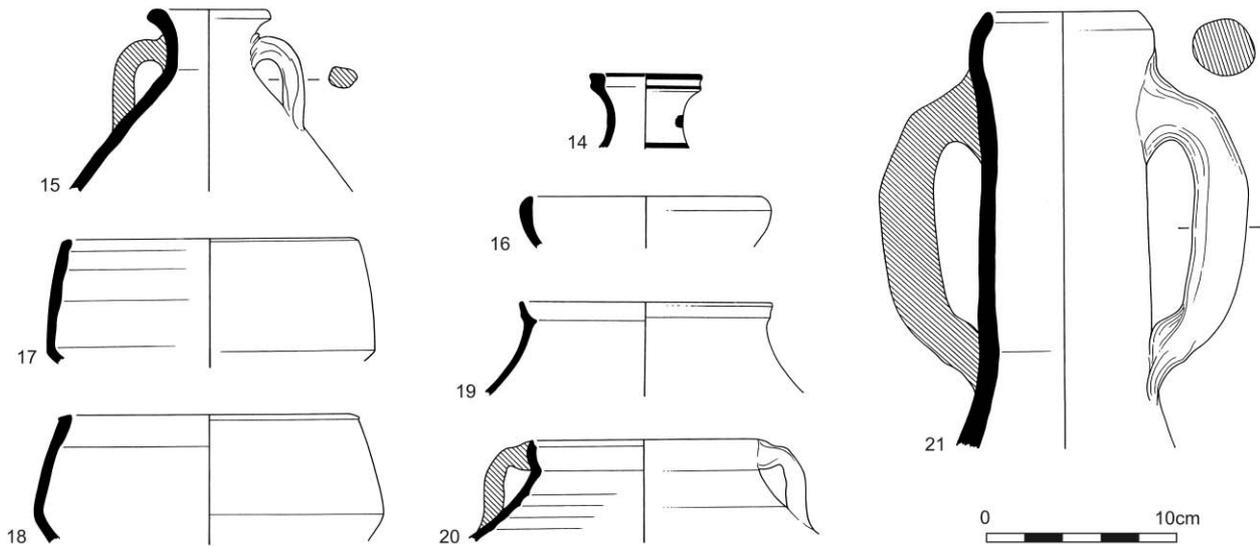


Fig. 4 — Pottery from Bradford Village Hut 5.

or everted rim (n° 15); bowls are either carinated (Nos 17-18) or hemispherical (n° 23); cooking pots normally have a sharply-everted, lid-seat rim, frequently with a carinated shoulder (e.g. n° 12); amphorae have an almond-shaped rim, characteristically in-turned (Nos 5, 13, 21).

It is possible that the differences in assemblage size relate to the number of inhabitants of each hut, although this cannot be argued with any certainty due to the seven unprovenanced vessels, comprising one flagon, two bowls and four cooking pots. Considering the rooms of Hut 5 individually, all the structures on site are in the order of about 4 m long, and size alone would limit the population.

To a certain extent the restricted range of vessel types reflects the limited period of occupation. A second quarry village thought to be Tiberian in date, and also a source for black porphyry, is located south-west of Bradford Village on the other side of Abu Ma'amel. Here 15 mostly conjoining cells were visible (Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 62-4, fig. 3.8). A range of vessels like those from Bradford Village was collected from this site, known as Foot Village and Quarry (Tomber 2001, fig. 6.15). Although a meaningful distribution study could not be conducted, with only 29 rims from the entire Foot complex, the similarities between the Bradford and Foot Village assemblages are important and should not be underestimated.

In addition to the repetitive and restrictive nature of these assemblages, another distinguishing feature is the lack of finewares and of imports in general (Bradford and Foot Villages contain a single imported amphora vessel each). Comparative assemblages dating to the first half of the 1st century from Coptos (Herbert & Berlin 2003, 101-7, 138), Berenice (Tomber 1999, 124-36) and Myos

Hormos all contain more diverse assemblages. This is somewhat predictable, given the more permanent nature of settlement, together with their roles in long-distance trade. The vessels collected from Bradford and Foot Villages appear to be utilitarian assemblages stripped down to the most basic, functional necessities.

At present Bradford and Foot Villages provide evidence for the earliest occupation at Mons Porphyrites. Although the dating of the fort foundations was hampered by the deep rubble strewn over the area, it is probable that these villages were occupied before the establishment of the fort. If so, who were the inhabitants who worked the quarry and were supplied with the functional kits of crockery for their survival at Mons Porphyrites? Could they have been military personnel issued with a personal mess kit?

The literature on pottery production and use associated with the army is vast, and it is not intended to survey it here. A glimpse demonstrates the repetitive nature of these industries, from different provinces, frequently including flagons, jars and bowls, but also rich in finewares (for Britain see various papers in Dore & Greene 1977). Further comparison between legionary wares serving towns and garrisons and the isolated environment of Mons Porphyrites is unfruitful in this context.

Caius Cominius Leugas was probably a civilian, and likely a freedman (van Rengen 2001, 61). Therefore there is no clear evidence for military involvement in the discovery of the quarries. A range of Augustan/Tiberian ostraca and inscriptions from other quarries in the Eastern Desert (Maxfield 2003) testify to the importance of the military in the running of the Eastern Desert quarries. From Mons Porphyrites itself, an undated ostrakon indicates the

presence of soldiers (van Rengen 1996, 16), while a building inscription from the Isis temple of the Trajanic period attests construction work supervised by the military (Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 23-4, fig. 2.14, and V Maxfield pers. comm.). Nevertheless, there is no evidence from Mons Porphyrites, nor more importantly from the Eastern Desert in general, that military personnel worked the quarries, rather that they administered and supervised this work (Maxfield 2002, 75).

Beyond the Eastern Desert written evidence provides us with a number of household inventories, such as that of a commanding officer in the *praetorium* at Vindolanda (Bowman 1994, 65-81, esp. 65-6), like Mons Porphyrites another site on the fringes of the Empire. What appears to be lacking from the written evidence at Vindolanda and other sites are similar inventories for private individuals. Extensive personal letters from the nearby quarry of Mons Claudianus reveal detailed information concerning the requisition of food, which is frequently transported in amphorae or other ceramic vessels (e.g. *O. Claud. II* 227, 277, 280, 290), but none provide a personal inventory of vessels and implements.

The life of quarry workers at Bradford and Foot Village was severely circumscribed by the physical limitations of the harsh environment. Their implements reflect the basic requirements for survival and provide us with a standard against which future assemblages, either civilian or military, can be measured and compared. These restricted assemblages are labelled as mess kits not in the military context, but in a more generalised one, relating to self-sufficient kits for preparing and eating food, frequently in the wild – a description that sums up accurately the hardship of life for these workers.

Acknowledgements

I thank Professors David Peacock and Valerie Maxfield for inviting me to work on the pottery from Mons Porphyrites. Figure 1 is the work of Penny Copeland. The pottery drawings on Figures 3-4 were prepared for publication by Graham Reed based on field drawings by Don Bailey and Catherine Johns and digitised by Penny Copeland. I am grateful to Vivien Swan for drawing my attention to the potential military aspect of the assemblages, and Valerie Maxfield for numerous helpful comments on a draft: any errors are, of course, my own.

Catalogue of pottery

Fig. 3, A. Hut 2

1. Tripolitanian amphora base

Fig. 3, B. Hut 3

2. Nile silt flagon with cream slip outside and inside on the rim; 1 rim
 3. Aswan flagon with red-brown slip outside; 1 rim
 4. Nile silt cooking pot; 1 rim (east of Hut 3)
 5. Nile silt amphora; 3 rims and 1 handle, joining (east of Hut 3)
- Unillustrated: 2 footring bases (2 vessels)

Fig. 3, C. Hut 4

6. Marl flagon; 1 rim
 7. Aswan bowl with red-brown slip outside in part; 1 rim
 8. Nile silt bowl; 2 rims, joining
 9. Marl bowl; 1 rim
 10. Aswan jar or cooking pot with red-brown slip on the rim top and outside; 2 rims, non-joining
 11. Nile silt cooking pot; 5 rims, 3 joining
 12. Nile silt cooking pot; 1 rim
 13. Nile silt amphora; 2 rims, joining
- Unillustrated: 3 footring bases (3 vessels)

Fig. 4. Hut 5

14. Room a. Aswan flagon with red-blown slip inside, orange slip outside and black painted decoration; 1 rim
 15. Room b. Marl flagon; 1 rim, 1 handle, joining
 16. Room a. Aswan bowl with light-red to pink slip outside and on the rim; 2 rims, joining
 17. Room a. Aswan bowl with abraded red-brown slip outside; 1 rim
 18. Room a. Aswan bowl with red-brown slip all over; 1 rim, non-joining with 3 rims from just to the west of the room.
 19. Room a. Nile silt cooking pot; 2 rims, non-joining
 20. Room b. Nile silt cooking pot; 2 rims, joining
 21. Room b. Nile silt amphora; 1 rim
- Unillustrated: Room a: 3 footring bases (1 vessel); Room b: 1 footring base

Fig. 3, D. Huts 4/5 Room b

22. Nile silt bowl; 2 bases, joining

Fig. 3, E. Hut 6

23. Marl bowl; 2 profiles, 1 rim, 2 body sherds, joining
24. Nile silt cooking pot; 2 rims and body sherd, joining

Fig. 3, F. Hut 7

25. Nile silt cooking pot; 1 rim

Bibliography

- O. *Claud. II* Bingen, J., Bülow-Jacobsen, A., Cockle, W.E.H., Cuvigny, H., Kayser, F., & van Rengen, W. 1997. *Mons Claudianus ostraca graeca et latina II. O. Claud. 191 à 416*, Documents de Fouilles de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale 32 (Cairo).
- Bowman, A.K. 1994. *Life and letters on the Roman frontier. Vindolanda and its people* (London).
- Dore, J. & Greene, K. (eds). 1977. *Roman pottery studies in Britain and beyond. Papers presented to John Gillam, July 1977*, BAR Supplementary Series 30 (Oxford).
- Herbert, C. & Berlin, A. 2003. *Excavations at Coptos (Qift) in Upper Egypt, 1987-1992*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplement 53 (Portsmouth, Rhode Island).
- Maxfield, V.A. 2002. 'Armies and quarries: a preliminary look at the evidence from Roman Egypt' in P. Hill (ed.), *Polybius to Vegetius: essays on the Roman army and Hadrian's Wall presented to Brian Dobson*, 69-82 (York).
- 2003. 'Ostraca and the Roman army in the Eastern Desert', *Documenting the Roman army*, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 81, 153-73 (London).
- & Peacock, D.P.S. 2001. *The Roman Imperial quarries. Survey and excavation at Mons Porphyrites 1994-1998. Volume 1: Topography and quarries*, Egyptian Exploration Society Sixty-Seventh Excavation Memoir (London).
- Tomber, R. 1999. 'The pottery', in S.E. Sidebotham & W.Z. Wendrich (eds), *Berenike '97. Report of the 1997 excavations at Berenike and the survey of the Egyptian Eastern Desert, including excavations at Shenshef*, 123-59 (Leiden).
- 2001. 'The pottery', in Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 241-303.
- van Rengen, W. 1995. 'A new Paneion at Mons Porphyrites', *Chronique d'Égypte* 70, 240-5.
- 1996. 'The ostraca', in D.P.S. Peacock & V.A. Maxfield, *The Roman Imperial porphyry quarries: Gebel Dokhan, Egypt*, interim report, 1996, 16-18 (Southampton/Exeter).
- 2001. 'The inscription', in Maxfield & Peacock 2001, 60-2.